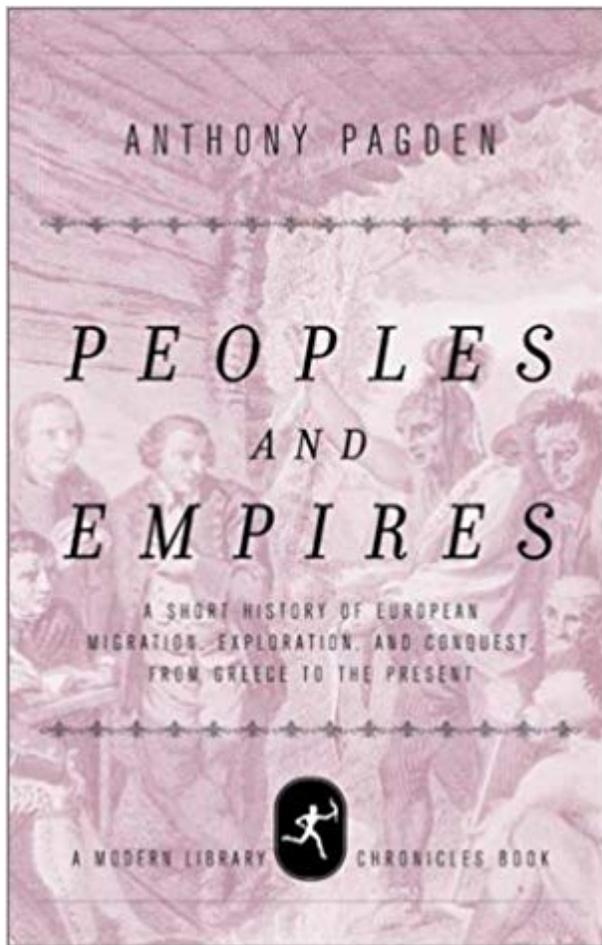


Still Life with Empire



✘ Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, From Greece to the Present*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001. 206 pp., \$19.95 cloth.

A generation ago, it appeared that the formal analysis of empires and imperialism, though it was a venerable avenue of historical inquiry and analysis, was all but played out. Scholars of early America turned toward community studies—the forerunners of today’s microhistories—to explore social, cultural, and psychological phenomena in more depth, while those working in other fields similarly turned away from “high” political and intellectual histories to examine local settings. But the past twenty years has brought several strands of inquiry to the fore that raise new questions about empire, or allow us to approach old questions with new angles of vision. Subaltern and postcolonial studies, and their partly analogous counterpart in early American historiography, ethnohistory, have cast the dynamics and legacies of colonialism in an entirely new light. Recent scholarship on early modern European state formation has similarly prompted inquiry into the connections

between state building and empire building. In the case of early modern England, the rise of a "new British history" that explores the relationships among English, Scottish, and Irish histories and polities raises, by extension, questions about the nature of the first British Empire, which emerged just as these relations were being hammered out. Finally, a new—or renewed—interest in comparative, transnational, and global histories has brought scholars back to old comparative issues, seen again in a new light. For historians of Anglo-America, this means confronting the deeply engrained tradition of American exceptionalism in its colonial variant, a tradition that has emphasized the distinctive characteristics of Anglo-American rule to help explain the emergence of colonies that were poised for independence by 1775.



James Muldoon, *Empire and Order: The Concept of Empire, 800-1800*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999. 209 pp., \$65.00 cloth.

These developments have prompted a flourishing revival in imperial studies. Oxford University Press has just released a timely and expansive five-volume history of the British Empire, and it is once again fashionable for job candidates to tell prospective employers that they are interested in empires and imperialism. This essay will examine three books that are quite different from one another, but that, taken together, permit a nested and telescoping exploration of certain fundamental questions about the evolving nature of empires, the particular importance of early modern theories of rule to the creation of Europe's overseas empires after 1492, and the specific configuration of ideas that may have helped to make England's experience seem distinctive or even unique.



David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 239 pp., \$54.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Anthony Pagden's *Peoples and Empires* is an elegant and deceptively compact meditation on the nature of imperial enterprise from a scholar deeply rooted in the European contexts for such an inquiry. Here he presents a sweeping analytical narrative that suggests some of the central themes in empire building from the age of Alexander until the present day. At the center of this book lies a fundamental tension between the claims of most imperial powers to universality and the challenge to those claims that originated both from outside and from within their spheres of authority. These claims to universality have been of two types: on the one hand, great world empires since

Alexander have steadily sought expansion, pressing their claims to territory, in the case of both Macedonia and Rome, to the limits of the known world. They become universal in the sense that there is almost literally no end to their pursuit of power and domination. On the other hand, such empires also typically propagate another kind of universality as well: the universalist claims of an ideology that would draw alien peoples into the sphere of imperial power and transform them in the empire's own image. In the case of Rome, those claims rested on the elaboration of Roman law, whose provisions were extended throughout the empire in 212 A.D. when the emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to all its free inhabitants. It was the rule of law that saved Rome, at least in theory, from being merely an expression of the emperors' personal will to power. "Ultimately," Pagden writes, "Roman law was intended to create not merely political and social order; it was also intended to confer an ethical purpose upon the entire community" (29).

With the division and dissolution of Roman power in the fourth century, those universal claims lost some of their force. They were revived when Pope Leo III conferred the title of emperor upon Charlemagne in 800 and thus inaugurated the Holy Roman Empire, whose claim to universal dominion rested not on the authority of Roman law but on that of the pope and the church. Yet, as James Muldoon notes in a book that focuses especially on the enduring significance of medieval legal theory to the formulation of early modern empires, the power of the Holy Roman Empire was more symbolic than real. Though the Pope confirmed the authority of successive kings as emperors, he did not have the power to make them kings in the first place, nor did the Holy Roman Empire have the governmental or administrative infrastructure necessary to give the empire an independent existence. As a practical matter, a universal empire even ruling over all of Christendom was beyond the reach of any monarch. Even as the church established a theoretically universal dominion, medieval kings cobbled together territories spanning various regions and principalities, governed according to a variety of laws, customs, and principles, and united often by nothing other than allegiance to a common sovereign. The result was a complex patchwork of political units that evolved toward the "composite monarchies" of early modern Europe. Dante Alighieri explained the disjunction between papal and monarchical power by arguing that God designed man for a dual end, and therefore created distinct realms of spiritual and political authority. Hugo Grotius concluded more grudgingly that, however desirable a universal Christian kingdom might be in principle, it was unattainable in practice because its scale would make it ungovernable.

But if a universal Christian empire in Europe seemed to be beyond reach, European expansion into the Atlantic—and, from there, into the Indian and Pacific Oceans—raised the possibility of a new Christian order overseas. Under the "watchful eye of the papacy" (Pagden, 55), in 1493 the monarchs of Portugal and Castile agreed to divide all the world into two jurisdictions. Thereafter, they sought to claim the riches of the Americas on behalf of both their crowns and their church. Yet from the beginning there were countercurrents of criticism and protest even within orthodox Iberian Catholicism. Bartolomé de

las Casas, though he accepted the validity of European imperialism overseas, sharply criticized the "indiscriminate exploitation" (Pagden, 72) of the peoples they found there.

At roughly the same time, the Protestant Reformation split the church in Europe. In a striking analysis of early English imperial ideology, David Armitage argues that it is difficult to discover any enduring, specifically Protestant ideology of empire in the writings of men like Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas. Indeed, because Protestantism was by its nature skeptical of the universalist claims of the Roman church, Armitage even suggests that Protestantism vitiated English attempts to discover a unifying sense of religious purpose. Instead, Hakluyt drew upon classical conceptions of the good life and the successful polity in his efforts to make sense of England's imperial goals. Armitage contends that the post-Renaissance context for the ideological origins of the British Empire may have been more significant than the post-Reformation one. But Christian humanism and post-Machiavellian republicanism both expressed deep ambivalence about imperial enterprise. Empires were "by definition expansionist," Muldoon notes, "a fact that inevitably led to the moral corruption of their citizens" (113). Armitage follows the efforts of seventeenth-century English theorists to reconcile the demands of empire with their desire to sustain liberty. Machiavelli had argued that the greatness (*grandezza*) of a commonwealth derives from its liberty, but that it could only be sustained by expansion. Expansion, in turn, would destroy liberty. Machiavelli concluded that greatness was worth the price and that it was preferable for a state to pursue expansion, even at the cost of liberty. But English theorists were loath to make such a concession. Algernon Sidney suggested that the cycle of declension might be broken if an empire promoted expansion through commerce. Trade depended upon liberty, sustained greatness, and promoted expansion, he believed, yet did so without the dangers inherent in territorial conquest.

Thus English writers, politicians, and subjects nurtured the idea that their overseas dominion was a benign commercial sphere whose growth did not endanger the character of their kingdom. Armitage suggests that the simultaneous problem of defining the relationship among the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland made it impossible for English theorists to devise an unproblematic political definition of imperial dominion. Instead, they turned from politics to trade as a reason of state and, in the process, devised the field of political economy as a distinct realm of inquiry and analysis. This shift in the theoretical elaboration of empire turned attention away from thorny questions about the locus of political sovereignty, and at the same time "offered one resolution of the ancient dilemma of *imperium* and *libertas*" (169). He further contends that this conception of the British Empire was "originally provincial" (181), most clearly articulated and most ardently championed by colonial planters, imperial administrators, and Irish unionists in the eighteenth century. It was on the periphery that the idea of "the British Empire as a congeries of territories linked by their commerce, united with common interests and centred politically upon London" (181) was most

compelling. Armitage dates the emergence of an understanding of the British Empire as “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free” (173) to the 1730s, coincident with and strengthened by the War of Jenkins’s Ear. He emphasizes that the actual character of the empire was both debatable and unstable; it gave way, in fact, to a more hierarchical and authoritarian form in the wake of the American war. But even as the character of the empire changed at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, this conception of the British Empire lived on and gained strength as a source of identity for Britons.

This is a persuasive and appealing formulation, one that does much to explain the widespread perception that Britain’s imperial experience was singular. Yet while Armitage relies on figures like Sir William Keith, a Scot and former deputy governor of Pennsylvania, to make the case that provincials “argued that only gentle treatment of the colonies by the metropolis” (177) would sustain the colonial relationship, other men of similar background took a harder line on the question of colonial autonomy. Timothy Shannon’s *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000) identifies a loose circle of seasoned colonial administrators, some of provincial origin, who argued instead that the colonies needed to be drawn together under a “well-ordered dependency” (61) to solve the most pressing problems of imperial administration. His reading of James Abercromby, Henry McCulloh, William Shirley, Thomas Pownall, and two New Yorkers, Archibald Kennedy and Cadwallader Colden, suggests that Armitage’s claims, though persuasive, do not tell the whole story about the view of empire from the provinces.

All of these books provide extended meditations on the ambiguities of power. Empire itself is an endlessly variant term, always imprecisely invoked and vaguely understood. “‘Empire’ has become as much a metaphor as a description of a particular kind of society,” according to Pagden (xx-xxi). England struggled, as Armitage argues, with the problem of distinguishing between *imperium*, or sovereignty, and *dominium*, or property, in its American colonies. Muldoon notes that, paradoxically, though we typically think of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries as the “golden age” of empire, in fact none of the great leaders of that era—not Charles V or Philip II, not Henry VIII or James II or George III—referred to themselves as emperors, and their dominions were almost never *officially* called empires. In part, their reticence derived from the fact that the creation of overseas empires occurred simultaneously with domestic processes of state formation. As monarchs worked to rationalize and centralize the constituent parts of their various kingdoms—to move from the era of “composite monarchies” to the era of centralized states—they could not simultaneously take on the inflated pretensions of an emperor, with all its connotations of universality and absolutism. “Empire” only became a useful term for legal theorists, according to Muldoon, when the weighty burden of its medieval associations fell away, especially the connotations of moral decay that had been so inextricably linked to empire building in the thought of earlier writers. If Armitage is correct, it became useful somewhat sooner as a

looser popular concept, particularly given the paradoxical association, in British minds, of empire with liberty.

But Armitage is careful to remind us that, while the association of the British Empire with liberty was crucial ideologically, it was not necessarily an accurate description of its nature. Pagden offsets his discussion of empires of trade and liberty—a category to which he adds France and the Netherlands—with a chapter devoted to the extraordinary expansion of chattel slavery that accompanied their rise. The topic of slavery reminds us that we cannot take the claims of commercially oriented empires to moral superiority at face value. Eighteenth-century observers understood clearly, as historians have sometimes not, that, for an overseas commercial power like Britain, everything hinged on slavery. “‘No African Trade, no Negroes, no Negroes, no Sugar; no Sugar no Islands, no Islands no Continent, no Continent no Trade; that is to say farewell to your American Trade, your West Indian Trade,’” is how Daniel Defoe put it in 1713 (Pagden, 103). Nor can we accept a sharp distinction between commercial and territorial empires. British observers hoped that a commercial orientation might save their empires from the dangers of territorial entanglement—dangers that were as much moral as fiscal. Edmund Burke recognized the danger clearly. He indicted the East India Company as “‘one of the most corrupt and destructive tyrannies that probably ever existed’” (Pagden, 96) and energetically pursued the prosecution of the corrupt governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings. For Burke, as Pagden writes, empire was not only, perhaps not even predominantly, an economic enterprise. “It was a sacred trust, ‘given by an incomprehensible dispensation of Divine providence into our hands’” (98). Burke recognized, but could not check, the corrosive forces at work at the heart of Britain’s empire and Europe’s civilizing mission.

For all their differences and ambiguities, empires have shared in common a will to power that should make us skeptical of their most optimistic self-assessments. From Alexander to the present day, builders of empire have professed their idealism and described their enterprises in altruistic terms. They aimed to glorify God by expanding the horizons of the known world, by spreading a gospel, by extending the benefits of commerce. Yet expansion and growth are intoxicants that undermine such claims. Pagden notes of Alexander, “More than that of any other would-be world ruler, his life became a tale of the elision of knowledge and understanding with power, of the merging of science and exploration with domination and settlement” (14). Alexander may epitomize the type, but he was surely not alone in this elision. At a much later date, European explorers fanned out across the Pacific in the interests of expanding the horizons of science. They sailed, as Pagden notes, in ships named “*Discovery, Resolution, Adventure,* and *Endeavour; Géographie and Naturaliste; L’Astrolabe and La Boussole*” (126). Soon enough, science itself “became a recognized source of power and a new terrain on which the European powers fought one another for preeminence” (127). And soon, too, science had generated a complex theory of racial hierarchy and the dangers of race mixing that gave the most exploitative and brutal imperial practices a veneer of justifiability and even respectability. For a time,

racialist ideologies gave permission to the failures of empire; in the end, empire itself—at least the distinctive form of empire that arose in Europe during the nineteenth century and crashed suddenly to the ground in the mid-twentieth—foundered on their insupportability.

The books considered here do a great deal to explain how Europeans understood their imperial aims and enterprises. Each is rich with material I have not touched on. Each also misses important opportunities that merit further attention, two of which deserve a brief mention here. First, in their focus on legal and theoretical writings, these authors all, to some degree, explore the intellectual scaffolding of empires but give less attention to their informal dynamics, where their true natures are often most clearly revealed. One feels at times that they have found the patient's skeleton but missed his beating heart. This should not be understood as a critique of these books, each of which succeeds marvelously on its own terms, so much as a suggestion that they be read in concert with a wider literature. Second, I found myself wishing at times for more explicit comparisons among various empires. Pagden's book is the most comparative in spirit, and yet by focusing exclusively on the empires of the (so-called) West he misses a marvelous opportunity to introduce brief sketches of the Chinese, say, or Ottoman experience to a general readership. Similarly, early Americanists need much more systematic comparisons among the Spanish, English, Dutch, French, and Portuguese Empires in the Americas than are currently available in the literature. We cannot effectively evaluate the claims of eighteenth-century Britons to the distinctiveness of their empire, for example, without understanding it more clearly in terms that can be directly compared to other nations' experiences. Imperialism, an old and venerable topic, lives and breathes still as a vital subject of historical inquiry and analysis.

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