



Alfred W. McCoy, Josep M. Fradera, Stephen Jacobson, eds. *Endless Empire: Spain's Retreat, Europe's Eclipse, America's Decline*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 477 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-29024-5.



Reviewed by Juan Pan-Montojo

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A. W. McCoy u.a. (Hrsg.): *Endless Empire*

Is history *magistra vitae*? Can we draw lessons for the present and the future from the analysis of the past? A hesitant scepticism is probably the dominant attitude among contemporary historians, despite a long tradition of positivist responses to these questions, including the passionate but lucid plea for history of Marc Bloch in 1941, and a widespread and stable praxis of choosing historical subjects on the basis of current issues. This latter tendency might be interpreted as pure commercial opportunism, and it so often is; it also responds, though, to the shared view among writers and readers that, whatever our understanding of the discipline, good history makes the present far more transparent and comprehensible and therefore aids contemporary decision-making (although it won't save us from erroneous, although well-informed, strategies and choices). The authors of this book, certainly McCoy in the introduction, partake in this optimistic view. Discussing scenarios for a new world order arising from the decline of the US power is one fundamental aim of *Endless Empire*. Nevertheless, the perceptive and far-reaching historical studies are much more than a means to this end.

In 2006 a large group of historians from different national backgrounds launched a collective comparative project on empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, which aimed at supplying tools (concepts, references, perspectives) to study 21st century empires. The book edited by McCoy, Fradera and Jacobson is one of the results – the final one as we read in the introduction – of this enterprise. The volume comprises twenty-five chapters organised in eight parts: Introduction, Spain's Long Imperial Retreat, Imperial Transitions in Latin America and the Philippines, British Global Dominion and Decline, Complexities and Contradictions of French Decolonization, Subordinate Elites and Imperial Decline in Southeast Asia, Imperial Decline and National Identities and U.S. Global Hegemony. This list reflects the existence of a guiding thread, which is stated in the book's subtitle: the end – whether it be characterized by gradual decline or rapid fall – of empires and post-imperial settlements. The book boasts a wide scope: Spain, Britain, France, the USA, and some of the major Euro-American maritime empires of the modern world. The inclusion of Spain in a comparative study of modern empires is one of the values of the book: Cuba,

Puerto Rico, the Philippines and different archipelagos in the Pacific Ocean have tended to be seen by historians of empires as a mere remnant of the old Spanish Empire and have hence been excluded from a proper understanding of the nineteenth-century Spanish nation-state. As Josep M. Delgado, Josep M. Fradera, Stephen Jacobson, Albert Garcia Balañá and Dolores Elizalde show in their chapters, Spanish imperial agendas and policies were much more akin to those of contemporary France or Britain, even though they had been designed from a peripheral European State, than they were to those of the 18th century Spanish Bourbons. Unfortunately similar considerations (the relevance of Spain to understand imperial strategies in the 19th century context) did not lead the editors to include a more in-depth study of Portugal: The new Portuguese Empire is only dealt with in a very interesting chapter on republican imperial citizenship by Cristina Da Silva and to some extent by Fradera. To be sure, Africa is under-represented in *Endless Empire* (notwithstanding the French chapters), a decision which cannot be disconnected from the political concerns of the book: the Pacific countries have in the prevailing interpretation more relevance with respect to the present and the future of the USA as an imperial power.

In place of full geographic coverage, the editors have chose to structure the diverse chapters of the book around a coherent set of factors (or weaknesses), which are said to be present in the phenomenon of imperial decline: the fragility of public revenues to sustain imperial status; the contradictory role of subordinate elites (needed as controlling intermediaries but at the same time potential leaders of anti-colonial movements); the autonomous dynamics of international alliances and threats of rival powers; the multiplication of risky micromilitary undertakings against diffuse forms of resistance; and lastly technological obsolescence, especially in the field of information technology. In fact, the chapters do not confront all these topics: hence, "structuring reference" does not mean a strict structuring scheme. The chapters address different sides of colonial policing, from metropolitan public opinion to constitutional position of colonies, through imperial discourses and their interplay with national political doctrines, "colonial" sciences, ethno-national and social identities, international relations, international aid and economic policies, diplomacy, intelligence! But the common factors of decline, explained in the Introduction, effectively supply the concepts with which diverse angles and topics, geographic spaces, institutions and chronologies, presented in chapters (unequal in style and intellectual concerns), manage

to avoid the risk of slipping into a hotchpotch of imperial studies. The book chapters do not offer either a list of examples of a historical theory of imperial decline: no alternative vision to the one of Paul Kennedy, let alone Oswald Spengler, is shaped by the impressive list of historians headed by McCoy and including other eminent scholars such as John Darwin, Robert Aldrich, Greg Grandin, Francisco Scarano, and Joya Chatterjee. What the reader is left with is a relevant, complex and nuanced look at regularities, some of which could be deduced from a general model of imperial structural necessities, some of which are only accessible to the well-trained eye of experienced historians, involving themselves with concrete and temporarily limited realities.

Since I am unable to review each of the contributions to the book, let me take a shortcut and substitute the evaluation of the whole for the fairer and more interesting explanation of the strong and weak points of the parts. In McCoy's list of key factors of imperial decline, the first item is the economy and more specifically the resources needed to maintain imperial status. But this topic is hardly tackled by most of the authors. Furthermore, economic considerations are left aside or lightly analyzed in nearly all the chapters. The fact that there is not a single quantitative table or graph anywhere is a clear sign of the subordinate role of economic considerations, be they those concerning colonial or military expenditure, in other words, imperial costs or benefits such as revenues derived from imperial taxation, intra-imperial trade, private profits from investment! or the more loosely defined economic advantages of informal colonies (favourable trade agreements, regulation of internal markets and foreign trade adapted to interests of the hegemonic power!). Business lobbies and economic interests groups and their changing composition and influence are seldom brought into the picture. Can we really explain empire-building, imperial turning points and imperial decline without discussing these factors or, instead, taking them for granted? Although it is true that some authors consider such factors (see Fradera on "Slavery and imperial political economics" or McCoy on the economy in the Introduction), it is impossible to find a thorough discussion of the ample literature on the costs and benefits of imperial undertakings and their impact on declining empires. If economic explanations are the weak point, what we might term cultural elements, in every sense of the word "culture," as well as geopolitical and geo-strategical analyses, are the strongest. With respect to the first element, the book offers praiseworthy insights and novelties: about the role of national iden-

tities among metropolitan residents and among subordinate elites and other groups in the colonies; about the construction of discourses on politics, empires, and international relations that have conditioned public opinion and that of political elites in relation to imperial, neo-imperial or post-imperial rule; or about colonial knowledge and its impact on imperial policies, anti-imperial reactions and colonial transitions to independence and, sometimes, neo-colonial relations. With respect to the second element, the broad comparisons implicit in the book, which are often referred to by the authors, and the more precise and explicit comparisons, allow for highly interesting and new interpretations about the reasons behind, and the effects of, micromilitarism, or about the relations among rising and declining powers, or about in-

telligence, information and imperial strategies.

Endless Empire does not cover all the geographic scenarios of modern imperialism nor does it address all aspects. It is not a state of the art of the gigantic bibliography on imperialism. It does not offer a grand theory of imperial decline. However, it is a coherent series of studies on imperial fragilities and post-imperial and neoimperial solutions in the modern world, which must be read by historians. It offers updated and well-structured studies on imperial declines, in addition to an intelligent way to construct comparative history – the best path to history-social science. It is a model of thinking, productively, about the present and the future through the past. Good history, which can be and manages to be *magistra vitae*.

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