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## REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

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**A. G. Hopkins: *American Empire. A Global History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, 980 pp.**

Reviewed by  
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The ideology of exceptionalist nationalism has long influenced the writing of US history. According to this view, efforts to contextualize the American experience via comparison are of little use except to confirm that the United States is evolved in a historical category of its own. In his book *American Empire*, A. G. Hopkins, an emeritus professor at the universities of Cambridge and Texas/Austin, aims to dismantle this intellectually stifling, self-referential, and yet still widespread nationalist narrative.<sup>1</sup> He argues that any understanding of US history requires a global perspective and that empire constitutes an excellent window for highlighting the deep interconnectedness of US and global developments over the *longue durée*, not “[...] to put the United States down, but rather to put it in – to the mainstream of Western history” (p. 691).

To this end, the author develops an interpretative panorama of dual integration in which the United States is equally embedded in the unfolding of economic globalization over roughly three centuries and the simultaneous struggles of states and empires in the Atlantic world to advance globalization and control its transformative sociopolitical challenges. In those transformations – from proto-globalization to modern and ultimately post-colonial globalization(s) – territorial empires were simultaneously both drivers and passengers.

Hopkins applies strict spatial and temporal limitations to his interpretation of the US Empire, which he observes in its insular colonial manifestations. Victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898 constituted the moment “when the real American Empire, the tangible territorial empire, was established” (p. 38). According to the author, this empire decolonized in 1959 when Hawaii received statehood. The book suggests that causes, contours, and consequences of US colonialism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines were part and parcel of the history of globalization, its transformations, and the global history of imperialism. In contrast to the exceptionalists who either minimize America’s imperial past and/or deny its comparative suitability, Hopkins

argues that: “[T]he trends influencing the course of American Empire were the same as those shaping the other Western empires” (p. 636).

The book’s analytical focus on economics and state power is structured around major transformative stages of globalization and consists of 4 parts, 15 chapters, and a prologue and epilogue on the failed occupations of Iraq. The first part (1756–1865) discusses the divergence between nominal US independence and its continued dependence on Britain until the mid-nineteenth century. According to Hopkins, American political choices, economic development, and cultural aspiration were shaped by the British Empire until the Civil War, which “broke a state to build a nation” (p. 36).

This nation-building forms the core of the book’s second part (1865–1914). Hopkins contextualizes this process through comparative reference to European latecomers to national unification such as Germany and Italy. Those states shared similar programmes of national development designed to mitigate socioeconomic tensions through racism and empire-building. In the US, racism became the glue for the national project, signified by the polity’s tolerance for the failure of Reconstruction, the further marginalization of indigenous cultures, and colonial empire-building abroad. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States became an independent state and “[s]uddenly, and very visibly, the ex-colonial republic became an imperial power” (p. 337).

This colonial outreach took place in the context of a political and economic crisis that engulfed Europe and the United States and was rooted in the transition

from agrarian military-fiscal states to industrial nation-states. This process produced instability not only in the metropolises of many Atlantic empires but also in Spanish possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific: “The United States and Spain were both attempting to transform agricultural into industrial societies, while trying to consolidate political unity and promote a sense of national identity” (p. 427). While Hopkins acknowledges the influence of particular business interests such as the sugar trust in this form of enforced globalization by imperialism, he simultaneously rejects the idea that the quest for markets drove the acquisition of colonies. Instead, he emphasizes that empire was the result of a desire for political stability in the metropole.

The book’s third part (1914–1959) examines the history of this empire through four detailed case studies of US possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific by foregrounding the empire’s deep interconnections with its European counterparts regarding colonial practices, from economics to education. However, not only the re-enforcement of European and American empires after both world wars but also the increasingly tenable positions of such empires in the face of decolonization signaled such parallel development. The author interprets decolonization as a signifier for the often violent transformation from modern to post-colonial globalization and suggests that “[i]nstead of fitting decolonization into the Cold War, the Cold War needs to be fitted into decolonization, which in turn needs to be placed in the even wider context of the global transformation of power, interests, and values in the postwar era” (p. 640).

The book's part on post-colonial globalization provides a somber coda for all those who describe the post-1945 United States as empire. Based on his definition of empire as a concrete insular colonial format, the author describes the US as an aspiring yet often frustrated hegemon and claims that the American Empire ended in 1959 when Hawaii was granted statehood. While frequently labelled an empire to denote its immense post-war power and influence, Hopkins suggests that even at the best of times "the gap between potential and effective power remained stubbornly wide" (p. 708).

Hopkins is not the first scholar to write against the interpretative shadow of nationalist exceptionalism as an increasing number of historians have criticized this myopic interpretation of the nation's past, a myopia that has only been rivalled by the often pointless debates on the question whether the United States even constituted an empire or not. To break through the self-inflicted limitations of the exceptional, historians have particularly traced the political, economic, and sociocultural connections and exchanges between the United States and the world.<sup>2</sup>

This interest in connectivity through imperial formats also informs much of the writing of the "new imperial history" and global history. In this context, interpretations that privilege conflict over cooperation in the imperial worlds are now balanced by a growing interest in inter-imperial learning, circulations, connections, and cooperation. For the United States, such trans-imperial knowledge flows and reference frames encompassed not only Great Britain but also Spain, Russia, the Netherlands, and Japan.<sup>3</sup>

But few historians have delved as deeply into the global (Atlantic) imperial world and US history in an effort to integrate both as Hopkins has. The result is a conceptually sophisticated, empirically saturated (sometimes oversaturated), awe-inspiring learned, eloquent, and witty analysis over three centuries of empire and globalization. It takes a seasoned historian whose reflective knowledge builds on a life of scholarship about the imperial world, the British Empire, the American Empire, and globalization to produce such a work. By training, previous research, and career trajectory, Hopkins has the global outlook necessary to untangle knots of parochial nationalism and produce such a sustained scholarly assault on exceptionalism.

While the book requires endurance from its readers for its length, breadth, complex analytical matrix, and extensive evidence, it is also rewarding in at least three ways. Firstly, it offers multiple trajectories and vantage points for integrating US history into the writing of global history and vice versa. Secondly, it succeeds in de-exceptionalizing the United States by outlining its position within a dense global network of interlocking responses to globalization through state power and economic development. Finally, the book's analytical foregrounding of imperial territoriality pulls some of the constituent parts of the US colonial empire further out of the shadows of historiographical neglect, elevates them to a central analytical role for understanding imperialism, and simultaneously fills the analytical void left by the often mere metaphorical application of the empire label to US power with both perspectives of colonizer and colonized.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, however, the book's narrow definition of empire – with its restricted spatial formats and imperial chronologies – permits only a partial glimpse at the full extent of the American Empire. This conceptual weakness is most pronounced in the absence of any extended discussion of empire-building on the continent.<sup>5</sup> For Hopkins, expansion in North America was not empire but at most “internal colonialism” because “Native Americans represented only a tiny fraction of the total population” (p. 237) and the settled territories were admitted to the polity on equal rights.

And yet, the United States struggled for control over the continent not only with European empires but also with powerful indigenous polities such as the Comanche Empire or the Lakota Nation.<sup>6</sup> The federal government not only devoted enormous resources to imperial wars but also held many conquered territories in colonial dependency for decades before awarding statehood. Thus, for most of its history the United States consisted of a great mix of territorial formats and territorial sovereignties, a hallmark of empires across the globe.

The sidelining of continental empire also represents a missed opportunity to analytically engage global interconnections of this imperial West as well as America's global outreach before 1898, especially during the antebellum period.<sup>7</sup> Imperial mobilities and the accompanying desire to project US power across the world's oceans defined the United States since its inception and accompanied the process of transcontinental empire-building.<sup>8</sup> While still operating within a world system dominated by the British Empire, the

United States steadily expanded the spatial horizons of its imperial engagements abroad, manifested by a quickly expanding network of naval outposts, resource extraction and production zones, extraterritorial jurisdictions, and consular stations.

While the United States built an empire long before it became a nation, it also retained an empire even after its transition into the phase of post-colonial globalization.<sup>9</sup> Hopkins is certainly correct in much of his assessment of imperial overstretch; but many of the territorial manifestations he so carefully excavated from the entombment of imperial amnesia were either not decolonized for many more decades, such as the Panama Canal Zone, or remained colonized territories, such as Puerto Rico, Samoa, Guam, or other Pacific territories still under US control. Those spaces remain complemented by a global network of military bases, extraterritorial outposts, and resource extraction zones, historically key ingredients of America's imperial spatial mosaic.

Finally, Hopkins' focus on a very specific and segmented format of empire also forecloses the opportunity to further explore the deep interconnections between the nation-state and its empire. Empire after all took place not only in faraway locations but also very much within the polity itself in often spatially delineated zones of exception within which constitutional rights were either temporarily suspended or non-existent for various subject populations. Typical examples encompass the “empire of Jim Crow” with its vast space of racial oppression, violence, and disenfranchisement; the reservation system; and internment camps. While just a partial listing, these examples highlight that empire and

nation-state are not necessarily antithetical but often coexisted in spatially overlapping formats designed to uphold difference for some while providing forms of participation and equality for others. For much of its history then, the United States constituted such a hybrid imperial state encompassing the trajectories of empire and nation-state within the same polity.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, the book leaves us with an uneven panorama of “American Empire”: on the one hand, Hopkins has provided us with an impressively broadened analytical perspective and metanarrative integrating the United States into the global histories of imperialism and globalization. On the other hand, he has limited the panoramic view through an overly narrow definition of imperial territoriality that precludes tangible, formative, and foundational spatial manifestations of empire in US history. In a round-table response, Hopkins recently remarked that “The death of scholarship is not criticism: it is neglect”.<sup>11</sup> This fate will not befall *American Empire*, whose strengths will awe, whose weaknesses engage, and both inspire scholars for years to come.

#### Notes:

- 1 Most recently: J. Lepore, *These Truths. A History of the United States*, New York 2018.
- 2 Foundational: T. Bender, *A Nation Among Nations. America's Place in World History*, New York 2006; I. Tyrell, *Transnational Nation. United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789*, New York 2007; for an excellent cross-section of the state of the field: C. R.W. Dietrich (ed.), *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations. Colonial Era to the Present*, Volume 1, Hoboken 2020.
- 3 Most recently: K. L. Hoganson/J. Sexton (eds.), *Crossing Empires. Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain*, Duke 2020; T. Ballantyne/A. Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global 1870–1945*, Cambridge 2014; V. Barth/R. Cvetkovski (eds), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870–1930*, London 2015.
- 4 For the robust historiography on U.S. Colonialism: P. Kramer, *How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire*, in: *Diplomatic History* 42 (2018), pp. 911–931; since the publication of *American Empire* also: D. Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, New York 2019.
- 5 Foundational: W. E. Weeks, *Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754–1865. The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations Vol. 1*, Cambridge 2013; P. Frymer, *Building an American Empire. The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion*, Princeton 2017; W. L. Hixson, *America Settler Colonialism. A History*, New York 2013.
- 6 Especially the works of P. Hämäläinen, *Lakota America. A New History of Indigenous Power*, New Haven 2019, and P. Hämäläinen: *The Comanche Empire*, New Haven 2008.
- 7 On the global West: J. Lahti, *The American West and the World. Transnational and Comparative Perspectives*, New York 2018; D. M. Wrobel, *Global West, American Frontier*, in: *Pacific Historical Review* 78 (2009), pp. 1–29; on global outreach before 1898 for example the contributions in: *Forum: Globalizing the Early American Republic*, in: *Diplomatic History* 42 (2018), pp. 17–108; R. Zagarri, *The Significance of the ‘Global Turn’ for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building*, in: *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (2011), pp. 1–37.
- 8 D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America. A Geographical Perspective on 5000 Years of History, Volume Two: Continental America, 1800–1867*, New Haven 1993.
- 9 On empire before nation: Steven Hahn, *A Nation without Borders. The United States and Its World in the Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910 (The Penguin History of the United States)*, New York 2016.
- 10 For differentiation and overlap between empires and nation-states most recently: K. Kumar, *Empires. A Historical and Political Sociology*, Hoboken 2021, esp. chapter 4; also: J. Burbank/F. Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 2010, p. 8; C. Maier, *Among Empire. American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*, Cambridge 2006, p. 23.
- 11 H-Diplo Roundtable Review XX-33, April 22, 2019, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/>

discussions/4033475/roundtable-xx-33-ag-hopkins-american-empire-global-history (accessed 1 March 2021).

**Elana Wilson Rowe: Arctic Governance. Power in Cross-border Cooperation, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, 176 pp.**

Reviewed by  
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As the recent years have shown, the Arctic has come to occupy a distinguished place in contemporary social imaginaries and global political agendas. Together with climate change, environmental sustainability, and ecological biodiversity, *Arctic governance* is perhaps the most favoured and revisited topic within Arctic-related research and policy-making. Yet, grasping the many faces of the Arctic and the complexity of actors and factors involved in shaping its dynamic governance landscape poses an analytical and methodological challenge, which requires not only extensive research experience but also, and perhaps more so, academic sensitivity, creativity, and investigative thinking.

This is exactly why Elana Wilson Rowe's book is wholeheartedly recommended for both academic and non-academic reading. Written in a scientifically eloquent yet comprehensive and clear language, it is a unique combination of critical multidisciplinary approaches and a nuanced analysis of key actors in Arctic governance

reweighed anew. Aiming to go beyond the disciplinary constraints of international relations (IR), the author employs analytical tools from critical geography studies and science and technology studies (STS), seeing them as "windows on how relations of deference and dominance [...] shape Arctic cooperation" (p. 2), and carefully tests their applicability throughout the book.

*Arctic Governance* is by and large a quest for understanding what power is and what power does in current global politics. The book revisits the notion of power and reassesses its analytical productivity in studying cross-border cooperation and diplomacy in the Arctic. With a particular focus on power representations and performances, the book takes a "systematic and theoretically informed look at how power relations are enacted, maintained and contested in the production of Arctic cross-border governance" (p.12) and "sensitises" the readers to significant elements of these relations. Conceptualizing cooperation as an ecosystem of intersecting policy fields, Rowe finds her own way of demonstrating the hierarchies and inequalities inherent to relations among Arctic actors, depending on their ability to successfully define what matters most and thus gain and maintain authority.

Unlike many publications on the topic, *Arctic Governance* is explicitly "selective" and "concrete", as Rowe points out in the very beginning. The selectivity is clearly seen in the choice of actors and analysed themes informed by the extensive body of interviews with Arctic actors conducted from 2004 to 2017. The specificity of the primary sources brings a human, intimate dimension to Arctic governance and provides a unique insight into the everyday