

Informal Empire

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WHAT does informal empire mean? A common working definition appears rather simple: it refers to a system in which a nation is officially designated sovereign, yet the outsize power of another nation's (usually economic) leverage in fact compromises its self-determination. In other words, informal empire governs without governance, achieving significant influence over foreign states without the official institutions of formal control wielded by settler and administrative colonialism. It is sometimes called neocolonialism, under the assumption that it represents a second wave or a spin-off of traditional empire (in fact, the two have long colluded), and it is sometimes called financial imperialism, since the levers one nation uses to influence another are commonly economic.

For Victorian scholars, several examples of informal empire are important. In the nineteenth century, the British obtained significant, sovereignty-compromising influence over China through the “unequal treaties” that ended the Opium Wars, over Egypt through market dominance, over India through the East India Company, and, perhaps most expansively, over the new nations of Latin America through an admixture of systems ranging from predatory loans to the ownership of industry. Given the difference in scope, duration, methods, and outcomes in these cases, it becomes difficult to pin down an inclusive definition of informal empire. Some instances involved military intervention while others did not; some made use of administrative structures while others were less formalized; some involved laws and treaties while others had no such features. For the remainder of this short essay, I will mitigate some of the difficulty of this variety by focusing on Latin America.

What *exactly* do we mean when we call a certain kind of imperialism informal? It almost seems like a contradiction in terms to suggest such indefiniteness about a system of wide-reaching control. The word

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“informal” might signify a lack of structure—a lack of form. It might also signify casual, as in not rigidly supervised nor top-down. Scholars have variously considered informal empire to be “informal” in both of these ways, all the while butting up against the outer limits of what may still be termed “empire.” On formlessness, one can look to scholars who describe British informal empire in Latin America as “diffident [and] vague,”¹ “short-termist [and] improvised,”² and “ad hoc[,] . . . dispersed and fragmentary.”³ In other words, although a system of coercive power became operational between Britain and Latin America, it had no centralized structure. That much is true; Britain had no Office of Informal Empire, encoded no iterable procedures for overtaking Latin American national sovereignties, and created no hierarchy of administrators to carry out its directives in the continent. The leverage was achieved, and the influence exerted, by banks, companies, investors, and migrants who offered loans, purchased industries, provided capital, and imported British culture. These relationships had *forms*—usually hierarchical, often exchange-based—but they did not derive from a central, premeditated form. This, then, is the way in which informal also signifies a lack of hierarchical supervision. Scholars tend to agree that, as Robert Aguirre puts it, informal empire “did not originate in a master plan”⁴ or, in Matthew Brown’s words, was not “a coherent imperial project directed from London.”⁵

So then, to what extent do the individuals who helped enact the informal forms of informal empire bear moral and causal responsibility for the entire system? Thousands of British men and women traveled to Buenos Aires, Valparaíso, and Montevideo to trade goods, teach in schools, join the military, and start families, and scholars disagree about whether these individuals were culpable agents of informal empire. Jean Franco and Mary Louise Pratt call these migrants “missionaries of capitalism” and the “capitalist vanguard,” respectively, suggesting that they had explicitly imperial ambitions and worked actively to bring South America under the sway of British economic and discursive power.⁶ Meanwhile, Brown argues that while this may have been true in some cases, most British migrants simply followed their own individual, rather than any larger systemic, motivations. Speaking in particular about British mercenary soldiers who joined the Latin American independence movements, he calls them “variously too headstrong, too incompetent, or too inebriated” to be considered agents of empire.⁷

If one sides with Brown, informal empire looks something like the systems theory concept of “emergence,” wherein a collective displays a

particular property created by the interaction of individual members, but which no individual members themselves possess nor control and which stems from no centralized source. In this view, the dynamic amalgamation of British loan deals, industry contracts, and land purchases in Latin America can be called imperial, but no single banker, miner, or farmer may be called an imperialist. Given that the structures of informal empire were in many cases built collaboratively with willing Latin American elites seeking to join the global market, one might say that informal empire “emerged.” out of a transnational collection of extraimperial individuals. Emergence is an appealing way to describe “informal” form—that which is both indistinct and bottom-up—but it also highlights the incongruity of terming such a thing “empire.” It begins to seem quite a paradox to claim a continuity between emergent power and the highly structured, centralized, and legislated nature of the territorial British Empire. In fact, some scholars have rejected the term “informal empire” precisely on these grounds, suggesting that “sphere of influence” or “dependency” better fits the bill. But that takes us far from the foundational arguments about informal empire—namely, that it is a kindred operation to territorial empire, a less violent and less costly method of British dominance, but one of its methods nonetheless.⁸ Given the extraordinary benefits accrued by the British economy, this interpretation is hard to dismiss.

This short essay has intentionally done more to trouble definition than to provide one. That scholars disagree on things like the complicity of individuals, the extent of government oversight, or even whether informal empire is imperial reveals it to be less a settled concept than a vexing category.⁹ So where does this leave us? My own view is that informal empire is best approached through the lens of paradox. It is a system with no centralized authority and yet which gave Britain a powerful role in the formation of Latin America. It relied on the continuing independence of Latin American nations and yet compromised their sovereignty. It often fostered the economic progress of the new nations and yet strangled their development. It grew out of the labor of thousands of individual migrants and travelers, and yet many of these people had no sense that they were involved in something called empire (some certainly did). What informal empire means is still very much up for debate. It remains unclear precisely what it did in the nineteenth century. However, what it does for *scholars* of the nineteenth century is clear: it calls us to the study of imperialism in new ways, asking us to look beyond the usual sites, to more openly conceptualize power relations,

and—using the particular powers of literary study we possess—to be attuned to the strangeness and paradox of imperial form.

NOTES

1. John Lynch, “British Policy and Spanish America, 1783–1808,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1969): 21.
2. Matthew Brown, *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries, and the Birth of New Nations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 17.
3. Robert Aguirre, *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvii.
4. Aguirre, *Informal Empire*, xvii.
5. Matthew Brown, ed., *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 7–8.
6. Jean Franco, “A Not-So-Romantic Journey: British Travelers to South America, 1818–28,” in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, edited by Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman, 133–46 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992).
7. Brown, *Informal Empire*, 7–8.
8. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 1–15.
9. See Brown, *Informal Empire*, and Martin Lynn, “British Policy, Trade, and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” in *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, edited by Andrew Porter, 101–21 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

