

INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

The Possibilities of U.S. Imperial History

Paul A. Kramer

Department of History, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA
Email: paul.kramer@vanderbilt.edu

It is an honor and pleasure to have my essay discussed by such accomplished and thoughtful colleagues, from whom I continue to learn so much. In setting out to respond to their reflections, I would like to begin by stressing my original essay’s tremendous debt to the work of scholars, intellectuals, and political actors who have approached histories of U.S. power in the world from a critical stance, as the piece’s long footnotes—about which I have received much good-natured ribbing—were crafted to highlight. Despite occasional efforts to deny or minimize this rich, complicated intellectual history, there is a vibrant, long-standing conversation here—a conversation that is, in fact, my essay’s main subject and theme, and without which it simply could not exist.

Building on this foundation, I had particular goals for the piece: to gather in one place critical-historical conversations about U.S. power in the world that made use of empire concepts; to map out and interpret patterns in the ways those concepts have been used, especially their application to particular subjects, and their appearances and vanishings across time; to explore empire concepts’ distinctive interpretive value—on their own terms and relative to mystifying, euphemistic alternatives—and to discuss these concepts’ limits and challenges. In doing so, the essay sought not only to critically engage with and challenge exceptionalist approaches to U.S. global power, but to participate in larger scholarly exchanges about empire and its histories that take place mostly outside of U.S. historiography, and to embed discussions of U.S. empire’s histories and historiographies in those conversations.

While my reply here will not be able to do full justice to the rich themes and questions raised by my colleagues, it seeks to engage as substantially as possible with their core questions. These include the relationship between U.S. imperial histories and broader histories of empire in other national contexts; the question of whether empire histories risk “containerizing” histories, as national histories have; the value of approaching historical concepts (including empire) in pragmatic ways with an eye toward their interpretive payoffs; the importance of hegemony to U.S. imperial histories; the distinctions and overlaps between imperial and transnational histories; the question of misrecognized and neglected anti-imperial histories in the making of historiographic narratives; discussion of empire histories’ relationships to histories of U.S. foreign relations; intersections between migration and empire histories; and the question of whether or not U.S. histories ought to be approached as in some ways exceptional.

Andrea Weigeshoff initiates the forum with a valuable contextualization. As she points out, efforts to approach histories of the U.S. in the world through the lens of empire were part and parcel of broader historiographic developments. Over recent decades, historians who studied past and present world powers embarked on bold, innovative explorations of the ways imperial forces of state and capital transformed colonized societies; the profound effects this had on metropolitan societies; and the roles imperial processes played in building an unequal, integrated world. While sharing features, each of these historiographic projects confronted

distinctive challenges that derived from the particular ways imperial histories had been treated or suppressed within authoritative historical works in their respective national contexts, the limits and possibilities of dominant conceptual and methodological practices, and the often-charged public politics that surrounded discussions of empire, its historical legacies, and moral and political meanings.

Weigeshoff also raises the question of historical “containers,” and imperial histories’ relationships to them. Global and transnational histories, she points out, critique the presumption that national polities and states are and should be histories’ containers, especially ones with hard, impermeable, and taken-for-granted boundaries. Might imperial histories reproduce this problem, simply providing new containers to replace the old ones? This is an important question, which points to the ways imperial histories do not, in and of themselves, counter methodological nationalism. In many cases, they can instantiate it, focusing narrowly or even exclusively on metropolitan-imperial agents or dynamics, interpretive lenses, historical stakes, or historiographic conversations. This said, imperial histories can also provide alternatives to containerizing, especially where they play close attention to historical actors’ own efforts to partition, demarcate and police boundaries between “outside” and “inside” that imperial projects of state and capital called into question. Empire histories, in other words, can contribute to historians’ efforts to denaturalize these boundaries, precisely by paying close attention to the ways past actors struggled over their polities’ boundaries onto wider worlds. I greatly appreciate Weigeshoff’s reflections on this point, and on the larger context of empire histories, from which U.S. imperial histories have much to learn, and to which they have much to contribute.

Katherine Unterman’s response focuses on my essay’s explicitly pragmatic orientation and, especially, its attempt to reorient scholarly conversations from the question of what empire “is” to the question of what this lexicon “does” interpretively and analytically. Toward this end, she puts my work in dialogue with that of William James, which, as a longtime, paid-up member of the Progressive-era nerd club, I could not help but find somewhat heady, if also somewhat unflattering to my illustrious counterpart. To field Unterman’s question, my indebtedness to Jamesian pragmatism, here and elsewhere, is self-conscious. I come to this influence, especially, through my graduate advisor Daniel Rodgers’s approach to intellectual history as the history of people thinking—especially in the thick of social and political conflict and argument—rather than the history of “ideas” or bodies of “thought” as coherent, consensually agreed-upon units. Instead of teaching his students to head out in search of ideas in the making, Rodgers encouraged his students to approach historical thinking as a verb: thinking as project and process, inseparable from its contexts, with consequences—including contingent, unforeseen, and unintended ones—that needed to be investigated.¹

For me, this pragmatic approach raises the question: what specific lines of inquiry do vocabularies of empire open up for historians of the U.S. in the world? What significant realities do they draw our attention to, that other concepts do not? Or, to put it more critically, what realities did the historical marginalization of these concepts make it more difficult to register? Exploring this question—empire concepts’ affordances—was one of the driving motives of my original essay, and while I was aware of some of them at the time I wrote it, others have become clearer to me since. In brief, empire concepts help displace technocratic, managerial, apologetic, and mystifying concepts and frameworks, more or less organic to imperial power, which many historians have used and to which their work has fallen prey. They promote anti-exceptionalist approaches to any state’s power and presence in wider worlds. They foreground historically deep and ongoing relations of geopolitical inequality and domination between polities, countering ideologies that conflate sovereign equality with global justice. Empire concepts have the capacity to call attention to unequal, power-laden, global

¹Daniel T. Rodgers, “Thinking in Verbs,” *Intellectual History Newsletter* 18 (1996): 21–3.

connectivities, as sharply distinguished from the terms offered by liberal internationalism and neoliberal cosmopolitanism.

Languages of empire also highlight questions of coercion and violence as core, defining instrumentalities of U.S. global power, against assertions of a defining U.S. commitment to a voluntarist, consensual, peace-seeking, international order. Where U.S. foreign relations history, in particular, has traditionally directed its primary attention to a Cold War, “East–West” axis of conflict, concepts of empire have played an important role in bringing to the fore “North–South” political dynamics associated with colonialism and decolonization, and drawing belated, necessary Americanist attention to these social and political terrains (even as imperial power dynamics were by no means confined to colonized and postcolonized political geographies.) In the process, empire concepts foreground urgent questions of racialized power and differentiation as structural features of unequal world-making, where these were bracketed and subordinated (and also exemplified) in many conventional histories. I am grateful to Unterman for providing this occasion for me to revisit the question of which particular squirrels I was chasing in the original piece, and why I was chasing them.

Penny Von Eschen’s response stresses the importance and value of hegemony as a concept in U.S. imperial histories and raises the question of imperial histories’ relationships to transnational histories. On the first discussion, I completely agree that hegemony, defined in very rough terms as the ongoing, contingent political project of stabilizing fissured, unsettled power relations through the restructuring of common sense, is essential to imperial histories of all kinds, including those involving the United States. In the original essay, I touch on a rich historiography attuned to the question of imperial hegemony, organized around questions of legitimation, messaging, propaganda, image management, and “world opinion.” This scholarship has made important contributions to U.S. imperial histories, even as it has often struggled to escape the gravitational pull of actors’ own categories and technocratic formulas derived from actually existing projects in imperial hegemony: the ubiquitous, authoritative-sounding, managerial vocabularies of soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural exchange, for example. Much remains to be done by historians, especially when it comes to studying the building, contesting, and negotiating of hegemony in “peripheral” societies, at the pressure points of imperial power, between elite and popular sectors: struggles over power and freedom that almost always predated and outlasted intervention by “outsiders,” and that often conditioned or even dictated imperial tactics and strategy.

Von Eschen’s second point deals with definitions of imperial and transnational histories. While she shares my caution about historians’ use of polarized dichotomies between structure and agency, she is skeptical of my claim that the structure/agency dichotomy fed into influential advocates’ distinctions between transnational and imperial historiographies. Here I would like to take the opportunity to clarify that I was neither advocating such a distinction, nor claiming that there were not many historiographic projects that could be accurately cast as both transnational and imperial. My argument, in other words, was not that transnational history necessarily precluded questions of empire, but rather that prevailing definitions of transnational history as set out in the 1990s and early 2000s, with their overwhelming thematic emphasis on global mobilities, flows, and networks as liberated and liberating, were relatively inhospitable to urgent questions of imperial domination, violence, and exploitation. This said, I fully agree with Von Eschen that there have long existed powerful, countervailing visions when it comes to the questions that global and transnational histories might ask, and I thank her for this reminder that there are compelling, alternative genealogies and traditions to which historians can and should look for inspiration and guidance.

Harvey Neptune’s response opens by providing a lucid, elegant synopsis of my article before turning to questions arising at the intersection of my piece and his own brilliant, transformative scholarship on mid-twentieth-century U.S. historical writing. Here and elsewhere, Neptune emphasizes that the historians conventionally (and, for him, erroneously) labeled the

“consensus school” have been seriously and durably misread and misinterpreted—and subsequently not actually read, in part because of these misreadings—since their heyday between the late 1940s and mid-1960s. As he argues, rather than complacent apologists for the United States’s supposedly consensual, nation-defining values of liberalism, individualism, and property rights, historians like Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz, and Daniel Boorstin were consummate ironists, whose complicated outside/inside positions, as Jews in an academic landscape shaped by anti-Semitism, contributed to what Neptune characterizes as a distinctive approach to the U.S. past that exposed and punctured the inflated verities that many mid-century Americans held dear. According to Neptune, these authors insisted on framing the United States as a society, like other former New World colonies and postcolonies, that remained defined by its historically deep, subordinating ties to imperial Europe. Where leading mid-twentieth-century U.S. commentators sought to elevate the United States as first among equals in a white, transatlantic, “free world” defined by capitalism, democracy, and imperial dominance, he argues, these historians insisted that the United States remained, in important ways, an ex-colony that was historically defined (in ways it struggled not to admit to itself) by settler colonialism, slavery, anti-colonial revolution, and economic dependency, comparable to other New World societies.

When it comes to my essay, Neptune points to the fact that I do not mention Louis Hartz, an absence that leads him to wonder if my essay, which reflects on the comings and goings of empire concepts in U.S. historical writing, might have inadvertently produced its own counter-productive erasure. While my piece would certainly have been enriched by a reference to Hartz, when it comes to its overall periodization of critical empire scholarship and writing, my claim in the essay was not that anti-imperialist historical writing did not continue between the inter-war period and the Vietnam War, but that the “nationalist, exceptionalist, and anti-communist mobilizations and repressions of World War II and the early Cold War” made anti-imperialist work’s “critical tenor ... hard to sustain,” a general claim I do not think is incompatible with the existence of Hartz’s essay, or broader critical approaches to the United States role in the world among “consensus” historians (1388).

That said, Neptune’s deeply researched excavation and incisive reading of the “consensus school,” crossed with questions of imperial history, raise subtle, vital questions about anti-imperial discourse more generally. Some of these questions are: what are we looking for when we search for anti-imperial histories, and how do we recognize them when we encounter them? And how might our metrics, whether implicit or explicit, artificially limit the scope of our vision and distort our portrait of historiographic change? When we think of anti-imperial rhetoric in U.S. history, the first tones and affects that likely come to mind are earnest, sincere, righteous, and condemnatory. But this, Neptune insists, is not the only way to rhetorically confront imperial power. Alongside what might be called denunciatory anti-imperialism (which necessarily enlarges its object to justify its righteous anger), there is what might be called deflationary anti-imperialism, which seeks to burst empire’s pretensions to grandeur, significance, virtue, and exceptionality. If the former is an anti-imperialism of thunderous, rumbling timpani drums, the latter represents the anti-imperialism of mocking, funny-sad slide trombones. Neptune’s work is attuning historians’ ears to listen for this wider spectrum of anti-imperialist discourse, within historical scholarship and beyond it.

Ryan Irwin’s contribution focuses on the fortunes of U.S. foreign relations history as he defines it and the implications of my essay (as standing in for and embodying broader trends) for the field’s present and future. Much could be said about his misguided personification of what has for decades been a dynamic, collective, sometimes contentious scholarly enterprise—an enterprise that has been creative and spirited precisely because no one person has been in charge of it. As for Irwin’s invocation of red pills, George Orwell’s “endless present,” the specters of “entropy,” deconstruction, and “everything as war,” neglected political scientists and the incoming threat of literary scholars, and an undergraduate who may be trying to

cover (not very artfully) the fact that they have not done the reading, perhaps the less said the better.

Instead, I want to focus here on two issues: Irwin's characterization of the state of U.S. diplomatic history and his depiction of its relationship to imperial histories. On diplomatic history's present and future, I find Irwin's dire depiction hard to square with my own perspective, and those of many friends and colleagues. U.S. foreign relations history has never been more intellectually alive and promising. One need only turn to the recent, monumental, multivolume *Cambridge Histories of America and the World*, to which a great many gifted U.S. foreign relations historians contributed. Or one could point to the vitality of U.S. foreign relations history's flagship journal, *Diplomatic History*, newly energized under the stellar leadership of Nick Cullather, Anne Foster, and Petra Goedde. And one might look, perhaps a bit ironically, to the fact that many of the scholars who lament the "end" of foreign relations history do so from stable, well-resourced academic positions, at powerful, prestigious universities, under precisely that label. The claim that U.S. foreign relations history, in and of itself, faces some kind of end-stage, existential crisis in either intellectual or institutional terms simply does not withstand serious scrutiny.

Over the past several decades, U.S. foreign relations historians have succeeded in broadening the fundamental questions they ask, to include the relative significance of "non-state" actors in the making of U.S. foreign policy; the politics of colonialism and decolonization; the ways U.S. foreign policy has been inflected by racialized, gendered, and sexual power, and religious ideologies; historical studies of development, human rights, capitalism, science, technology, public health, and the environment; and of the consequences of U.S. foreign policy for those affected by it, including those whose lives have been endangered, harmed, or destroyed by U.S. actions. In his response, Irwin does injustice to the intellectual richness of this new generation of work, starkly contrasting it with what he takes to be genuine U.S. foreign relations history.

Here it seems that Irwin is not so much alarmed over the scholarly enterprise of U.S. foreign relations itself—a category that can comfortably hold this new work, if non-exclusively—but about one, very particular and constrained version of it. It is a version in which U.S. foreign relations historians focus on "power" (defined primarily or exclusively in terms of statecraft and policy making), dialogue primarily with political scientists and international relations scholars rather than other humanists and social scientists, and adopt an aspirational subject position as consultants or advisors to foreign policy processes, tasked with uncovering history's "lessons" for present-day questions of national security and foreign policy. In seeking to speak to this audience, scholars who practice this version of U.S. foreign relations history often adopt for historical-analytical purposes the concepts and categories of either powerful past actors or present-day policy makers, even as these framings can distort historical understanding by sanitizing, euphemizing, and mystifying many U.S. relationships with the wider world. Critical empire histories are, indeed, opposed to understandings of U.S. foreign relations history as part of the broader policy sciences of imperial management. But it is inaccurate and counter-productive to depict imperial histories' relationship to U.S. foreign relations history itself as one of existential, zero-sum conflict.

To the contrary, these ways of framing historical research are entirely compatible and mutually supporting, with each providing complementary benefits that in no way conflict. While foreign relations history's strong suit has always been the study of policy making, statecraft, interstate relations, and international politics more broadly, imperial history's forte has been its critical attention to dynamics of unequal power and geopolitical domination, the interrelationship of power and difference, and the mutual constitution of metropole and periphery. Where, exactly, is this supposed incompatibility? Why can't U.S. foreign relations history, influenced in part by imperial-historical questions, be about—among other things—the ways U.S. state and civil society involvements with the wider world were shaped by and shaping of geopolitical and imperial inequalities, in ways that affected the United States, other polities, and the

transnational and global environment? Isn't that what much of the thriving subfield of U.S. foreign relations history already is?

Last in the sequence, but far from least, Eladio Bobadilla focuses on the historiographic question of imperial histories' implications for migration histories, and the question of whether U.S. history might be regarded as in some ways exceptional. On the latter point, I would simply want to emphasize what for me is the importance of drawing a sharp distinction between uniqueness and exceptionality, which Bobadilla's response approaches as somewhat interchangeable. As many scholars have insightfully noted, the histories of all polities are unique, even as these histories are not discrete and separable, and even as they share many features and characteristics in common. While frequently conflated, exceptionality actually represents an entirely different claim from that of uniqueness; by its very nature, exceptionality involves distortive comparisons that homogenize all but one instance of something, usually through implicit or explicit reference to otherwise universal features or governing rules, from which exceptionalized cases are conveniently immunized. Exceptionalisms, in other words, deny the uniqueness of those histories whose very uniformity is required to isolate the exceptional case.² This said, Bobadilla's explorations here valuably point to the need for painstaking, non-exceptionalist comparisons that can yield insights into similarities and differences, and the relative force of the factors that produced them.

On the earlier point, about migration and empire histories, I could not agree more wholeheartedly with Bobadilla that empire concepts and framings have much to offer migration histories, and vice versa, and that historians find themselves somewhere in the middle of the exciting project of fully connecting these historical conversations. Thematically, these imperial histories of migration and migration histories of empire explore the ways statist and capitalist projects in geopolitical domination and exploitation contributed to the forces that dispossessed and displaced migrants, violently denying them a "right to stay home." They examine the logistical, political, and moral force that migrants and their families, communities, and organizational networks applied to state migration controls, and investigate the ways migration policy has been mediated by interstate diplomacy and multilateral norms and compacts. They map the outward, politico-geographic projection and enforcement of bordering regimes, beyond states' territorial boundaries. They look at the ways refugee and asylum policies have been shaped by geopolitical and imperial priorities. They uncover the roles that military power and basing infrastructures have played in transporting and detaining migrants, and military institutions as vast systems of mobile, migrant labor. And they challenge sovereigntist approaches to migration history by historicizing struggles over sovereignty and migration control, vis-à-vis international and global political pressures.³ I am grateful to Bobadilla for emphasizing this nexus, as one of many settings where empire concepts can help bridge and enrich subfields that have much to offer each other.

To conclude my response, while imperial histories of the United States in the world have arguably never been richer, more sophisticated, or wider ranging, this approach still faces many challenges, including relatively new and emerging ones. Lively conversations concerned with questions of empire—such as present-day historical debates about settler colonialism and neoliberalism—run on relatively parallel tracks, where they might converse and cross-pollinate. Empire and nation continue to be misunderstood as typologically distinct types of socio-political organization, rather than useful concepts for making sense of particular dimensions of states and polities. (Conversely, scholars sometimes off-handedly swap in the word empire

²On these points, see especially Daniel T. Rodgers, "Exceptionalism," in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), 21–40.

³For my own approach to these themes, part of a larger work in progress, see Paul A. Kramer, "The Geopolitics of Mobility: Immigration Policy and American Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (Apr. 2018), 393–438.

where the term nation is normally used, paying insufficient attention to the very different ways these concepts approach questions of power, membership, and political geography.) Some histories take empire to be coterminous with white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, or border-making, in ways that make it difficult to explore tensions between these projects and the ways they played out, and variations in the ways historical actors constellated these forms of power.

If the challenges remain formidable, the prospects for imperial histories of the U.S. in the world have never been brighter. Even as empire scholarship makes strides in coverage, depth, and sophistication within its traditional focal points—work on overseas colonial-imperial regimes and military basing—scholars are bringing imperial analytics to bear on historical domains where they are newer and less familiar: the geopolitics of human rights, development, media, education, language, urban geographies and the built environment, and international “civil society,” for example.⁴ Much work remains to be done in these and other domains. While social, cultural, and economic histories of U.S. military power have been rapidly developing, for example, we have yet to fully bring together histories of military institutions, militarization, and war-making, with histories of U.S. empire. Historians have much to learn about imperial diversities in U.S. history: the ways projections of dominative, geopolitical power could qualify or undermine totalized, zero-sum forms of exclusion, and give rise to hierarchical, conditional, burdened, instrumentalized modes of inclusion. Scholars continue to advance the long-standing project of “trans-imperial” histories that explore the ways powerful states interacted, cooperated, competed, and learned from each other. And historians are only at the beginning when it comes reflexive, intellectual-historical inquiries into the ways past and present imperial projects have shaped our own concepts, questions, and methods as scholars.

I would like to close on a note of gratitude to this forum’s contributors, and to *Modern American History*’s editors, Sarah Snyder and Darren Dochuk, for all their hard work in making this exchange possible. I would also like to thank the scholars, writers, intellectuals, and activists—working inside and outside of academia—who have done so much to advance these inquiries over the decades. And I thank, in advance, future scholars—only some of whom I will get to know—who may take these inquiries forward in rigorous, illuminating ways, including in ways that we cannot imagine from the present.⁵ Hopefully, those of us thinking and writing now will turn out to be reasonably good ancestors, worthy sparring partners, and comrades across time, perhaps giving you as much to build on and argue with as those who came before us and who made our own work imaginable.

⁴For a partial bibliography of book-length works of U.S. imperial history published between 2010 and 2023, see <https://www.paulkrameronline.com/>.

⁵For some reflections on historians’ social roles in democratic societies, see Paul A. Kramer, “History in a Time of Crisis,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 19, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/history-in-a-time-of-crisis/>.