

**REVIEW:**  
**“Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires,  
1688 to the Present” by Julian Go (Cambridge UP, 2011)**

*\*Por Lic. Guzman Castro.*

Julian Go's objective in *Patterns of Empire* is intentionally transparent from the very beginning: to definitely refute the idea of American “exceptionalism.” Exceptionalism refers to the set of arguments that take the national character of the United States as unique and as the source of its “special” role in the world. It comes both in the form of “empire deniers” (especially those arguing that the U.S. never was, and never will be an empire due to its “liberal” nature) or defenders of America's “benevolent” empire (for example, the controversial academic/public-figure/neoconservative Niall Ferguson). But can also be located in revisionist historians that, while accepting the nature of the United States as an empire, argue that it was an imperial formation of a “particular” kind: an “informal empire.” Go's central claim is that exceptionalism is a relational property; American empire can only be exceptional in relation to other empires. However, no detailed accounts of the United States as an empire in comparative perspective exist up to date. Thus by recurring to comparative sociological methods and an impressive handle of historical knowledge the author will show how British and American imperial formations have homologous patterns. This should convince the reader, Go argues, that exceptionalism lives only in the minds of politicians, scholars and laymen with particular political agendas.

Empires are usually studied as quasi-homogenous units of analysis. This is analytically problematic. By taking the concept of “imperial formation” (see the work by Cooper and Burbank) he defines empire as “a sociopolitical formation wherein a central political authority (a king, a metropole, or imperial state) exercises unequal influence and power over the political (and in effect the sociopolitical) processes of a subordinate society, people, or space.” Such a definition allows us to locate empires in cases where there is colonialism (i.e. formal, territorial empire), but also to think more systematically about informal empires, as well as to study variation in the application of power by the metropolis within the same imperial formation. Moreover, and following recent trends in the social sciences that pay particular attention to sequencing in historical analysis (most prominently “historical institutionalism”), the author suggests that empires should be compared at similar stages of economic development. Therefore, he will compare empires at homologous “hegemonic stages”: ascendancy, maturity, and decline. The broader point, disaggregated in several chapters, is that both the US and GB were more aggressive and colonial (i.e. formal imperial formations) during their periods of ascendancy and decline (1763-1815 and 1873-1939 for Great Britain, 1873-1945 and 1974-present for the US), and less aggressive and prone to informal empire (e.g. using puppet regimes

in Latin America) during their stages of maturity (1816-1872 for GB, 1946-1973 for the US).

One of Go's richest moves is to account for intra-empire variation in a specific stage. To take one example, the US had a "tutelage" imperial formation in the Philippines, while at the same time having a "hands-off" type of empire in Guam. This difference, the author argues, responds not to America's national character but to "what happened at the point of application of power." In attempting to legitimize their imperial rule, both GB and the US created different governing institutions for their subjects. These institutions needed to "fit" local conditions in order to be legitimized. Provincializing imperial formations is an interesting way to overcome some of the problems of metropole-centered thinking.

Chapter 4, "Imperial Forms and Global Fields," shows Go's theorizing at its most creative. Qualifying his claims on patterns of imperial types during homologous hegemonic stages, Go notes that American and British empires recurred to different types of imperialism during "mature hegemony" (see above for periodization). While GB mixed formal and informal empire, the US was engaged mainly in informal empire (with some brutal exceptions, like Vietnam). Classical explanations of this theoretical anomaly would recur to the tropes of a "special character" that defines the leader of the "free world." Nonsense, Go would say. Explanations at the level of ideas, people and culture in the metropolis (e.g. "special, liberal character of the US") should be substituted by analyses at the level of "global fields."

These "global fields," borrowing from Bourdieu's dictionary, are defined as the broader international context in which empires are situated. They have both a material political ecology and a cultural structure. For example, the US became the hegemon in a historical moment in which most of the world was either colonized or formally recognized (in the sense that sovereignty had been extended to places in the periphery that, for example, did not enjoy it when GB set out its imperial enterprise around the 18th century). Therefore, and for several reasons, informal empire (e.g. recurring to Latin American puppet regimes) was far less complicated than recolonizing the periphery. On the other hand, at the end of WWII, the US could rely on already institutionalized European empires to keep trade and resources flowing (what Go terms "outsourcing" of empire). However, a puzzle remains. By 1960 European empires were being rapidly relocated to the dustbin of History. Then, why didn't the US engage in a new wave of colonization (or formal empire)?

The explanation, according to Go, needs to be done at the level of political culture; and not the culture of the metropole, but that of the colonized. American informal empire responded to a shift in the discursive structure of the global field. Universal self-determination and anti-colonization were too entrenched for the US -caring about legitimating its dominance- to apply direct territorial control. Even more, in a deontologizing move, discourses of self-determination and anti-colonialism became useful imperial tools to gather political support and accumulate symbolic power (à la Bourdieu) (a good historical example being the Suez Crisis in 1956). "To win hearts and minds and thereby win the Cold War," the author argues, "the United States had to support national independence around the world rather than squash it by recolonization...direct colonial rule was

no longer an option" (p. 153). Once again, the site of application of power mattered just as much, or even more, than the metropole itself.

Lastly, are there patterns of imperial formation for declining hegemons? The answer is yes: declining hegemons, his comparative study suggests, are more aggressive than mature empires. "During the late nineteenth century - concomitant with its relative decline- the British state tended to replace informal with formal modes" (p. 171). Since the constraining nature of discourses in the global fields are still present nowadays, Go argues that increased aggressiveness and boldness in American interventions in the world should be seen as substitutes for GB's renewed colonialism in its stage of declining hegemony. Go presents extensive statistical data, besides his narrative process-tracing, that supports these patterns in the British and American empire.

The argument that the US has been an empire is, I think, indisputable (even without bringing up the expansion to the West). So is the importance of factors particular to the colonized to explain the types of imperial institutions that are installed (an insight that is shared by some of the work in "comparative colonialism" in historical and rational institutionalism, although the author does not dialogue with this literature). However, with just one fifth of the book to go, the reader might legitimately wonder if the author will give an explanation of imperial forms, instead of just showing correlations between hegemonic stages and imperial forms to substantiate his claim of homology in British and American patterns of empire. The answer comes on page 184. And, unfortunately, it's not a convincing one. Hegemonic ascent and decline fosters colonialism or increased intervention and violence because these are times of economic crisis, geopolitical threats, and peripheral instability (although economic threats appear to be doing most of the work). It is during these periods that the hegemon has less confidence in itself and its safety (confidence that leads the hegemon to strive for the status quo in the stage of hegemonic maturity). "They [the imperialisms of declining powers] do not represent the work of powerful empires flexing their muscles, but rather ailing hegemons tactically trying to ward off impending doom. Rather than feats of strength, they are acts of desperation amidst the threat of final demise." At its core, this theoretical argument is none other than the hegemonic stability theory of Robert Gilpin and others. It has very little of the sophistication one encounters in his idea of "global fields" and does not suggest new and exciting ways to think about empires.

Acknowledging this weak spot does little to obscure the many strengths of *Patterns of Empire*. Among them, the author does convincingly show the parochialism of American "exceptionalism." He does the literature a service by clearly differentiating hegemony from empire. Moreover, by developing the concept of global field, Go not only brings culture back to the (way too materialist and determinist) study of power in international relations, but demystifies the metropole and gives agency and voice to the subaltern. *Patterns of Empire* should be seen as a first step in new modes of theorizing empire and power in international politics that hopefully will be followed by others.

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