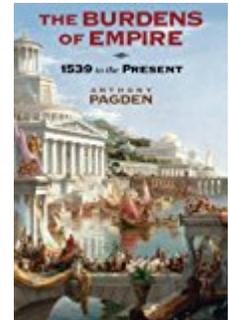


Anthony Pagden. *The Burdens of Empire: 1539 to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 302 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-18828-9.



Reviewed by Mahshid Mayar

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Anthony Pagden is a political historian and has been, for the past three decades, at the center of research on Europe and its encounters with the non-European world. Therefore, a quick overview of his work helps to better place *The Burdens of Empire: 1539 to the Present* both within Pagden's larger body of research and within the discipline. Pagden has extensively researched the Spanish Empire and its influence in the Americas in works such as *The Spiritual Conquest of the Mayas* (1975), *The Fall of Natural Man* (1982), *The Spanish Empire and the Political Imagination* (1990), and *The Uncertainties of Empire* (1994). In addition, he has published on the idea, formation, and evolution of Europe both within its continental confines and as the birthplace of modern, global, imperial regimes in *Lords of All the World* (1997), *Peoples and Empires* (2001), *The Idea of Europe* (2002), and *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (2013).

The Burdens of Empire is the latest of this long, impressive list, a volume where his two interrelated lines of research—Europe and imperi-

alism—come together. Except for its sixth chapter, the remaining chapters of the book have been previously published elsewhere and should be familiar to those whose research or general interest in the idea and practice of modern empires has been influenced by Pagden's former writings. However, the volume attempts to offer a coherent narrative, mainly through its introduction, which binds the chapters into a forceful argument about the European empires of early modern and modern times and the legal nature of their extended arms in their settler colonies in the "New World."

To this end, Pagden begins the book by setting the historical stage for the study of empires, arguing first that empires belong to and have shaped our human past more systematically than nation-states have; second, that as the United States is not an empire in the way Pagden understands empires, the conclusion should be that we live in the age of imperial "game over"; and third, that understanding the current state of human rights necessitates the study of these bygone legal polities

in their modern European form as part and parcel of an intellectual history of universal laws.

Revisiting the Roman Empire and the legacy it left for modern European empires, Pagden turns his focus to the legal implications of building and ruling settler colonies in North and South America. At the heart of his argument lies a concern—shared in one way or another by all European empires of the early modern period, he believes—over the legal nature of distance, manifested in the contentiousness surrounding such issues as distant and “unknown” native and creole cultures, territorial claims, citizenship rights, limits of sovereignty based on the law of nations, racial distancing, claims to self-governance, the severing ties of the empires and their colonies, and interimperial contacts and conflicts on sea and land.

As Pagden sketches, all these debates and the ensuing crises within the extended legal polities of European empires led to discontent and ultimately to revolts and liberation movements in the Americas. The consequent legal and political debates they caused both in the metropolis and the colonies were viewed by a number of Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, and Benjamin Constant as moments to consider replacing the “law of nations”—which was based on controversial political claims—with a transnational legal system, based on common commercial interests, in which universal principles and rights, rather than rivalries, exceptionalities, and hostilities, would guide the collective human fate. What such a replacement constituted went beyond a reordering of the colonial directive and in fact called for a reimagination of empires as commercial partners rather than territorial conquerors and rulers—itsself another failed project which brought about more rivalry than did the former vision of empire.

Pagden moves on from this reimagination of modern empires to discuss yet another redefinition, brought about in the wake of the Congress of

Vienna in 1815. In Pagden’s view, the rise of nation-states was initially welcomed and yet failed as another imperial reincarnation to fully counter the tyranny of empires. Indeed, as Pagden asserts, despite centuries of crises, countermovements, domestic critique, and legal reincarnations, the imperial Europe which, in 1500, consisted of “first empires” and controlled only 10 percent of the surface of the earth had grown into “second empires” which, at the break of the First World War, exploited about 84 percent of it (p. 27).

The book’s conclusion is that the fricative and far from absolute dissolution of the imperial world order in the middle of the twentieth century has not erased the imperial heritage, or at the least the legal system it had established to sustain itself against domestic and external claims and crises. For one, the replacement of the rights of nations with cosmopolitan rights, argues Pagden, has remained with us in the by and large Eurocentric framework of human rights. The book’s final chapter is dedicated to a debate on this framework, enumerating the criticisms levied against both the rights it upholds and the universality of its scope. What these denunciations have in common, Pagden believes, is “their clear recognition of—and objection to—the fact that rights, and human rights in particular, are cultural artefacts represented as universal, immutable values” (p. 244). Offering a genealogy of the concept of human rights and the Kantian take on it from a cosmopolitan perspective, Pagden concludes that the turn to global citizenship and recognition of the universal rights of the individual—however European in its conception and interpretation—constitute the final reincarnation of an old imperial project which has been conceived and delivered parallel to the centuries-long evolution of the ideas of empire as practiced by Europeans.

An illuminating volume on the legal imperatives of European empires over four centuries, *Burdens of Empire* draws attention to the postimperial world order and the imperial legacy it still

carries around in reconceiving itself in the face of new crises, critiques, and questions. Offering a rigorous historical examination of the Eurocentric core of the current human rights framework, the volume, however, celebrates its potential for assuring a better future for individuals based on the legacy of European empires. Though Pagden does trace the anti-imperial discourse put forward by metropolitan and colonial citizens of the empires, the volume tries to do justice to the legacy of these empires by projecting them as ultimately beneficial, at least partly, to all humankind. Therefore, while an exhaustive intellectual history of European empires in the *long durée*, the book remains too sanguine in its critique of the universalization of human rights discourse that has direct roots in a most European soil: the Enlightenment project.

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