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The American Empire Across the Globe

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An impressive comparative study of the British Empire & the United States makes it clear that America should properly be seen as an empire. Its hegemonic ambitions have frustrated the developing world's aspirations for autonomous political & economic futures.

The United States does not, and never did, consider itself an empire. Its own mythology is of a constitutional republic that was born through a war of independence against the British Empire. As it became the dominant power on the global stage following the Second World War, the various phrases Americans used to define that dominance — 'American Century', 'Liberal World Order', 'Leader of the Free World' — never included the term 'empire'. They pointed to the fact that unlike its European powers of the past who went by the name of empire, the US did not actually possess and rule territories outside of its border, with some very minor exceptions (Puerto Rico, Guam, the military bases etc.). Its core principles were liberal constitutional rather than imperial. And while it remained the most powerful country in the world, it exercised that power within the constraints of an elaborate international institutional and normative structure. In all these ways, it was merely the most powerful country in a postimperial world, distinct from its predecessor as a global hegemon, the self-consciously imperial Great Britain.

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From the perspective of those in the global periphery — or for that matter many in the core capitalist countries — these euphemisms and excuses were never particularly convincing. Empire was both a familiar and useful way of describing what America's role was in the world. In the 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union, whatever little challenge and external constraints that remained on American global dominance disappeared. This unconstrained singular dominance of the US — what George H.W. Bush called the 'New World Order' — eventually felt no need to adhere to the language of a rule-based liberal international order when, against the opinion of the global community, international law, and most of its allies, it unilaterally declared war on Iraq. The Iraq war, needless to say, had an enormous impact that is still unfolding around us. But one such impact was to revive a discussion on empire within the Western public discourse and scholarly community.

> [T]he book argues that the US should properly be understood as an empire; and while the transition from British to American imperialism diverges in form and strategy, there are meaningful continuities in the logic of imperial domination.

Atul Kohli's new book, *Imperialism and the Developing World*, belongs to this political and scholarly moment. As Kohli mentions in the introduction, the idea of this book came to him in the wake of the Iraq war. Divided roughly into two halves of detailed and comparative studies of the British and the American empire, the book argues that the US should properly be understood as an empire; and while the transition from British to American imperialism diverges in form and strategy, there are meaningful continuities in the logic of imperial domination. As the title of the book suggests, Kohli approaches this from the standpoint of a scholar from and of the global periphery. He brings together his analysis of the imperial projects devised in Britain and the US, with the modality and effects of that project as it unfolded in the global periphery.

The main focus and contribution of the book is the latter: a long history of modern empires from the standpoint of the global periphery. The result is an extraordinarily synthetic empirical and analytical labour that spans spatially three continents and temporally across two centuries. The silos of regional expertise that divides the discipline of political science make Kohli's ambition and ability to construct such a thorough empirical and analytical exercise at this scale both rare and impressive. Some of the most rewarding moments of the book for me were the various insights these attentive explorations yielded. However, for the sake of this review, I focus on the broad claims in the book regarding modern empires.

As Kohli readily admits, the topic he is covering has been the subject of long and rich scholarly debates. With admirable clarity, he summarizes his main claim about modern imperialism thus: “imperialism is moved mainly by the needs of hegemonic powers to enhance their national economic interests” (3). How does this claim relate to other analyses of imperialism? First, it dismisses the ideological or normative justification of imperialism offered by conservative or liberal defendants for empire, like civilizing missions, defence of liberal values, or protection of human rights. Whatever banner of noble cause it decides to march under, imperialism is ultimately a matter of cold, hard, interest. Kohli, therefore, finds himself in proximity to the two most influential traditions of interest-based analysis of empire: the Realist and the Marxist.

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To summarize (somewhat simplistically), the Realists analyse imperialism primarily in terms of the political calculus of national security and balance of power, while the Marxists view imperialism driven by the economic forces of capital accumulation. Kohli’s analytical unit of ‘national economic interests’ draws upon both these traditions while being part of neither. Against the Realists, Kohli argues through his empirical case studies that much of imperial expansion is undertaken without there being any meaningful threat to national security or balance of power. Marxists, on the other hand, he argues, underestimate the role of political actors and the role of national (as opposed to class) interests in imperial adventures. This is a Weberian position, which seeks to draw a distinction between the state and the capitalist class — “authority and association” — where the latter while influencing the former, does not fully subsume it (397). The ‘national’ is as significant as the ‘economic’. ‘National economic interest’ is driven by capitalist growth but defined by state actors. The imperial calculus is therefore determined through this interconnection between the economic and the political. In my reading, Kohli draws a firmer (and more successful) distinction between his framework and the Realists, than he does with the Marxist view, a point that I would return to later.

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Beyond his debates with the Realists and the Marxists, Kohli’s definition of imperialism has a more immediate target. The venerable discipline of International Relations, that informs much of state policy and public discourse about the role of the US in the world, rarely acknowledges the term empire in its mainstream variant. In constructing a coherent framework through this vast empirical survey of US and British actions in the world, Kohli suggests that it should be impossible to talk about any particular international act that the US undertakes without situating it within this broad framework of empire. Be that in Iraq or Vietnam, Argentina or Iran, the acts of the US become comprehensible and coherent only when understood within a framework of pursuing their national economic interest, rather than as singular or contingent decisions by this or that set of actors. In other words, one cannot talk about American foreign policy without the conceptual vocabulary of empire.

This is where the theoretical significance of Kohli’s decision to structure his book as a comparative description of British and American empire becomes clearer. The appealingly simple argument against the proposition that Americans are an empire is to point out that unlike the British Empire, which occupied and governed territories across four continents, the US does not formally claim any territory outside of its national borders, with some minor exceptions. (Even this argument is complicated by Daniel Immerwahr’s (2019) new book.) Kohli unsettles this simple binary by describing the British Empire as a sum total of both the territories it formally governed (India, Nigeria) and the countries that were informally under its imperial control (Argentina, Egypt, China).

What distinguished the relationship of the British Empire with regards to these various territories, and hence the usage of the adjectives ‘formal’ or ‘informal’, were contingent questions of strategies and local conditions (most significantly the existence of a willing indigenous elite that could collaborate with the hegemonic power). The noun empire was common to both. Furthermore, Kohli argues that the adjectives ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ should not be thought of as a binary categorization. Rather, what we have is an ‘imperial continuum’. Where different countries within the imperial circuit are placed is dependent upon contingent historical factors, with varying strategic calculus. All are nevertheless subject to the logic of imperial domination. This detailed historical analysis of the most well-known modern empire overcomes the rigid definition of empire as formal political subjugation: a definition that has long been an alibi for the American establishment to deny any charge of being an empire.

> Imperialism is, by definition, a violation of the sovereignty of peripheral nations.

If informal empires are empires properly called, then, as the second half of the book demonstrates, it becomes incontrovertible to trace America's own imperial past and present on those terms. What is attractive about this methodological choice is that it reaches a judgement on the indubitably imperial nature of America's role in the world not from an a priori standpoint of condemnation, but as the endpoint of a rigorous journey through the long history of modern empires. There should be little doubt in the mind of any reader that this is an anti-imperial book. But that normative position is all the more sturdy and impactful, due to it being reached through the hard labour of historical and empirical analysis.

The other major argument in the book relates to the relationship between imperialism and development in the peripheries. Here, Kohli approaches the question of imperialism from an intellectual terrain familiar to him. Kohli was of the generation of postcolonial scholars who came of age when the expansive promise of postcolonial developmentalism had been exhausted across the Third World. His first book was a seminal study of the success and failure of the postcolonial developmentalist state in India, primarily with regards to its ambition of land reform and agrarian modernization (Kohli 1987). Subsequently, he broadened the scope of this enquiry beyond India to look at the comparative fortunes of 'state-directed development' across the global periphery (Kohli 2004). His critical reflections explored the various elements of postcolonial socio-political life — state capacity, party structures, class compositions — to understand the limits of the planned developmentalist promise.

In other words, exploring the challenges to postcolonial development have been the central theme of Kohli's intellectual life. This is the intellectual formation that he brings to investigating the effect of imperialism on peripheral economies. The result is an unqualified judgement — backed by formidable evidence — that imperialism had a negative effect on the development of countries in the periphery. This is in itself a valuable empirical claim. It counters the widely prevalent belief in Western academic and public discourse that despite some overreach and adverse effects, Western imperial hegemony has been in the final account a good for the world. Spreading peace and prosperity for a majority of the world's population despite the occasional, unfortunate wars.

However, it is in Kohli's analytical justification for this empirical claim that this argument goes beyond the act of debunking. This involves his use of the term 'sovereignty'. Imperialism — whether explicit (formal imperialism) or implicit (informal imperialism) — is by definition a violation of the sovereignty of peripheral nations. "National Sovereignty," Kohli argues, "is an economic asset." The less sovereignty a nation-state enjoys, the less likely are the chance of its population experiencing economic progress. Ergo, imperialism hinders economic progress in the peripheries.

The term sovereignty is one of the more contested terms in political thought. Kohli's use of this term draws from the tradition of Third Worldist thought in the wake of decolonization in the mid-20th century. Sovereignty, for most postcolonial political actors, did not simply denote formal political independence. It also meant substantive autonomy in determining one's political — and crucially for the purpose of this book — economic futures. The de jure granting of the former, while the de facto denial of the latter is what many of those thinkers described as continued dependency or neo-colonialism. This autonomy was required to pursue some of the economic policies — import substitution to nationalization, state-led industrialization to protectionist tariffs — that were widely viewed as necessary for the development of the 'national economy' but were in most cases contrary to the interests of Western capitalists. Consequently, in many cases — e.g., Iran, Congo, Chile — these policies invited violent interventions. As Kohli astutely notes, beyond any alleged socialist or communist content of the policies in those instances, what motivated the interventions was "the danger assertive nationalism posed to America's hegemonic ambitions."

> [Kohli's] theory about the relationship between sovereignty and economic progress is a counter to this theory of globalization that still dominates the established political-economic thinking not just in the core countries, but in much of the erstwhile Third World.

The dilution of this idea of sovereignty, one could argue, became more widespread and more intensive in the era of neoliberal globalization following the end of the Cold War. While in the capitalist core, neoliberalism is identified with the dismantling of the welfare state, decline in unionization, and rise of financialization; in the global periphery, it was experienced as the withdrawal of protectionism and capital controls, privatization of state assets, and enforced structural adjustment through sovereign debt. Kohli discusses the role of the American empire in this process in his chapter on the Washington Consensus. Indeed, in this era, the term sovereignty was seen as an anachronistic term belonging to a pre-globalized past. Integration into the global market rather than sovereign autonomy came to be seen as the key to prosperity. While Kohli does not explicitly spell it out in these exact terms, his theory about the relationship between sovereignty and economic progress counters this ideology of globalization that still dominates the

established political-economic thinking not just in the core countries, but in much of the erstwhile Third World.

It is the very last part — the dominance of this view in the peripheries — that provokes some interesting thoughts regarding Kohli's formulation. The term sovereignty in the book is generally attached to the state and focused outwards (i.e., the relationship of the peripheral state with hegemonic powers). There remains, however, also an internal dimension — the relationship of the state with the society within. This leads to several questions. How does that society influence or constitute the state? Which segments of society are dominant over others? Or is there a genuine democratic condition where there are avenues for popular participation in the functioning of the state? Put together, they make us think about the state (as Kohli's own earlier work did so successfully) not as a given, unproblematic entity, but the subject of contestation amongst various social powers. If we break it down in these terms, the goals of the masses of the Third World and those of the powerful capitalist or land-owning classes did not always align, as Franz Fanon (2002) argued all those years ago.

> How national, one might ask, is the national bourgeoisie today?

Those dominant classes wanted to continue their existing position within the imperial economic circuit (say, the ranchers and latifundistas in Latin America) or eventually came around to finding such integration to their interest. The latter (with necessary qualifications and regional variations) might describe significant segments of the capitalist classes in the Third World today. Going by that old term, the 'national bourgeoisie' might abandon their earlier preference for protectionism for access to foreign market and investments. How national, one might ask, is the national bourgeoisie today? And it is their increasing dominance over the Third World state that might reflect in the internal support for imperial integration. While these questions become more urgent in the wake of the decline of the Third Worldist project, one could argue that they were inherent to the nationalist project of decolonization from its birth.

These questions arise in keeping with the anti-imperial spirit of the book. Kohli's thorough account of the existence and effects of imperial domination compels one to enquire about the potential promises and challenges to anti-imperial political projects in the global periphery. The moment of mid-20th century decolonization, which led to the end of the last empire, generated genuine aspirations amongst those that Fanon (2002) called the wretched of the earth for a world without empires. As the second half of this book demonstrates, it did not turn out that way. A significant part of the explanation for that is the hegemony of American power, frustrating directly or indirectly the most assertive claims of Third World political autonomy.

> Today in a world facing unprecedented inequality, economic stagnation, and climate catastrophe, a challenge to our imperial present might have to be imagined beyond the threats of military interventions.

But reversing the perspective, one can also ask why the conception of 'national sovereignty', which this book and the most notable Third Worldist statesmen held up as the foundation of an anti-imperial global order, failed to fully realize its promise. As we saw, for these statesmen, 'sovereignty' had both a political and economic dimension. The hope of this 'nationalist' project at the moment of decolonization was that the sovereign space of the nation could offer protection against and autonomy from not only empires but from another system that operated on a global spatial scale: capitalism. That the sovereign borders of the newly decolonized nations could both allow for autonomous, planned, capitalist development within, and overcome dependencies on global capitalist forces outside. With some exceptions, neither of those hopes were realized. Commodity producing, capital scarce countries, with much of the old colonial class structure intact (with the notable exception of China) proved unable in becoming powerful within the global capitalist system no matter the formal strength of their national sovereignty.

As many argued in the following decades, decolonization had to go beyond this aspiration of taming capitalism spatially, to imagine a different socio-economic form to realize its promise of self-determination and truly break from the imperial circuit. If our focus is on unilateral military and political interventions, like the Iraq war, there is little to deny the value of national sovereignty as an anti-imperial concept. But it is not just the real or perceived threat of Tomahawk missiles that have kept the formally decolonized countries in a persistent state of dependency with the capitalist core. Today in a world facing unprecedented inequality, economic stagnation, and climate catastrophe, a challenge to our imperial present might have to be imagined beyond the threats of military interventions.

At the very end of the book, Kohli notes the importance of citizens to hold their political leaders accountable for their collaborations with imperial hegemons. May one suggest that this call for democratic action might need to go beyond just reinforcing the terms of state sovereignty? It might also require a democratic control and constitution of social and economic life. Without that, one wonders,

how powerful is national sovereignty in the face of the global sovereignty of capital?

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