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Where in the World Is America? A Review Essay

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At more than five kilograms weight and nearly three thousand pages length, this four-volume *Cambridge History of America and the World* is a physical and intellectual heavy-weight to be reckoned with.¹ The general editor Mark Philip Bradley, who teaches international history at the University of Chicago, and his team of ten editors, all widely published in their respective research areas of U.S. interactions with the world, coordinated one hundred and twenty authors in their development of one hundred and sixteen chapters. Considering those numbers one can imagine the logistical and conceptual challenges of such a mega-project.

The results are impressive and the four volumes provide a terrific panorama of themes, angles, trajectories, and analytical vectors deeply grounded in a wide range of temporal, spatial, and subject historiographies. The work assembled in this collection is theoretically sophisticated and constitutes some of the most innovative, inclusive, and empiri-

1 Eliga Gould/Paul Mapp/Carla Gardina Pestana (eds.): *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. General Editor Mark Philip Bradley; Volume I: 1500–1820, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 618 pp. Kristin Hoganson/Jay Sexton (eds.): *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. General Editor Mark Philip Bradley; Volume II: 1820–1900, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 784 pp. Brooke L. Blower/Andrew Preston (eds.): *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. General Editor Mark Philip Bradley; Volume III: 1900–1945, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 774 pp. David C. Engerman/Max Paul Friedman/Melani McAlister (eds.): *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. General Editor Mark Philip Bradley; Volume IV: 1945 to the Present, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 810 pp.

cally textured historiography of any subfield in the broad canvas of writing the histories of the United States.

The first volume of the *Cambridge History* begins its coverage in 1500 and thus antedates the formation of a U.S. polity by almost three centuries; this temporal scope not only sets it apart from other recent collaborative publication projects on U.S. interactions with the world but highlights the volume's interpretive matrix whose strands intertwine multi-polar worlds of empire, historical contingency, geography, interconnections, violence, and global perspectives.[1]

This emphasis on pre-eighteenth century history is not just a temporal re-calibration but also an analytical weight re-distribution which foregrounds contingencies and the complexity of the multi-polar system of indigenous, African, European, and Pacific players which intersected, collided, and cooperated in this North American cosmos in its hemispheric and trans-oceanic contexts long before the United States came into existence. For the volume editors Eliga Gould, Paul Mapp, and Carla Gardina Pestana 'America' constituted "[...] a space within which other states, peoples, empires, many of them centered outside the Western Hemisphere, interacted and vied for supremacy and control." [2]

Both expansive temporal and geographic perspectives are thus designed to de-exceptionalize the history of the English colonies and complicate common positivist narratives about the emergence of the United States as world power.

In this volume, the chapters are organized in six sections on geographies, people, empires, circulation/connections, institutions, and revolutions. Taken together these sections outline an impressive panorama of maritime histories, environmental interactions and extractions, the voluntary and forced movement of explorers, whalers, hunters, slaves, and settlers, the contours of indigenous worlds, as well as the role of imperial trade, law, religion, ideas, social stratifications, and revolutionary state-building. Each chapter's bibliographic essay introduces the reader to scholarship often overlooked by the field's myopic focus on the modern period and maps and illustrations complement the text.[3] The sum of those efforts is a North American history of perplexing complexity described by the editors as: "[...] the messy, complicated, various, multidirectional early modern Atlantic-American world".[4] They also acknowledge that such a history might be "[...] too diffuse for a cohesive national narrative to stand, or comprehensive enough to serve as a foundation on which a more perfect union can be built." [5] Regardless of its inspirational potential, the broad contours of early interactions in 'America' over the *longue durée* provide important analytical signposts for subsequent chapters; those histories demonstrate how deeply North American worlds were shaped by empires and imperial imaginations of rule in the struggle for control over spaces, environments, and resources between indigenous and European polities. These conflicts produced devastating violence and laid the foundations for persistent formats of oppression.

Furthermore, these interactions underlined the fundamental contradictions of interconnectivity which simultaneously created wealth in Europe through the mobility of people, goods, and ideas, sustained the social construction of political, social, economic, legal, and religious orders across expansive geographies, but also accelerated the spread

of germs, conquests, and enslavement with devastating consequences for the Americas and beyond.

Finally, this connectivity through migrations, trade, exploration, and maritime networks inscribed global horizons in the world-making projects of early Americans which neither ended with the collapse of the European imperial system nor the separation of thirteen colonies from the British Empire. Instead, global outlooks and orientations steadily intensified and became deeply embedded in the 'American' experience of globalization(s). The second volume traces the histories of empire and globalization(s) for much of the nineteenth-century. The chapters are organized in four parts dedicated to empire-building and resistance, imperial structures, actors, and global horizons. They are based on a vibrant and robust historiography and reflect the prominence of empire-studies in de-exceptionalizing and internationalizing U.S. history. But while empire is front and center of the analysis, this volume is skeptical about positivist narratives of the rise of the United States to world power. The volume's editors Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton suggest instead that "U.S. empire-building in this period was certainly not destiny [...] The history presented in this volume differs from traditional accounts of the 'rise' of the United States [...] by foregrounding the contingency and on occasion sheer chaos that characterized struggles for sovereignty and power in this period." [6]

The contours of this empire are 'fluid' and flexible, its expansive dynamics "piecemeal and contingent" and its history of outreach "marked by period flurries of significant development". [7] Multiple forces shape the development of the United States as an imperial state, its quest for primacy in North America, and its interactions in the hemisphere and the world; they encompass indigenous polities, a southern slave-holding empire, Latin American republics, and remaining European empires. Individual chapters discuss the individual stages of settler colonial genocide, the war for national unification, emancipation, the rise of industrial capitalism, and the transoceanic territorial outreach. Much of this analysis underwrites the importance of the shape-shifting properties of this empire; but it also highlights temporal and spatial continuities by affirming an analytical arc from settler to overseas empire and by underlining the persistent composite nature of the U.S. polity as imperial state. The close association of state and capital enabled federal power to assume a key role as driver in the development of imperial infrastructures. Individual chapters trace the legal, economic, technological, military, environmental, and ideological dimensions of these infrastructures which not only enabled Americans to reach out further into the world but also created pathways for global audiences and developments to influence the United States.

The volume's third and fourth parts encompass multiple case studies of this 'two-way street' effect of foreign relations under globalizing dynamics with the simultaneous permeability of national/imperial spaces and the power of trans-national/-imperial forces. Individual chapters of the third part trace the international mobilities of a great variety of non-state actors such as tourists, missionaries, explorers, migrants, sailors, social reformers, and miners. These informal 'representatives' of the United States pursued their own interests abroad and helped accumulate and distribute knowledge about global

conditions; while many were agents of empire-building, others were not and used transnational networks to advance their agendas of social reform and anti-colonialism.

For the editors, these actors amply reflect the multipolar, dizzying varieties of nineteenth-century U.S. empire-building and its shape-shifting, contested formats and 'formations': "[...] there was a staggeringly wide array of interests at stake. There was no helmsman directing the United States in the nineteenth-century; rather, competing interests jostled to turn the wheel of this motley ship of state in directions of their choosing." [8]

The chapters in the fourth part complement the multiplicity of 'world-making' by excavating the spatial dimensions of empire-building, and –contesting; these case studies further drive home one of the key arguments of this volume, that both 'America' and 'the world' are abstractions of the geographic imagination which suggest homogeneity and obfuscates complexity. Individual chapters trace those complexities and explore imperial and globalizing re-spatializations through migration, border-regimes, and word regions of U.S. engagement from the Caribbean and the Pacific to Africa, the Islamic worlds, and Europe.

The third volume edited by Brooke Blower and Andrew Preston spans a temporal arc from the early twentieth century to the end of World War Two; it is bracketed by two very different positions of relative power for the United States, an unevenly developed empire among empires with grand aspirations but still overshadowed by the *Pax Britannica* in 1900 versus, an unprecedented economic, military, political, and cultural powerhouse with global reach and aspiration to set the parameters of international order at the end of the Second World War.

This rise to preponderance was neither preordained nor was U.S. power ever omnipotent. It was often characterized by contradictions and tensions between capital and the state, nationalism and globalism, liberalism and imperialism, humanitarianism and war-making, democracy and racism. The role of the United States was contingent on a confluence of factors including the decline of European power competitors. It was furthermore contested by a wide range of transnational actors, and intersected with dynamics of globalization(s) which simultaneously intensified interdependences, structural asymmetries, and national rivalries on a global scale. And yet: "[...] during the twentieth-century's first forty-five years, the midst of a deadly era of sickness, famine, economic crisis, and global warfare, the United States became the most powerful nation in the world, possibly the most powerful for a over a millennium." [9]

In the past, the cold war confrontation and U.S. global engagements interpretatively overshadowed the first decades of the century as a misguided, nativist, isolationist intermezzo on the way to world power. But the volume's chapters engage a growing historiography which highlights the great specter of international engagement and multi-layered entanglements of the United States in and beyond the Atlantic world. The contours of this engagement with the world, its drivers, and repercussions are developed in three sections which explore the nature of U.S. power in the modern era, its challenges from within and from abroad during a period of ever intensifying interconnectivity, and the

efforts of the United States to manage, contain, and adapt to the repercussions of global outreach and its perils.

Just as in previous volumes, empire provides a central analytical matrix for many chapters; they discuss its military, legal, economic, and technological formats and structures, technology and spatial manifestations in colonies, territories, and world regions. The United States utilized a wide range of imperial tools and profited greatly from increased global interdependence; it also benefitted from the exploitation of natural resources (oil), the steady influx of cheap labor, and the rapid decline of Europe's dominant position in the international system.

At the same time, empire and its marginalizing formations remained always contested by trans-imperial/-national reform networks as individual chapters on Jim Crow, indigenous sovereignty, anti-colonialism, critiques of bio-politics, and women's politics demonstrate. While these chapters highlight the global extent of progressive reform and competing perspectives, others emphasize opposition to globalism and further interdependence by nationalists, nativists, and religious fundamentalists which "[...] forged a new, long-enduring strain of populist antiglobalism".[10]

The volume's third section is devoted to the promise and peril of globalizing interdependence: on the one hand it opened the door for global epistemic exchange, the spread of commodities, capital, and people. At the same time, it also exposed economic, environmental, political and military vulnerabilities and intensified national rivalries further exasperated by the crises of the capitalist order. For the United States these tensions culminated in a global war with imperial power contenders which laid the foundations for its vast influence and world-making capabilities after 1945.

Alternating assessments of global integration as peril or opportunity also constitute an important theme in volume four edited by David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melanie McAllister. The chapters in this volume are organized in three parts which chronologically cover almost eight decades since the end of World War Two. The first part explores the initial postwar decades when the United States advanced its universalist aspirations through preponderant power to create a network of interlocking political, security, and economic organizational frameworks and alliances to ensure an 'orderly' and stable international environment. The chapters in this part discuss many dimensions and conditions of this U.S.-led system from capitalism to knowledge production, global governance to cultural attraction, and from decolonization to global security.

But while at the pinnacle of its power during those years, the United States was not omnipotent; its power to 'secure the peace' was neither universal nor was the structure it created a 'liberal order' whose purported demise has been bemoaned in recent years.[11] This American 'world-making' was confronted with the violent instabilities and 'disorder' of declining and decolonizing European empires; it was furthermore challenged by the Soviet Union and its equally universalist agenda for global 'order'; in addition it was also contested by a range of alternative projects of 'world-making' among the decolonizing new nations of the Global South.[12]

These external challenges to aspirations of U.S. leadership were further magnified by the paradox of increased globalizing because “[...] as the United States came to have greater influence [...] on the world, so too did the world play a greater role in the United States, shaping cultural production, social movements, and everyday life in new and even unprecedented ways.”[13] But while the boundaries between the spheres of foreign and domestic remained highly porous for transnational civic and religious activism, the gap between aspirations and abilities widened for the United States as the cold war intensified, new power competitors emerged, and U.S. credibility and prestige increasingly suffered by its persistent racism and colonialism at home and abroad.

The volume’s second part discusses many of those repercussions, challenges and contestations; it explores imperial ‘formations’ of race and rule at home and abroad, the continued disregard for national sovereignties as highlighted by covert and overt operations of regime change, imperial military interventions, environmental devastation, and the blatant disregard for the nation’s foundational principles evidenced by its support for authoritarian regimes and human rights violations.

Those practices abroad were mirrored by the emergence of a powerful national security state and its infringement on civil rights. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many contemporary observers in the United States hoped for a ‘peace dividend’ which would allow for redirection of military resources and de-construction of much of the security architecture. The chapters of the third part examine this – in hindsight – so brief period of opportunity during which successive administrations praised the advantages of globalization dynamics, pushed for further integration, reflected on unipolar world orders and the ‘end of history’, but were ultimately confronted with a fractured international system characterized by cascading crises abroad and polarization at home. This threat horizon provides the coda for this collection; from Ukraine to the Indo-Pacific, from the COVID pandemic to the climate crisis, and from endemic racism to populist nationalism and the decline of democracy, a confluence of fundamental challenges confronts the United States, its interactions with the world, and the contours of the *Pax Americana* today.

Understanding those challenges, their historical trajectories, and their future implications is no small feat and the *Cambridge History of America and the World* serves as a scholarly reliable, conceptually innovative, and empirically detailed roadmap. The innovative dynamic of this *Cambridge History* is reflected by three axes of inquiry over the *longue durée*: the first axis probes and delineates the contours, themes, temporalities, spaces, and dynamics of U.S. interactions *with* and U.S. actions *in* the world. The volumes advance a broad conception of foreign relations and international history which foreground trans-national connections, the interplay between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’, and the interconnectivity between a variety of spatial scales from local to national and global. This extensive perspective is also reflected by the wide range of themes and topics addressed in this collection including ideas, imaginations, indigeneity, space, technology, military, race, gender, sexuality, capitalism, consumer cultures, resource policies, empire, popular, culture, migration, and the environment.

Such a broad range effectively captures the state of the field and reflects its theoretical and methodological evolution and conceptual broadening over the last three decades.[14] At times, however, the emphasis on transnational dynamics also obscures power hierarchies in international relations and marginalizes state-centered perspectives, policy-making, and the role and influence of the U.S. federal government in the conduct of foreign affairs.[15]

The second axis of inquiry explores the driving forces, contours, and repercussions of U.S. power through the lens of empire. It builds on a robust and vibrant historiography of empire studies and underlines the interpretative significance of the imperial experience and trans-imperial connections for writing histories of the United States in the world against the persistence of nationalist exceptionalism.[16] In this *Cambridge History* the concept of empire is front and center in at least three of the four volumes and many chapters trace successive stages of empire-building, spatial formats, instruments, and structural manifestations. This emphasis on imperial formats and 'formations' over the *longue durée* convincingly highlights the multi-directional nature of state power and the permeable boundaries between the 'foreign' and the 'domestic', underlines the composite nature of the U.S. polity as imperial nation, and offers multiple trans-imperial vantage points for connecting U.S. history to global historical developments.

But the empire which emerges in those contributions differs from previous characterizations as less centralized, less potent, less directed/purposeful, and less coherent and more contested. The collection's overall analytical framework avoids positivist grand narratives and favors imperial kaleidoscopes and its 'messy' complications of U.S. power.[17] The sum of this recalibration constitutes an important corrective to schematically linear understandings of U.S. power; but overemphasis on multipolar settings of empire and the desire to give anti-imperial agency to previously marginalized voices at times obscures rather than details the violent undercurrent of U.S. power in the world.

The third axis of inquiry traces connections, flows, and circulations between the national, regional, and global spaces through its emphasis on empire and globalization dynamics. The volumes contextualize the development of the United States in its hemispheric and trans-oceanic contexts and highlight the impact of those overlapping and intersecting spatial orders on the development of the American polity. They also trace how U.S. developments shaped and were shaped by its entangled histories with the rise (and sometimes demise) of global political-legal, economic, and social orders. Finally, they emphasize how environmental and human challenges on a global scale have simultaneously advanced and contested U.S. 'world-making' in a wide range of formats and formulations.

In sum, for those engaged in teaching and research in this field, this collection offers a treasure-trove of angles, approaches, lenses, and trajectories for engaging with the 'United States and the World'. One may quarrel with the imperial connotations of the collection's title, its chronological volume segmentation, or its overwhelmingly Anglo-American editor- and authorship. But each volume offers a sophisticated analysis and conceptual framework for engaging with the latest historical research through thoroughly documented individual entries each complemented by bibliographic essays, illustra-

tions, and maps. The editors have done a terrific job ensuring interpretative cohesion without analytical straightjackets and the texts are well-suited for graduate seminars in U.S., global, and international history. For years to come this collection will serve as an exhaustive (and exhausting) *tour-de-force* showcase of much of what the historiography in this field has to offer.

Notes

- 1 Recent examples include: Tyson Reeder (ed.), *The Routledge History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, New York 2022; Christopher Dietrich (ed.), *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations: Colonial Era to the Present*, 2 Vols, Hoboken 2020.
- 2 Eliga Gould, Paul Mapp, Carla Gardina Pestana, Introduction: What does America and the World 'Mean' before 1825, in: *The Cambridge History of America and the World*. General Editor Mark Philip Bradley; Volume I: 1500–1820, Cambridge 2021, pp. 8–33, here 8 (hereafter referred to CHAW Volume I).
- 3 Mark Philip Bradley, General Introduction: What is America and the World?, in: CHAW Volume I, p. 3.
- 4 CHAW Volume I, p. 31.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 6 Jay Sexton, Kristin Hoganson, Introduction to Volume II, in: CHAW Volume II, pp. 8–32, here 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 9 Brooke L. Blower, Andrew Preston, Introduction to Volume III, in: CHAW Volume III, pp. 8–33, here 10.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 19; on interwar anti-globalism most recently Tara Zahra, *Against the World. Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars*, New York 2023.
- 11 For example: Robert Jervis/Francis J. Gavin/Joshua Rovner/Diane N. Labrosse (eds.), *Chaos in the Liberal Order. The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York 2018.
- 12 Most recently: Adom Getachev, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton 2019.
- 13 David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, Melanie McAlister, Introduction to Volume IV, in CHAW Volume IV, pp. 8–28, here 9.
- 14 For the range of analytical lenses for example: Frank Costigliola/Michael J. Hogan (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. Third Edition, Cambridge 2016.
- 15 For a critical perspective on de-centering the United States, especially with regards to policymaking in the historiography of transnational relations: Daniel Besner, Frederik Logevall, *Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations*, in: *Texas National Security Review* 3 (Spring 2020) 2, pp. 38–55.
- 16 Most recently: Kristin L. Hoganson, Jay Sexton (eds.), *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain*, Durham 2020.
- 17 Emphasis on contingency, contestation, and 'messiness' as interpretative perspective also in Dietrich (ed.), *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations*.