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Book reviews

Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire. The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 286 pp.

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Empire is an indispensable concept in historical and political sociology. From pre-antiquity to collapse of European colonialism in the mid-twentieth century much of the world was subject to imperial rule of one form or another. The nation-state, by comparison, and the principles of territorial integrity and national self-determination, are but a dot on the arc of world history. Yet it is only with the relatively recent “imperial turn” in historical sociology that the nation-state has begun to surrender its privileged status in the discipline as the societal unit of greatest relevance.

The importance of empire extends beyond the study of historical empires which commonly bear the name. The lasting legacy of imperial consolidation and contraction, even after the disappearance of empire as a legitimate form of political organization, is implicated across many areas of substantive concern to contemporary social science. The modern inter-state system itself bears the imprint of imperialism, comprised largely of nation-states which have either achieved their autonomy from empires or were once metropolitan imperial centers in their own right. The imperial legacy also animates many of the fault lines of present geo-political conflict, as border wars and nation-building struggles from central Africa to the Balkans to the Middle East reflect the artifice of colonial mapping and the messiness of its retreat. So too, the bifurcation of the globe into developed/developing, North/South, the West and the rest, maps readily onto foregoing divisions of world into colonizer and colonized.

Yet if empire is indispensable, it is also a frustratingly elusive concept. The matter of what, precisely, constitutes an empire has preoccupied scholars for decades. Yet the ambition to meaningfully fix the definition of empire, and to construct explanatory frameworks accounting for imperialism’s rise and demise, often obscures more than illuminates.

Defining empire runs the risk, on the one hand, of delineating too narrowly the kinds of center/periphery relationships and modes of political organization which can be described as properly imperial. Often the “pure type” amounts to formal political control by metropolitan centers over once-autonomous territory – the opposite of the nation-state. Excluded under this rubric are various informal strategies of geo-political influence – forms of clientalism, asymmetrical economic relationships between formally independent states, or the mercurial exercise of “soft-power.” On the other hand, more inclusive definitions of empire and imperialism threaten to undermine the meaningful specificity of the concept. Can this single label encompass virtually any and all forms of geo-political and global commercial dominance without surrendering coherence?

One of the great virtues of Julian Go’s *Patterns of Empire* is that it does not shy away from this ambiguity, but rather embraces it. He is not concerned, as many other influential scholars of empire are, with concretely defining empire and selecting or rejecting historical cases accordingly. Instead, the principle objective of Go’s study is to

employ the analytic tools of comparative-historical sociology in order to tease out causal explanations for the highly varied patterns of imperial formation within and across the two empires he has selected, namely the British and the American empires. (The provocative and somewhat controversial choice to compare the British empire with the American rise to global dominance will be discussed in short order.) The cases studied include varieties of both “formal” and “informal” imperialism. The orienting problem is to explain why one strategy of dominance achieved ascendance over another at a given time and place, and why in the aggregate these strategies changed in the course of imperial rise and decline.

The comparative objectives of *Patterns of Empire* come in two distinct but interrelated guises. How, firstly, can we account for the considerable variation in the strategies of imperial consolidation, the forms and ends of control, and the discourses of imperial justification in a given instance? The second examines the longer-term trajectory of imperial rise, consolidation and decline. On both counts, Go illuminates points of comparative convergence and divergence in the British and US cases. In so doing he devises generic explanatory frameworks to account for similarity and difference.

Concerning the first objective, despite the best efforts of scholars to characterize a given empire in terms of overriding logics of consolidation and rule in the pursuit of sovereign, commercial and military aims, the truth is that virtually all empires have evidenced considerable internal heterogeneity. Strategies of control, and the forms and ends of colonial administration on the ground, can differ dramatically over the life-course of an empire. They may also vary within a given empire during the same period. By exhaustive comparison Go offers compelling explanations for variation in imperial strategy and forms of colonial rule – from outright military annexation and grandiose claims of dominion necessitating comprehensive reform of indigenous society, on the one hand, to more minimalist strategies of informal empire-building, on the other, pursued through subtler means of obtaining influence short of territorial rule or the civilizing “burdens” of sovereignty.

Variation within and across the British and US cases follows, Go contends, from on-the-ground accommodation to perceived societal and political circumstances. Specifically, imperial agents and policy-makers are likely to assess the efficacy of one or another possible form of influence with an eye to the “requirement of legitimacy.” Given the choice, they are apt to favor policies which encourage the acquiescence of subject populations to imperial rule, or at least a (typically elite) segment thereof whose placation and cooptation is necessary for the stability of rule and the realization of imperial objectives.

In emphasizing the primacy of local conditions, and the requirements of accommodation and legitimacy, Go is at pains to counter explanations which foreground the influence of metropolitan national values or which stress uniform ideologies of colonial custodianship merely superimposed on disparate and diverse corners of the world irrespective of local exigencies. In the cases of Britain and the US, Go appeals to the historical record for vindication.

Thus in Guam and Samoa, the US operated largely through existing elites and maintained a policy aimed at preserving local custom and institutions. The island possessions were not sized up, that is, for any heavy-handed colonial social engineering nor

outfitted with a system of native schooling to make Americans of newly incorporated subjects of US power. This minimalist strategy was justified in terms of protecting the unspoiled “noble savagery” of the Islands; however the impetus to follow such a course did not reflect a uniquely American imperial disposition self-consciously opposed, for example, to European models. Instead, it conveniently justified a strategy of least resistance, derived *in situ*, which was deemed the most efficacious and less risky path to securing US control and interests.

In contrast, when the Philippines and Puerto Rico became US possessions following the Spanish-American war, policies and resources aimed at educating populations and remaking political culture and institutions on the liberal-democratic American model were aggressively implemented. Here too, policy did not flow from metropolitan values or a pre-conceived ideal of what national stewardship must amount to. Policy stemmed, once again, from on-the-ground perceptions of the most expedient means of securing US power, namely by accommodating to “local molds.” Encouraging education and nurturing a culture of liberal democratic civil society was designed to bolster the legitimacy of US rule in the eyes of the elite strata of Puerto Ricans and Phillipinos. These elites were not “noble savages”; they were already civilized – i.e. brought within reach of market expansion – and were furthermore inclined to political reform following centuries of Spanish rule. Encouraging political and educational reform is thus not evidence of an integrally, and uniquely American approach to empire-building but rather, in Go’s telling, yet further evidence of an accommodationist strategy of securing legitimacy.

Likewise, in the case of the British empire Go compares the policy of “paternalistic preservation” obtaining in Fiji with the “tutelary” colonialism in India. In Fiji, assessments of the recalcitrance and vitality of local institutions governed by indigenous elites, alongside the delicacy of relations between indigenous populations and settler colonists, combined to favor a minimalist imperial posture. British interests were best served by treading lightly so as neither to awaken national resistance or incur the unnecessary costs and risks of colonial tutelage.

A similar logic of legitimation held sway in India in the later 19th century, and especially following the 1857 “Mutiny,” though in this instance the logic led to outcomes very different than in Fiji, and comparable in important ways to the US experience in the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Decisive in this regard was the formidable presence of politically-engaged and educated Indian elites, as well as powerful classes of landowners and local potentates. In the second half of the century the British colonial administration in India encouraged measures to incorporate traditional holders of power as well as rising professional and middle classes into deliberative governance at national and provincial levels; in the words of Lord Ripon, out-going Viceroy, the goal was to “provide a field for the legitimate aspirations of English educated Indians.” At the same time, the British administration walked a precarious line in at once throwing bones to aspirant mainstream nationalism while seeking to marginalize and incapacitate its more radical guises.

Indeed, agents of this logic of legitimacy and accommodation were everywhere forced to contend with the specter of nationalism. On the one hand, heavy-handed colonial governance could awaken nationalisms which, if they turned anti-colonial, might imperil legitimacy and raise the costs and risks of reasserting it. If conjuring nationalism

could be avoided by treading lightly, so much the better. On the other hand, given the presence of politically astute classes beholden to a concept of indigenous nationhood, legitimacy's best hope may lay in some combination of accommodation and incorporation.

The book's second important comparative insight lies in identifying the strikingly analogous trajectories marking the rise, consolidation, and decline of the British and the US empires. Again, the general drift of imperial development does not reflect metropolitan circumstances alone, nor can it be reduced to national attitudes vis-à-vis imperialism. Go's important contribution is to situate the course of changing imperial strategy within a "global field."

Two main factors determine changes in imperial strategy in both cases. The first is whether an empire can claim a hegemonic share of geopolitical dominance (measured mainly in terms of percentage of global market share). The second, relatedly, is the degree of formidable competition for overseas influence.

A true hegemon can afford to tread lightly, to opt for more informal means of securing commercial and geopolitical influence if the global field is absent serious competitors. Such was the case in the British empire through much of the Nineteenth century – in the terra incognita of internal sub-Saharan Africa, for example, and in South America, where clientelism and soft power exerted over domestic policy satisfied imperial stakeholders. The US adopted similar strategies in the early-to-mid-Twentieth century. Amid its rise as a hegemon by the Second World War, the US was content to work, alternately, through existing European "imperial networks," or to actually side with anti-colonial nationalisms in order to win influence. Given these options, the possibility that the US would grab colonies from fading European powers was never seriously entertained.

Both Britain and the US also exhibit similar patterns during the period of hegemonic decline. Given a more crowded global playing field and/or domestic economic crises, decline is characterized by an up-tick in military belligerence and the increasing seductions of outright annexation. Go links the British participation in the "scramble" for Africa and the annexation of South Pacific islands in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century to 1870s depression and the entry of rising industrial powers – Germany and the US – on the geopolitical scene.

The US economic decline that began with the 1970s "oil shock," combined with Cold War competition and the rise of the China and the E.U., among other economic rivals, engendered more militaristically aggressive strategies to maintain geopolitical dominance. This shift is evident, Go contends, from the invasion of Granada to the First and Second Gulf Wars. Whether and to what extent the US has entered a period of hegemonic decline, and whether the ceaseless wars of the past decades can be considered as an expression of such – whether Afghanistan will persist as the graveyard of empires – are questions hotly debated by scholars and policy-makers. I will leave to experts, and readers generally, the task of assessing the details Go marshals in defense of a decline thesis, in addition to the specific lines of causality drawn between measures of decline and recent US military adventurism. Minimally, the comparative-historical perspective brought to bear here, and the striking similarities identified in the late British empire and the contemporary US, introduce a novel and rigorously systematic perspective to an otherwise somewhat tired debate – one that deserves to be taken seriously.

Returning to the matter of the US empire and whether it is “worthy” of comparison with the British: the explanatory fruits of Go’s comparison would seem to provide justification enough. Yet there are many who would deny the label “empire” to the US. Among British scholars one sometimes wonders whether this is motivated by a chauvinistic nostalgia for past imperial grandeur that dare not speak its name.

Within American scholarship there are those who would insist that, despite certain similarities between the exercise of American power abroad and European empires past, the US was only ever a reluctantly imperial power. America has preferred alternate paths to realizing geo-political goals – so the argument goes – or is disposed on account of its own history and political culture to shy away from outright colonialism, assuming, at most, temporary custodianship over possessions until the democratic values and institutions necessary for self-rule were sufficiently indigenized.

Go is centrally preoccupied with confronting, and undermining, the myth of American imperial exceptionalism. We learn that popular and scholarly exceptionalist discourse alike belie the reality of American imperial history which mimics the European mold far more than defenders of the exceptionalist school would suggest. Furthermore, the American exceptionalist narrative is not all that exceptional. Exceptionalism in fact marks yet another point of convergence with British imperial history and lends further justification to the case pairing.

In one of the more illuminating strands of inquiry in the book, Go unearths a British idiom of liberal exceptionalism, one remarkably similar to the American. Especially potent in the early- and mid-Nineteenth century, the British variant denied that the commercial and colonial expansion of Britain abroad, then nearing the apex of its global hegemony, could be compared to the “brutalities” of Spanish empire. Many Britons even denied that this amounted to an empire, a term absent from British popular parlance until startlingly late.

Another dimension of the US/British comparison which may give readers pause is Go’s insistence that the geographical extent of American imperial power – not merely its global economic dominance – is comparable in size and numbers of subject peoples to the British empire “on which the sun never set.” He of course lists the territories which came under US rule in the wake of Spanish-American War, and the islands and atolls after the two World Wars. However, he also includes the westward territorial expansion of the republic following Independence.

Regarding the inclusion of continental US expansion, some might accuse Go of a slight of hand. It is not an accounting trick, however. His descriptions of the conquest and colonization of the North American continent westward is, in my opinion, one of the most important and original contributions of the study. Drawing on ample secondary and primary sources Go demonstrates convincingly that the “West was won” militarily, administratively and in terms of “native policy” by means not only similar to, but informed by British imperial precedent.

The suspicions which will undoubtedly greet the inclusion of the continental United States in American imperial history will stem, in part, from the fact that this territorial empire was effectively and permanently consolidated. It was never subject to serious “anti-colonial” challenges or the kinds of native nationalisms which brought down empires elsewhere. The very “success” of US national consolidation on its expanding

frontier hints at an important, but often overlooked aspect of imperial history which, though not dealt with extensively in Go's study, is worthy of further development.

The success of US continental consolidation touches, namely, on the empire-like features of nation-state building itself. Whereas the nation-state and empire are conventionally identified as the chief rival, and mutually exclusive, modes of modern political organization, in fact nearly all cases of territorial state-formation and nation-building have exhibited elements of the center/periphery dynamics and struggles of sovereign assertion and administrative integration over provincial autonomy that attended empires. In many ways, effectively consolidated nation-states are but successful empires – so successful that their internal imperial history has been obscured. By extension, movements for devolution from Scotland to Catalonia to tiny Belgium (and Texas?) expose the limits of consolidation in ways similar to the challenges posed to past empires by anti-colonial nationalisms.

The many merits of the study notwithstanding, one area of concern must be mentioned, which relates to theoretical choices on which the overarching framework of comparison depends.

Many readers will immediately note that in accounting for variation across the two empires Go's explanatory foregrounding of local accommodation and the requirement of legitimacy is at odds with the approaches of other sociologists of empire currently laying claim to explanations of internal imperial variation.

In Go's account we are led to assume that assessments of on-the-ground circumstances follow from a fairly accurate appraisal of transparently objective societal conditions (though he frequently enlists the qualifier "perceived"). Likewise, the optimal colonial policies derived from such colonial knowledge are pursued via an effectively rational weighing of risks and benefits, resulting in the choice of one form of rule over another. Yet one wonders whether the gathering of colonial knowledge and the policies that follow could really have proceeded so smoothly, or whether the sphere of colonial policy-making could have been as effectively insulated from external claims as he seems to suggest.

Take the example of India under the increasingly direct territorial governance of British metropolitan state from late Eighteenth century on. The dizzying array of stakeholders laying claim to India under British "national trusteeship" in this period suggests a heterogeneous constellation of sometimes highly fractious interests, both on the ground and in the metropole. Many envisioned the construction of a colonial state with very different ends in mind. Not only did commercial interests sometimes conflict with a parliament eager to achieve greater control over Indian administration from merchant adventurers run amok. There also arose rival schools of "oriental knowledge" with varying understandings of the peoples governed and, as a consequence, of the forms of colonial society possible and desired. Add to this the formidable missionary lobby with its own objectives, sometimes deeply at odds with secular administrators and commercial interests and capable of mobilizing popular metropolitan activism, and the picture of colonial policy-making appears to be one of contingent negotiation and conflict, of both zero-sum battles, and compromise-formations, leading, in the end, to sometimes less than coherent policies. However transparent the ends and means of accommodation and legitimation may have been to certain colonial agents from a *realpolitik* vantage point,

these were forced to contend with varying claims on the colonial environment, and with colonial knowledge gathered for divergent purposes.

In Go's account, in contrast, policy sometimes seems to emanate from the rational deliberations of a uniform coterie of decision-makers able to coolly assess objective opportunities and constraints and to devise the most effective means to clearly defined ends – absent, that is, outside meddling from metropolitan interests or serious disagreement over the ends of colonization itself.

India may be an exceptional case, but one wonders whether the other cases included in the study evidenced similar tensions, whether the forms of rule and the policies enacted were as neatly tailored to local conditions and insulated from wider interests and controversy as he suggests. If Go is correct in insisting that the varied forms of colonial rule in both the British and American cases do not by and large reflect national values, this is not to say that empire-building was not exposed to the political process and civil society pressure in each metropolitan society which were both, of course, formal democracies. And to the extent that politicians, various lobbies, and religious and philanthropic interests were able to access the levers of colonial policy-making, or exert pressure in other ways, it would seem that varied outcomes would have to reflect such contingency and contention. Alternately, a more detailed account of how the sphere of colonial decision-making managed to remain aloof from such noise is in order.

This is only to say that Go's explanatory framework, in minimizing metropolitan influence, in emphasizing local exigencies and the importance of legitimacy, and in elevating the objective and rational over the constructed and contested, is a choice with benefits and downsides, and doubtless made in full awareness of such complexity. If the choice is to err on one side in the interest of explanatory pay-off, the challenge for future sociologists of empire will be to marry the insights and elegance of Go's comparative approach with the messiness and contingency of empire.

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