H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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 Kevin Y. Kim (Stanford University)
Published on H-Diplo (June, 2013)
Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

How much should scholars of post-World War II international history care about empire in an era marked by the spread of democracy and collapsing colonial societies across the globe? A great deal, comes the resounding reply from a recent edited volume, *Endless Empire: Spain's Retreat, Europe's Eclipse, America's Decline.* Spurred by signs of declining U.S. global dominance, Southeast Asia historian Alfred W. McCoy and his Barcelona-based coeditors, Josep M. Fradera and Stephen Jacobson, gathered a wide-ranging set of essays that confront a central question emerging from a global network of scholarly conferences since 2008. "Does Europe's decolonization over the past two centuries offer insights," McCoy poses this question, "about the ongoing decline of U.S. global power?" (p. 4). Roving across six continents and three centuries of global comparative history from imperial Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, and New Zealand to postcolonial societies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, *Endless Empire*'s contributors have more than met McCoy's challenge. Eschewing simplistic declensionism, instrumentalist "lessons of the past" approaches, and moralistic judgments about empire, they provide a rich, globally vast portrait of imperial decline that should interest scholars engaged in any aspect of history touched by empire's receding, relentlessly grasping tendrils.

Such tendrils, *Endless Empire* suggests, left few lives or communities untouched. No empire, its editors argue, was more powerful than the United States after World War II. However, the U.S. empire, they warn, peaked around 1990, when "Washington Consensus"-styled policies dominated the global economy and U.S. military power underwrote U.S. and pro-U.S. elites' stewardship of the world. Though U.S. officials deny the mere thought of U.S. global decline, *Endless Empire* notes, a growing number of influential voices and hard global facts–drastic slippages in U.S. global economic and educational rankings; increasingly ineffective bouts of U.S. military intervention; the rise of China and other BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) nations–have made the notion cliché. "The time is gone," former Federal Reserve chair Paul Volcker said, after the People's Republic of China rejected the Barack Obama administration's pleas to reevaluate the yuan and thereby ameliorate the U.S.-China trade gap, "when the U.S. could lay claim as the putative superpower" (p. 24). By most standards, the United States remains the world's preponderant power. Yet, as McCoy warns (with European imperialists' hubris much in mind), "even at the apex of power, empires germinate seeds of decline unnoticed until they burst forth in a fatal florescence" (p. 5).

The book is not overly concerned with declining U.S. or Western hegemony; it is not even that concerned with the United States, or any other nation or empire, for that matter. It is concerned with imperial decline as a historical process, with recasting local and global histories by interrogating empire–the dominant global political form, after all, for much human history. One cannot do this, Fradera observes, by writing solely about metropoles or colonies, oppressors or the oppressed, imperial triumphs or tragedies. "We also need to assess the complex parallels and intersections among metropoles, colonies, and imperial rivals," he writes. This history indeed revolved around "a geopolitical contest for domination over other societies" (p. 73). But to fully depict this, Jacobson adds, requires dispensing with the truism that empire always ran "against the grain of modernity" (p. 74). As *Endless Empire* contributors show, declining empires' masters and subjects cried for imperial reform and postcolonial federalism as often (and sometimes more) as they cried for revolution and independence. Such revelations illuminate not only the widening differences that finally sundered metropole and colony, but also the less-known, strikingly modern ties that bound them in the first place. This dual sensibility, which suffuses the book and much of the new historiography on empire, enables readers unfamiliar with empire's disparate subfields to better understand what made its decline so protracted, ambivalent,

and, in the end, devastatingly precipitous.[1]

Endless Empire begins with the case of Spain to illustrate a point echoed throughout the book: the nonlinear chronology of imperial decline. Josep M. Delgado Ribas challenges the conventional narrative of nineteenth-century Spanish imperial collapse by highlighting sustained phases of decline and revival from the Hapsburg monarchy to the Spanish-American War. Amid repeated systemic crises, Ribas argues, Spanish imperialists initiated sweeping reforms and retrenchments to resuscitate empire–from the Hapsburgs' *pacto de sangre* granting considerable local autonomy to its American colonies to imperialists' experiments, under Isabel II's constitutional monarchy, with "liberal colonialism" in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other insular possessions after the empire's dissolution on the American mainland (p. 45). Fradera's contribution adds a world comparative perspective. Examining the same period, Fradera argues that Spain and Portugal's status as "second-tier empires" in a British-led world order was crucial to their flagging empires' survival (p. 57). To balance Napoleonic France's global ambitions and enrich its commercial interests, Britain pursued a pragmatic policy that occasionally challenged, but ultimately tolerated, both powers' dependence on slavery. Under Britain's formidable aegis, Fradera notes, Spain and Portugal solidified Cuba and Brazil, respectively, as lucrative bedrocks of their imperial political economies, and gained breathing space to reconstruct their entire empires. As these accounts suggest, empires cannot be understood as self-contained national quests to build a "fiscal-military state," as historian John Brewer conceptualized imperial statehood in his influential study of Britain's rise as a major world power.[2] Empire was also produced by geopolitical crosswinds and cultural and economic networks across states, whose imperial quests intersected in unpredictable and dynamic ways.

Other contributions also highlight the global, at times transnational, dynamics of empire. Courtney Johnson explores Latin America as a focal point of transatlantic imperial elites in the United States and Britain. As Johnson reveals, influential British and U.S. elites (including geographer Halford Mackinder, transatlantic news editor William T. Stead, and leading eastern U.S. Republicans) converged on the need for Anglo-American leadership in Latin America in the 1890s. Charting these elites' activities in their governments, the press, the Hague Court, the Pan-American Union, and other organizations, Johnson reminds us how shared interests and visions among empires often drove one's own empire. Similarly, drawing on imperial travelogues and other documents, María Dolores Elizalde traces the role of pro-imperial global opinion in the transition from Spanish to U.S. empire in the Philippines. Complicating the usual tale of hostile "Black Legend" perceptions of Spain, Elizalde demonstrates how shifting, increasingly critical European and U.S. opinion about Spanish empire (and growing admiration for the United States' imperial potential) facilitated U.S. replacement of Spain as the Philippines' imperial guardian.

Turning to the colonized, Latin American historian Greg Grandin offers a fascinating account of how Latin American politicians and intellectuals, with their U.S. counterparts, turned U.S.-Latin American relations, after Spain's retreat in the region, into a crucible for Pan-American ideas that augured and influenced future developments in international organization and law through the Cold War. Particularly illuminating is Grandin's portrayal of the way certain Latin American leaders, like Chilean jurist Alejandro Alvarez, accepted and admired the Monroe Doctrine and other U.S. legal and political principles for their consonance with Latin American notions of international law and multilateralism, while also adapting U.S. ideas to engage, challenge, and contain U.S. expansion in the region. Ultimately, as British imperial historian John Darwin argues in his synthetic overview of twentieth-century decolonization, imperialism as a world system was shattered by World War II's "geopolitical traumas" (p. 202). Yet as Darwin and other *Endless Empire* contributors suggest, while often exaggerated and nationalistically self-serving, global empire–whether in decline, revival, or collapse–was marked by mutual admiration, consensus, and collaboration as much as competition, rivalry, and war.

The metropole, too, was no monolith. Several contributions particularly make clear how its relatively privileged citizens held variegated, contingent commitments to empire. To explain the vast drop in popular support for Spanish imperialism in Africa and Cuba between the 1860s and 1890s, Albert Garcia Balañà examines large-scale shifts in overseas colonial migration, military recruitment, and the socioeconomic background of imperial soldiers and settlers. Increasingly dangerous military expeditions, higher peasant and working-class enlistments, and Latin American republics' growing appeal to middle-class Catalonians who once fueled Spain's imperial exploits demonstrated how, Barcelona's leading republican newspaper regretfully put it, empire ebbed when it "no longer [was] a social unit" (p. 103).

Two French historians, Robert Aldrich and Emmanuelle Saada, separately paint even more sophisticated portraits of metropolitan politics. Both suggest

that French public opinion and culture, on the surface, cared remarkably little about France's imperial outposts in Africa and Southeast Asia. But as Saada provocatively argues in her analysis of French constitutional and colonial culture, French citizens' lack of strong imperial identity stemmed from a "long-seated" self-denial about empire, and exclusionary laws and attitudes that disingenuously treated French colonies as an "exception" to the nation's republicanism (p. 215). Besides the book's all too brief explorations of the interrelation of empire, race, and ethnicity (excepting Joya Chatterji's excellent essay on the global rise of exclusionary citizenship in India, Pakistan, and the British Commonwealth), Aldrich's and Saada's insights into the contradictory, ambiguous political culture of French republican empire offer parallels with U.S. imperial experiences deserving of further study.

For this reader, the most stimulating contributions in *Endless Empire* concern colonial subjects' own visions of empire. Avoiding politically charged notions of "collaborationism" that traditionally dominated the subject, several contributors engage fully, and creatively, with colonial subjects' complex, changing positions on imperial rule. As Francisco Scarano argues of pro-imperialist Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the twilight of Spanish Caribbean empire in the 1890s, their visions–ranging from national independence to annexation by the United States–were not merely reactionary, neo-imperial impulses. They were rooted in a much longer history of "pro-imperialist nationalism," Scarano argues, in which "collaboration was principally a means toward a greater end: national independence" (pp. 140, 145). Other contributors find similar dynamics in other global contexts. Many emphasize the ways in which pro-imperial colonial subjects used metropolitan power to advance (though often with difficulty) their own projects: to integrate peripheral provinces, as Gregory Barton shows in the Britain-Siam case; to raise public health and education, as Warwick Anderson and Hans Pols argue of early twentieth-century Filipino and Indonesian doctors and scientists; and to debate citizenship rights within the empire, as Cristina Nogueira da Silva frames Angolan, Mozambican, and Guinean responses to Portugal's 1914 *indigenato* system.

Not only were nationalism and colonialism not inherently incompatible, but, as the book repeatedly reminds the reader, colonial subjects were also crucial agents of their own modernity. Two of the book's most original accounts emphasize this point. Remco Raben examines Indonesian mutual aid societies, local representative bodies, civic protests, and other instances of democratic populism spurred by Dutch imperial initiatives and grassroots Indonesian pressures. Raben challenges the conventional view that postcolonial Third World societies were doomed to authoritarianism because of their peoples' supposedly "awkward" response to "West-driven modernization." Rather, Raben argues, Indonesians, including their first president Sukarno, crafted a "heterogeneous" democracy drawing from both native and imperial sources from the days of colonialism and Dutch-Indonesian war to postcolonial Indonesia (p. 277).

Indonesia's political syncretism, as Raben notes, was hardly unique among postcolonial societies. Examining the intellectual development of Léopold Sedar Senghor, a colonial member of the French National Assembly who became Senegal's first president and an anticolonial Pan-African leader in the 1950s, anthropologist Gary Wilder offers a thought-provoking interpretation of this influential African leader's global thought. Senghor's initial postwar program, Wilder reveals, envisioned a global socialist French republic, with Senegal and other former colonies included as independent, equal members of a Francophone federation. Such ideas, contributors Aldrich and Saada elsewhere note, were not hopelessly visionary; they echoed other French and African leaders' proposals for "Eurafrique" federation. Though Senghor and his supporters failed to convince French and African leaders of this bold vision, their belief that only by transforming metropolitan societies like France could one transform postcolonial Africa and the wider world illustrates the pressing need for historians today, Wilder persuasively argues, "to move beyond the assumption that during decolonization many in the West thought globally while colonized peoples thought nationally" (p. 231).

Endless Empire is not without flaws. Many contributors' heavy reliance on secondary sources limits the book's innovative range. Much will thus seem familiar to specialists. For general readers, though, the book provides entrée to numerous foreign-language literatures; its comparative sweep should prove instructive to specialists, too. At times, the book's comparative connections–especially comparing Spanish imperial decline with that of the United States due to their similar unevenness, democratic contradictions, and longevity–are not entirely convincing. This relates to the book's chief shortcoming: the definition of U.S. empire and global statecraft, generally. Several contributors productively use the classic notion of "informal empire"–indirect, less intrusive global dominance via non-territorial forms of military, political, cultural, and economic influence–as a defining feature of U.S.

and British empire.[3] Indeed, contributions by Greg Bankoff, Julian Go, Brett Reilly, and McCoy suggest important continuities between European and U.S. global hegemony (including economic aid, clientelism, and military coups), as well as breathtaking U.S. innovations in military intelligence and information technology. But what U.S. global power stands for, beyond these tactical considerations, is unclear; where the book's Americans seek to take the world with their neocolonialist actions remains obscure. McCoy, the book's lead editor, offers some insight. Americans since World War II, he notes, undertook a "global guardianship" over a "troubled" planet unlike anything the world had seen, while holding a "deep ambivalence" toward empire (pp. 39, 3). Yet as any discerning reader of today's headlines might observe, Americans, at times, continue to reap and misapprehend the defiance of an increasingly multipolar, prosperous, globalized world they helped create. One senses the insufficiency of empire to describe and explain these developments. But certainly the close, open-minded process of historical inquiry in *Endless Empire* offers a model for scholars interested in answers to one of empire's continuing legacies.

Notes

[1]. For book-length studies exemplifying the new historiography on empire, see, for instance, Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013); and Yumi Moon, *Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[2]. John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), xvii.

[3]. For the classic formulation of "informal empire," see John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6 (1953): 1-15. In the U.S. context, the work of William Appleman Williams and others remains influential. See, especially, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1959); and Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Kevin Y. Kim. Review of W. McCoy, Alfred; Fradera, Josep M.; Jacobson, Stephen, eds., *Endless Empire: Spain's Retreat, Europe's Eclipse, America's Decline.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38492

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.