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This slim, lively volume from Emanuele Saccarelli and Latha Varadarajan, both professors of political science at San Diego State University, sets out a history of imperialism. According to this history, imperialism began in the 1880s and not only continues down to the present day but is at the heart of contemporary economics, politics, and international relations.

Central to this story is the authors' definition of imperialism, which they distinguish from related terms such as colonialism, colonization, and empire. According to Saccarelli and Varadarajan, “the essential foundation of imperialism as a historical phenomenon is found at the economic level” (p. 33). Imperialism has an “essential logic—that of capitalism” (p. 51). Over the course of the 1800s, capitalism led to monopoly capital and then to the financialization of industrial economies, first in Britain, then elsewhere in the West. Capital became parasitic, moving away from producing goods and toward finance, creating less and less of real value. Because parasitic finance monopoly capital undermined options for investment in industry, “the problem of excess capital demanded a solution based on new markets and new areas of investment” (p. 79). With the ruling class in control of the state and defending the interests of finance capital, there was an erosion of democracy and an expansion of the realm of investment abroad through imperialism. Thus imperialism was (and is) also an international system. It all started with the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, the Scramble for Africa, and “the division of the world among rival powers” (p. 48). Imperialism then survived World War I and was “reformulated and restructured” after World War II during the era of decolonization (p. 106). It continues to drive domestic and global affairs today.

If much of this sounds familiar, that is because it is. The authors are trying to revive the “classical conception of imperialism” (p. 59), that is, the Hobson-Lenin thesis. The Hobson-Lenin theory of imperialism initially emerged on the heels of Britain’s expensive and in ways shameful war against the Boers (1899-1902), which led many Britons to question the empire and why it
was expanding. In *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), J. A. Hobson provided an answer when he argued that the British Empire's late nineteenth-century growth was symptomatic of a structural imbalance inherent to British capitalism. Capitalists denied workers good wages, which limited demand and thus also money-making investment opportunities at home. So capitalists looked outside Britain for more profitable opportunities and found them in overseas territories. The solution to the problem, according to Hobson, was a structural shift in production in Britain where workers would receive higher wages and drive up domestic demand. Bolshevik leader V. I. Lenin agreed with Hobson on the export of capital in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*: “The necessity for exporting capital arises from the fact that in a few countries capitalism has become ‘over-ripe’ and (owing to the backward state of agriculture and the impoverished state of the masses) capital cannot find ‘profitable’ investment.”[1] Lenin then built on Hobson's (and others') work to develop a more dogmatic interpretation of imperialism that emphasized the benefit European financiers derived from colonial investments. Unlike Hobson, Lenin argued capitalism was incapable of reform, and he concluded imperialism was the last gasp of the capitalist order, the penultimate phase before a final collapse.

Considering the recent scholarly emphasis on the cultural history of imperialism and the relative neglect of political economy, a forceful, well-informed reassertion of the Hobson-Lenin thesis extending its application down to the present is an exciting prospect. Yet while Saccarelli and Varadarajan's book is spirited, it does not address in any significant way the literature, dating back decades, that casts doubt on or outright refutes Hobson and Lenin. Take the now-classic *French Colonialism 1871-1914: Myths and Realities*, in which Henri Brunschwig showed that the French government pursued a “policy of prestige” and assumed the financial burdens of empire. Brunschwig debunked the “protectionist legend” that Hobson had set out, which claimed protectionism and tariffs contributed to imperialism. Brunschwig also showed how trade with the colonies increased only very slowly over time, that the colonies never offered French exporters a monopoly, and how trade with them was a small portion of overall foreign trade, which was only a fraction of total French trade, domestic and external. Brunschwig concluded, “The real cause of French colonial expansion was the spread of nationalist fever, as a result of the events which had taken place in 1870 and 1871.”[2]

Other cases undercut the Hobson-Lenin thesis, even the British one. Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback have shown that empire was on the whole nonpaying, refuting the claim that capital was more profitable outside Britain. Moreover, “with few exceptions ... the dependent Empire did not draw large quantities of British finance.”[3] Or consider the case of the Congo. Henry Morton Stanley's speaking tour in England to spark interest in the Congo was greeted with marked apathy—even in heavily industrialized Manchester, of all places. Of course it was Leopold II who then pursued the Congo, yet the Belgian king's attempts to coax Belgian industrial and financial interests into supporting his colonial project were met with indifference. Rather than finding Europe's markets “over-ripe,” Belgian finance capitalists, like Goldilocks, thought they were just right, and so they continued to invest their money there. A more recent instance the authors discuss to illustrate how capital's search for profits has driven overseas interventions, namely the 1994 invasion of Haiti, is also questionable. Haitians must be wondering where all that foreign capital has been invested.

The book's lack of engagement with the literature on imperialism is evident in its sparse notes, many of which refer to websites for news articles, speeches, or brief excerpts from primary sources. The authors' unfamiliarity with major works on their subject shows in other ways as well. They
identify the 1880s as the start point for imperialism (p. 24) without grappling with any studies showing important continuities across the nineteenth century, for instance classic works like John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson’s on the “imperialism of free trade,” or more recent ones by David Todd (on France), Valentim Alexandre (on Portugal), or the late Christopher Bayly (on Britain).[4] Two significant studies on imperialism that the authors do address at length (besides those of Hobson and Lenin) are Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2001). Each is brought up to be refuted in turn, insofar as they provide alternative explanations for imperialism.

Because all developments flow from imperialism, Saccarelli and Varadarajan’s account is one of inevitability, in which human agency is removed from the picture. The “bloody denouement” that was World War I, for instance, “was not an arbitrary and avoidable outcome, but the necessary culmination of the initial growth and consolidation of imperialism as an international system” (p. 85). In short, World War I was a conflict that was “ultimately unavoidable” (p. 89). It was followed by World War II, which “flowed inevitably” out of the Great War (p. 105). History is emptied of human agency since everyone is subject to the matrix of parasitic monopoly capitalism. Thus, for example, Leopold II's long-standing (and well-documented) craving to acquire a colony, his fervid scheming behind the scenes, and his headstrong relentlessness were immaterial to his acquisition of the Congo. “The fact that he managed to become sole proprietor of the so-called ‘Congo Free State’ was the outcome of imperialist powers’ collective dealings and machinations” (p. 76).

Since the taproot of imperialism lay first in Britain, then elsewhere in western Europe and in the United States, these are essentially the only actors on the world stage in this book. Aside from the Soviet Union—which the authors contend heroically constrained imperialism—places and peoples outside the United States and western Europe have no real power; rather they are acted upon in a simple, two-sided engagement. As they put it, “Imperialism is fundamentally an international system ... there exist two different categories of nation-states that constitute this system—imperialist and oppressed” (p. 48). Even resistance to imperialism depended on the West, specifically Marxist-Leninist thought. “For all its difficulties and contradictions, the Russian Revolution began to give young Indian intellectuals and Italian factory workers, African American artists in Harlem as well as peasants in the fields of China, the means to understand and fight imperialism” (p. 96). The authors ignore how Samory Touré did not need the Russian Revolution to understand and fight imperialism during his extended campaign against the French in West Africa, nor Menelik II to lead his kingdom to victory at Adowa, nor Can Vuong resisters in Vietnam, Gandhi in South Africa and India, and so forth. Further, the book asserts that this dependency on the Marxist-Leninist heritage extended into the decolonization era: “The existence of the Soviet Union as a global military power, then, simultaneously checked imperialist designs, and provided Third World leaders who struggled to hold on to a semblance of independence some room to maneuver” (pp. 141-142). The authors appear unfamiliar with the innumerable, excellent works in print challenging this kind of Eurocentric, binary picture of imperialism.

The book contains a number of surprising absences. Because it contends imperialism flowed from European and US capitalism, excess capital, and the search of profits, the book in effect excludes Russia and its empire. Yet of course the tsars imposed their rule over vast numbers of non-Russians, and the Bolsheviks not only inherited that empire but expanded it, for example internally through Russification and colonization—including the gulag. About China Saccarelli and Varadarajan say effectively zero. When describing
Japan’s imperial aims, for instance, they write, “Given its geographic location, these ambitions also meant that Japan would be in direct competition with two other actors, one old (Russia) and one new (the United States)” (p. 84). China vanishes. Nothing is said of the First (1894-95) and Second (1931/37-45) Sino-Japanese Wars, and the untold millions of Chinese victims of Japanese imperialism.

At times, *Imperialism Past and Present* fails to get the facts correct. The authors assert that “none of the new territories” acquired during the end-of-century scramble for empire “seemed to have been acquired with the aim of actual settlement” (p. 25). Yet the millions of Italians who emigrated in the years following Italy’s unification provided an important justification for the conquest and creation of overseas colonies of settlement. Italy did not want to keep losing its sons and daughters to foreign powers.[5] This does not mean Italians left for the colonies once they were acquired, because generally they did not. But the motivation was there, and similar arguments were made in other countries. Another error: Saccarelli and Varadarajan state that the 1884-85 Berlin Conference saw European statesmen “carve up an entire continent amongst themselves,” arriving at a “carefully agreed upon parceling out of African land” (pp. 69, 75). It is simply untrue that the conference “successfully divided the world” (p. 100). Although there was much discussion of “spheres of influence,” the conference’s main outcome was rules for “effective occupation,” not the actual “carving up” of colonies, which only happened in subsequent years during the so-called Scramble for Africa.[6]

Another of the book’s dubious contentions is that imperialism led to “the erosion of democracy” (p. 47). The authors believe that imperialism inevitably entailed “erosion of democratic norms, culture, and institutions,” including “disenfranchisement” and “systematic biases in the electoral process” (p. 44; similar ideas forwarded pp. 104, 118). But the era since 1885 has seen the bolstering of democracies, not their erosion. Of course present-day democracies are far from perfect. Nonetheless, consider the small percentage of populations in western Europe that had the vote at the outset of Saccarelli and Varadarajan’s story: in 1890, only 27.1 percent in France, 13.9 percent in Denmark, 9.7 percent in Italy, and 21.7 percent in Germany; all numbers to be taken with a grain of salt considering restrictions, like Germany’s three-class voting system, or its lack of a secret ballot.[7] Even after the third reform act in Britain (1884), the proportion of the population to the electorate in Britain was 6.54 to 1.[8] Since that time, of course, there has been an enormous expansion of democracy in Europe and the United States—not to mention other world areas such as India, Australia, South Africa, or Japan—including the extension of the vote to women, and a massive development of democratic norms and practices in eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Still, the authors would maintain there has been an erosion of democracy from, say, the Poland of the 1880s (divided and under German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian rule) to the Poland of today.

The book’s skeptical approach toward Western capitalist democracies and its Marxist-Leninist approach lead to at times hyperbolic or murky assertions. The authors state that “the Athenian polis was intensely and directly democratic in a way that British parliamentarianism could not remotely approximate” (p. 19). This appears to ignore that women and slaves were excluded from Athenian democracy and adult men had to prove Athenian double descent, meaning participation was restricted to maybe a quarter of Athens’ adult population. Given these restrictions, perhaps a comparison between direct “democracy” in Athens and Britain’s representative democracy is not so preposterous. Elsewhere Saccarelli and Varadarajan argue that following the 2008 economic and financial crisis in the United States, “the notion that a government should continue to
spend money for basic social services and programs, already under attack for several decades, became an outright anathema” (p. 38). The authors appear unfamiliar with the spending approved by the US Congress that goes toward Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, education, housing, and so forth: well more than 50 percent of the US multitrillion dollar federal budget in 2015. They also repeatedly use the term “ruling class” without defining it, and they fail to show how the ruling class, whatever it was, actually maneuvered to enact imperialist policies. A thumbnail sketch of Condoleezzsa Rice’s career and a reference to the revolving door between industry and government in the United States does not suffice (pp. 42-43).

The book’s Marxist-Leninist approach also leads to burdensome bias in its assessment of sources. The authors consider most contemporary observers to be cynical and disingenuous, engaging in rhetoric concealing their true capitalist-imperialist designs. In 1885, for instance, “Diplomats, politicians, explorers, businessmen, missionaries, adventurers, all those whose maneuvers had led to this great meeting knew that the task at Berlin was quite simply formalizing the dragooning of the African continent into the imperialist world order” (p. 70). Likewise, in the post-World War II era, they see “humanitarianism”—in scare quotes—as a front for imperialism. Of course, there is some truth in this line of thinking, but at the same time it does a disservice to genuine beliefs that led people to act the way they did, be it to explore, go to Africa as a missionary, or advocate intervention to prevent a genocide. By contrast, the only past observers whose statements can be taken at face value seem to be Lenin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Rosa Luxemburg, the latter characterized as a “heroic, and clear-sighted” opponent of imperialism (p. 186). Thus in the 1919 confrontation between Woodrow Wilson’s and Lenin’s two visions, Wilson’s lofty expressions about self-representation were undermined by flexibility on his ideals and discrimination in the United States, while Lenin alone held out a genuine promise for true change in the form of the Bolshevik Revolution.[9]

Indeed, the book expresses nostalgia for Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution, the latter of which, according to the authors, ended World War I (pp. 95-96). Positive statements such as “The new Soviet government had come about in a process of direct political struggle against imperialism and was committed to its destruction across the world” (p. 96) are presented without any analysis of the Bolsheviks’ own empire. Later the authors state that “If such a thing as Soviet expansionism existed ... it was of a remarkably defensive, if not altogether passive character” (p. 118). Once again, there is some truth to this claim, but such a generalization downplays the many Soviet interventions in eastern Europe, Africa, and elsewhere during the Cold War.[10] The authors say almost nothing about Soviet oppression and totalitarianism, and absolve Lenin of any responsibility for them: it was only after he died that Bolshevik democracy went off the rails, with “the transformation of the Soviet Union into something Lenin could hardly have recognized” (p. 116). Yet we now know that many of the worst aspects of Soviet totalitarianism, including summary executions, political oppression, mass incarcerations, and the gulag, began under Lenin.[11]

Considering the now complete eclipse of Leninist communism and finance capital’s onward march, perhaps it is unsurprising the authors harshly, although inaccurately assess more recent global developments. According to them the United States has over the past three decades suffered “a weakening and crisis-ridden economy” (p. 143), even though both US GDP and the standard of living are greater than ever. They state that “in an objective sense, it is hard to deny the persistence and intensification of aggressive conflicts around the world since the end of the Cold War,” and they make reference to the “acceleration of tensions and conflict of the past few years” (pp. 143, 184). In reality, conflicts are fewer
and less destructive, and the proportion of the world’s population dying in them—and dying violent deaths generally—is down substantially.[12] The authors conclude that “the only sober, and sobering assessment of the contemporary situation is that humanity stands on the brink of a catastrophe of unfathomable consequences” (p. 184). This tendency toward alarmism detracts from good points the authors raise about pressing current issues, for example growing wealth and income inequality in the United States.

In sum, although this book assumes an ambitious scope, is well written and entertaining, and provides some insightful commentary on global history since the 1880s, as a guide to imperialism past and present, it comes up short.

Notes


[10]. See, for example, Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


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