

Imperialism and the Global Anglo-American Relationship

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Is America an empire? This is a question which has intrigued both historians and political scientists over recent years and continues to do so. The flourishing field of empire studies is no longer satisfied with analyzing the obvious cases, such as Britain, France or Spain, but devotes increasing attention to the United States of America. Interestingly, it is not the expansionism of the United States on the North American continent, nor its very few experiences with formal overseas colonialism, such as the conquest of the Philippines, which are at the centre of the debate about American imperialism. Instead, a growing number of scholars seek to investigate whether the concept of empire is a useful lens through which the interactions of the United States with the wider world in general ought to be seen and which can help explain its rise from colony to superpower.^[i] The fascination with imperialism is not confined to academic debates about US history. Open the pages of *Foreign Affairs* and you will find the terminology usually employed in discussions about empires – terms and phrases like “imperial overstretch”, “rise and fall” or “decline” – used by both advocates and critics of the present US foreign policy.^[ii]

In view of the immense military and political power, as well as economic and cultural influence, that the United States has gained and exercised throughout the world since its independence, and especially during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, investigating the role that imperialism played in this process towards global ascendancy is certainly a fascinating topic deserving of scholarly attention. The point of the exercise, however, cannot be to decide whether or not it is appropriate and justified to attach the label “empire” to the United States. After all, there is only one way of answering this question with a definite yes or no: to establish a checklist of categories that typically define an empire and to apply it to the United States. The trouble is that this method suffers from a lack of contextualization and entails a significant risk of arbitrariness. Since it ought to be the point of historical enquiry to

discover hitherto unknown things about the past rather than simply find new words to describe what we are already aware of, it is futile to get stuck in a debate that will, as Charles Maier succinctly put it, “never get past the definition”.^[iii] If the aim is a more thorough understanding of the United States’ place in global history, what we need is a differentiated analysis of the extent to which imperialism has conditioned that place, not a discussion about semantics.

This is why using other empires as points of reference can be a useful way of learning more about the relationship of the United States with imperialism. The merit of the comparative perspective, however, does not lie in skimming through the existing knowledge about every historic empire we can think of, from Ancient Rome to the Ottoman Empire, in a search for common patterns that may also be discernible in the history of the United States. The results of such an approach are very likely to remain anecdotal. Instead, we should concentrate on the American encounters with, perceptions of and policies towards the modern European empires, bearing in mind that those played very significant roles in the international system that the United States was part of during the larger share of its history as an independent nation. The crucial question is what outcome these encounters had, in the long term, on the development of American globalism. In this context, the relationship between the United States and the British Empire is of special interest, not only because the former used to belong to the latter until 1776, but because the British Empire was, compared to its European competitors, the most global in scope.

How historians of the British Empire and historians working on the international relations of the United States can benefit from each other’s research was pointed out in a very thought-provoking paper presented by Jay Sexton (Corpus Christi College, Oxford University) at this year’s annual meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR).^[iv] Referring to recent literature which situates the history of the United States during the nineteenth century within the geopolitical and economic framework of the “British world-system”, Sexton argued that American expansionism and British imperialism were not two distinct and isolated processes, but, at least to some extent, interdependent.^[v] He stressed that Britain’s global position of power, which was at its apogee during the Victorian era, was often the foundation on which US expansionism was built, both in North America and beyond. Sexton’s argument about the nineteenth century did not only demonstrate the benefits of an approach that takes the United States out of its national narrative and looks at its development from the outside, it also pointed in the direction of a much larger question that should fascinate historians of the British Empire and historians of America’s foreign relations alike: What is the connection between Britain’s experience as the mightiest world-power of the nineteenth century and the rise of the United States to global hegemony during the twentieth century? To what extent have the histories of these two globalist powers, when studied in the *longue durée*, met and influenced each other? And what does this tell us about the American approach towards imperialism? Have Britain and the United States exchanged their roles in the international system? A study of the global Anglo-American relationship from 1776 to the present day can tell us a lot about the places of both countries in world history.

[i] See Manela, Erez, “The United States in the World”, in: Eric Foner and Lisa McGill, *American History Now* (Philadelphia 2011), pp. 201-220, for an overview of the recent literature on this topic.

[ii] Parent, Joseph K./ MacDonald, Paul K., “The Wisdom of Retrenchment. America Must Cut Back to Move Forward“, in: *Foreign Affairs* 90, No. 6 (November/December 2011), pp. 32-47; Ferguson, Niall, “Complexity and Collapse. Empires on the Edge of Chaos”, in: *Foreign Affairs* 89, No. 2 (March/April 2010), pp. 18-32.

[iii] Maier, Charles S., *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA 2006), p. 3.

[iv] Jay Sexton presented his paper on 20 June 2013 at the SHAFR conference in Arlington, VA, during the plenary session on “America and the World – the World and America. Writing American Diplomatic History in the Longue Durée”.

[v] Hopkins, A.G., “The United States, 1783-1861: Britain’s Honorary Dominion?”, in: *Britain and the World* 4, No. 2, pp. 232-246; Magee, Gary/ Thompson, Andrew, *Empire and Globalization: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, ca. 1950-1914* (Cambridge 2010).

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