

# Reviews

## American empire: a global history

By A. G. Hopkins, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford:  
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Hopkins' ambitious book seeks to integrate the history of the global American territorial empire with the scholarly literature on European imperialism. He argues that examining European and American imperial trajectories in tandem reveals far more commonalities than differences. He shows that the timing of the American seizure, governance, and relinquishment of a formal overseas empire was in step with the new imperialism of other Western powers. Such a chronology suggests that 'supranational forces', rather than coincidental alignments between national histories, are to account for the rise and dissolution of Western empires in the twentieth century (p. 492). Drawing on Marxist theory, Hopkins contends that transnational economic considerations, especially transformations in the extent and pace of globalization, determined the patterns of Western imperial history. He defines globalization generously, seeing it as a 'process that also incorporates political, social, and cultural change' alongside economic integration (p. 12). Inspired by Montesquieu's observation that structure is relative to scale, he further argues that globalization was itself shaped by the political

form of the dominant imperial regimes at any given period (p. 32). Thus, he portrays the history of imperialism and globalization as intermixed and dialectical, with empires powering globalization, and globalization supporting and then gradually destabilizing and reshaping Western empires. While he draws comparisons with continental European powers, Hopkins mostly employs the British empire to contextualize American imperialism. This is largely because of the British empire's size, efficiency, and influence on North America and globalization (pp. 27, 36, and 47).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, globalization unfolded through the agency of military-fiscal states. These were expansionist, agrarian, dynastic polities that struggled to pay for extensive militaries in defence of their empires (p. 34). By expanding and developing overseas dominions, military-fiscal states initiated the first stirrings of global integration, or 'proto-globalization' (p. 7). That extension came with a cost, however; in what Hopkins calls the 'great convergence', wars of imperial expansion pushed Europe's military-fiscal states toward a financial and imperial crisis at the end of the eighteenth century (p. 52). When the British parliament tried to raise revenue from the North American colonies to help manage its debt from the Seven Years' War, it provoked the American Revolution. Likewise, France's intervention in the conflict later precipitated a similar fiscal crisis in 1789.

After winning formal independence, American revolutionaries faced the challenges of decolonization and nation-building (p. 19). They began by crafting the Constitution

on the (British) military-fiscal model in order to stabilize the US economy (p. 125). Fractious antebellum politics reflected contests between liberals and conservatives in nineteenth-century Europe, who jostled over whether economic policy should favour agricultural interests through free-trade or industrial interests via protectionism (p. 144). Overall, the partisanship of the early American republic ensured that the United States would remain dependent on Britain politically, economically, and culturally. Without 'effective independence', the United States was a state without a nation (p. 19). Interestingly enough, it was also a state without an empire. While the United States seized Native American lands in the west throughout the nineteenth century, Hopkins believes that such acquisitions did not comprise an empire because the Native American population was comparatively small and the new territories became incorporated into the Union as states with the same rights as the original thirteen (pp. 236–7).

The mid nineteenth century witnessed the 'great transition', whereby modern globalization began to transform military-fiscal states into industrialized nation-states (p. 94). Industrialization and urbanization produced social tensions that only unified nation-states seemed able to resolve. One of their strategies was imperialism, which appeared poised to ameliorate class divisions by boosting economic opportunity and patriotism. Hopkins believes that the United States followed this basic European pattern. By defeating southern agricultural conservatives in the American Civil War, Union forces 'broke a state to build a nation' (p. 36). Between 1865 and 1898, Americans shed vestiges of postcolonial dependency on Great Britain and assumed more and more political, economic, and cultural independence. But because their contests with Democrats at the ballot box continued, Republicans looked

abroad for ways of preserving their electoral dominance. Empire, via a successful war with Spain, was their solution. By engaging in a righteous, patriotic war and joining the other major industrial nation-states in the new imperialism, Republicans hoped that they would rally the nation's electorate to their brand of political economy and reject the neocolonial conservatism of their political competitors.

The gambit only partially worked. By annexing the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico, the United States joined the imperial club. Yet the nation soon found that gaining an empire was much easier than governing one. As Hopkins shows, Americans ruled over their 'insular empire' in much the same way as British and French imperialists reigned over their own foreign territories. On a global scale, the new imperialists quickened the pace of modern globalization. The First World War served as the final clash between outdated military-fiscal states and modern industrial nation-states (p. 444). Contrary to conventional thinking, Allied victory actually strengthened the territorial empires of Britain, France, and the United States, which enjoyed widespread prosperity in the 1920s (p. 536). Yet by delivering public goods and cultural constructs (including racism, ethnic nationalism, and natural rights philosophy), modern territorial empires facilitated a transition to postcolonial globalization. With the onset of the global depression of the 1930s, simmering anti-colonial movements gained momentum (p. 445). While the strategic experience and post-war landscape of the Second World War encouraged the Allies to maintain their overseas empires, postcolonial globalization made such an endeavour impossible (pp. 639–40). Decolonization followed rapidly in the 1950s, with Britain, France, and the United States giving up their overseas territories or otherwise rearranging their relationships with them. In place of an

empire, since 1945 the United States has sought hegemony, positioning itself as the essential guarantor of world order and security (p. 692). Yet its unilateralist tendencies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have often fallen short because nation-states, even hegemonic ones, are ill-equipped to tackle the world's challenges in a postcolonial, transnational, globalized economy.

*American empire* is a thoughtful, well-written, and deeply researched book. Hopkins set out to immerse American imperial history in the larger stream of Western imperial history, and in that he has succeeded. His core argument, that the United States was as subject to the forces and chronologies of globalization as other imperial powers, is convincing. His treatment of the formal American empire in the Pacific and the Caribbean is a welcome contribution to an area that has been greatly understudied in a comparative context. By assuming a larger perspective, Hopkins melds diverse literatures in American and European histories together in a productive manner. Like Kariann Yokota, his application of decolonization and postcolonial studies to the nineteenth-century United States is illuminating for American and world historians alike.<sup>1</sup> Where else might one encounter comparisons between Andrew Jackson and Mahatma Gandhi as leaders of 'green uprisings' (p. 148), or John Quincy Adams and Jawaharlal Nehru as post-revolutionary, decolonizing leaders (pp. 142–3)? The overall result of such efforts deals a significant blow to American exceptionalism in the area of imperial studies. Perhaps more importantly, *American empire* offers a usable model for incorporating the American imperial career

into world history textbooks, courses, and scholarship.

For all this, *American empire* has its limitations. One is Hopkins' insistence that the transcontinental expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, while imperialistic, did not produce an empire. He contends, for example, that the Native American population was too small for Indians to be considered imperial subjects (p. 237). Hopkins is right that scale matters in imperial studies: seizing a three-hut hamlet in an adjoining state cannot, by itself, make an empire. But surely the slaughter, dispossession, and incorporation of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans and their several hundred independent polities in the nineteenth-century North American west was on an imperial scale. Finally, by self-consciously excluding informal empire, Hopkins elides American imperialism and empire in its most global of incarnations. Although his observations on the challenges in defining and measuring informal influence are well stated (pp. 15 and 23), a growing body of scholarship has shown that Americans sought and achieved some measure of informal empire on the global stage as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The fullest global history of the American empire would include these maritime, commercial, diplomatic, naval, and missionary activities alongside the formal insular empire that Hopkins surveys so well. Such an approach would have the additional benefit of integrating more of the Global South into

1 Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: how revolutionary America became a post-colonial nation*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

2 See, for example, Brian Rouleau, *With sails whitening every sea: mariners and the making of an American maritime empire*, Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2014; Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian imperialism: converting the world in the early American republic*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015; and Matthew J. Karp, *This vast southern empire: slaveholders at the helm of American foreign policy*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2016.

the spatial scale of American imperialism. While this is not the book that Hopkins set out to write, such an approach would nonetheless have had a better claim to the mantle of global history. Until that book is released, however, Hopkins has made his mark, and has made it well. *American empire* is a provocative, perceptive, and compelling step towards a richer integration of American, European, and world history.

### The prospect of global history

*Edited by James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 222. Hardback £36.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-873225-9.*

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These are curious times. Global history is booming. This wide-ranging anthology is one of many that have appeared in recent years. There's global intellectual history, global conceptual history, global economic history, global ancient worlds, and global crises of the seventeenth century. A casual observer might fairly wonder if globalists are storming the discipline. If they are, it might be a long struggle. Recent evidence of foreign language training shows that the Angloworld is becoming more, not less, monolingual. American universities may not be platforms for Nation-Firsters, but they are becoming more parochial. Area studies are being downsized. What counts as social theory depends ever more on evidence from one country.

The editors of *The prospect of global history* do not address the anomaly squarely. What they do do is confront the complicated and even contradictory ties between global

history and globalization without assuming that the latter is as monolithic or irreversible as many of its champions once supposed. One might say that the introduction by the Oxford trio of Belich, Darwin, and Wickham maps out a prospect for global history not by severing the field from triumphal (or, more recently, tragic) narratives of globalization but by rescuing globalization from the present. The introduction explores the fissures between an older tradition of comparative history and the more recent turn to connected approaches. But just as comparative studies could seldom disentangle the units being contrasted, and had to concede to embedded or reciprocal strategies, so connectedness covered for a lot of different ways of understanding the tethers across societies. These range from contact, interaction, and circulation to the most intense form of connection, integration – when the parts of the global whole become co-dependent. The prospect of global history will have to rely on more nuanced and complex terminologies and typologies.

The essays that follow take a look at some of those nuances and complexities to reveal variations in intensity of globalization. For instance, Nicholas Purcell shows how incense got traded across the Swahili Coast, India, and the Mediterranean. But this was hardly a case of muscular integration, even though the use of aromatics became a shared ritual. On the other hand, according to Purcell, the meaning and value of incense consumption were not of a piece and adapted themselves to local mores and norms. By contrast, Linda Colley's essay on the diffusion of constitution writing shows how modern thinkers and scribes relied on charters to legitimate their states in a global political order that increasingly required regimes to have constitutions to get recognition and access to trade and financial markets. To be rescued from the present, we are going to need a wider repertoire of understandings of what