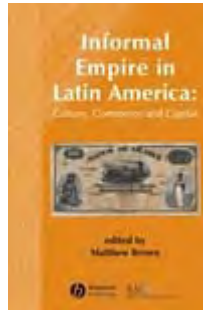


Reviews

Matthew Brown's (ed.) *Informal Empire in Latin America. Culture, Commerce and Capital*

By Enrique Alejandro Basabe (1)



Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing and SLAS, 2007
274 pages, ISBN: 9781405179324, US\$40

History has no official records of a 'scramble' for Latin America. However, together with Geography, Economics, and, more recently, Cultural Studies, it has attempted to provide us with both authorised and alternative approaches to disentangling the knot of venturesome ambitions and rational projects which unmistakably linked Great Britain and Latin America in the nineteenth century. Around the mid-twentieth century that intricate connection started to be described as an informal empire. The complex discussion ensuing from the use of such an umbrella phrase constitutes the firm and rigorous core of *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*.

The title, belonging in a new series recently launched by the *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (BLAR) and following from the conference on informal empire held at the University of Bristol, UK, in January 2007, invites readers to explore the issue through interdisciplinary paths which take them from the study of the real presence of British capital in the Argentine Pampas to the secret representational desires of a masculine Britain over a virginal feminised Brazil, from the awe-inspiring experience of Patagonia to the abandonment of any possibility of empire in Colombia whatsoever. Thus Matthew Brown, the highly accomplished editor of the book, and a cadre of renowned British

and American professors embark on a voyage of rediscovery and redefinition not of Latin America or of the British Empire per se but of the veiled, perhaps even imaginary, details of the twisted relationship between both and of the reasons for the absence of the former in the historiographies of the latter. In other words, they skilfully weave unofficial records and concealed representations in order to produce the fabrics of a fairer description of the roles than culture, commerce, and capital played in the complex bond under scrutiny than the ones already available.

Initiated by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson (1953), the discussion on informal empire, brilliantly conceptualised and succinctly historicised by Brown in the introduction to the volume, acts as the compass that guides readers along the journey of British and Latin American liaisons from the beginning of the Independence Wars around 1810 into the mid-twentieth century. Informal empire, though, is not an uncontested definition. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) argued for the weakness of the concept and suggested that even colonialism was a better term to define the situation of Latin America in the period under scrutiny. Later on, Ann Laura Stoler (2006) sparked renewed interest in informal empire by overtly declaring that it was just another euphemism for blunt imperialism.

The book sets out to explore the differing versions of informal empire as applied in Latin America and to assess the ways in which the already problematic concepts of culture, commerce and capital coalesced to shape the British influence in the region. In response to the convergent thematic interests of British Imperial History and Latin American Studies and drawing on their dissimilar historiographies, this is subsequently carried out on a comparative and interdisciplinary basis and with the aim of 'reformulating "informal empire" with a cultural bent and a postcolonial eye whilst keeping it anchored in its political economy roots' (20). Thus *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital* casts off to search for new illuminating havens for the mutual desires and representations of both the British and the Latin American, in Brown's words, well established 'on the ground and in the mind' (21).

Contrary to what may be expected from a glance at the illustration on the cover of the book, a photomontage exploring the convergence of the aboriginal, the black and the British in and around the Caribbean, five out of ten chapters of the work under analysis in fact address the presence of the British in Argentina, further down in the Southern Cone. For the somewhat static system of categories of empire suggested by Alan Knight (23-48), that presence and the long presence of the British in Argentina is explained only by 'the pursuit of profit through plunder' (33), that is, by Britain's interest in 'gold,' the third G in the list encompassing the intentions which drive human beings to empires: God, glory, gold, and geopolitics. In this context, however, informal empire may not be the best analytical tool to elucidate Anglo-Argentine relationships. For Knight, even though the asymmetry of power between the two nations was evident, there existed a 'perceived mutual self interest' (44) which made the collaboration with the metropolis by the local liberals largely consensual and utterly rational.

In a similar vein and after a carefully detailed review of the developments of the historiography of informal empire, David Rock

concludes that informal empire 'remains an ambiguous and elusive category' (76) when applied to the Argentine case, mostly due to the fact that it was only British capital and commerce that comprised empire there. Nevertheless, Rock pursues an extensive, stimulating, and highly valuable postcolonial analysis of the cultural relationships between the British and the Argentines only to find strong evidence that there might have been 'British imperialist aspirations in Argentina rather than a consummated imperialist hegemony' (76), a point very much like the only made by Karen Racine in her appropriate and modest examination of the early interests and procedures of the Foreign Bible Society in Latin America between 1805 and 1830 (78-98). Whereas for Rock the French and the Italians culturally allured the Argentines in far more powerful ways than the British did, for Colin M. Lewis and Fernanda Peñaloza the latter did have a strong social and cultural influence first in the formation of the South American nation and then in its modernising policies and its cosmopolitan aspirations.

Lewis (99-123) articulates a decidedly cogent account of the not only commercial but also cultural 'Anglo-criollo' juncture around railways in Argentina. His pertinent rethinking of the role of the railway companies reveals that there was 'considerable agency on the part of national interests' (120) and that those intentions were attempted to be realised not only by the rich landowners but also by the state and the people as well. Furthermore, the Argentines and their state, according to Peñaloza's rich intertextual exploration (149-186), can be posited to have framed their plan for political and economic expansion in Patagonia based on the travel experiences of prominent Englishmen and their literary representation of the 'unattainable' Argentine landscape usually founded on the aesthetic sublime. Thus Anglo-Argentine relationships cannot be reduced to capital and commerce as is initially suggested. The Argentine social and cultural appropriation of the British railways and of British representations may weaken the hypothesis of informal empire but adds to the establishment of a whole new space for analysis of

imperialistic intentions and tangential contestations.

Ordinary Argentines usually tend to explain their supposedly anti-British feelings by recourse to the rather formulaic reasoning that, in most of the historical events in which they have come together, the British and the Argentine have had to face each other in noticeably antagonistic terms. This appears to be the stance also adopted by Charles Jones in his study of the opposing roles played by the Britishman Robert Thurburn and the Argentinean Vicente Fidel López on the stage of the River Plate by the end of the nineteenth century (124-148). Profuse in historical and biographical detail, the highly stylised description of the divergent ambitions funnelling their actions, however, is far from simplistic, as it dives deeply into the personal interstices of Anglo-Argentine ties. Moreover, Jones even 'regrets' (144) having discarded the possibility of informal empire in his earlier work, a brave move which places him in a position paradoxically conflicting with those of most of the other authors in the volume.

Far from secure binarisms, safely founded on postcolonial and subaltern studies and along trends akin those already settled by Jones and Peñaloza, Jennifer L. French (187-207) plunges into Benito Lynch's *El Inglés de los Güesos* (1924), and offers an innovative reading of the tragic romance not as an allegory for informal empire, but as an 'allegory for thinking about informal empire' (197). Here, the novel is used to show the ways in which Lynch chooses to linguistically and visually destabilise the metropolitan traveller by the incorporation and empowerment of the local voice and the local gaze, which in turn, French proposes, can also be achieved by our experiences of disruptive reading. Literature, then, can be our teacher, but, 'metropolitan sources cannot be the only or the final word on the subject' (207). We, as readers, have the possibility of not falling into the snares of binary opposites, and, like Caliban in the Shakespearean play, steal the books and run off the island.

Then the compass takes us to the North, though never reaching Central America,

Mexico, or the Caribbean. Colombia, the nation invoked in the cover of the book, and Brazil, the country with which Britain set trade and investment bonds not unlike those it established with Argentina, are the other two cases considered in the volume. The former is put forward as an instance in which the British lack of interest and the Colombian lack of significance, both seen mainly in terms of commerce and capital, grew into an absence of informal empire in that Latin American territory. Thus, in a brief essay laden with lengthy quotes from historical sources, Malcolm Deas (173-186) destroys any hypothesis of the Colombian example being one in which the weapons of the weak triumphed over imperialistic advances, as he removes agency from both the British and the Colombians due to their mutual lack of intent.

The opposite seems to be the case with Brazil. Brazil has always had a perturbing influence in British desire and imagination, but what has commonly been emphasised is the active role of the British 'males' over the passive, virginal, 'female' Brazilian, and, by extension, the Latin American realm. This Louise Guenther deems rather restricted, and so she goes on to offer a brilliant playfully deconstructive counter-reading not only of the metaphorically sexualised 'bed' of the market (211) but also of hilarious cultural products like a Brazilian version of an old but still virginal Sherlock Holmes, in both of which the artful seductions of the locals have a powerful position in the overall framework of the Anglo-Brazilian relationship (208-228). But that role, Guenther convincingly argues, has usually been translated by the metropolis into cultural stereotypes that strengthen the initial sense of difference and ironically displace the taboo regions of sex and desire into an external feminised other. This distorted ambiguous version is what eventually becomes one of the most potent motivating factors in the actual enactment of informal empire.

The majority of the scholars contributing to *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital* are therefore reluctant to confirm the possibility that informal empire was actually enacted by Great Britain upon Latin

America in the nineteenth century. As Andrew Thompson remarks in his firm final exploration, most of them show a tendency 'to construct informal empire as a *category* (analytically distinct from the formal empire) rather than as a *continuum* (along which regions of both formal and informal rule can be positioned...)' (231), which may also explain the very noticeable drive in most of the essays to either justify or deny the covert agenda of informal empire in Latin America. Read as whole, though, the volume offers a remarkable search for informal empire as a useful interdisciplinary working hypothesis. As such, it works at its best when the roles played by the presence of British capital in Latin America (especially Argentina) are emphasised, and it shows a proclivity to weaken when the cultural and social aspects of Anglo-Latin American relationships are studied. In explanations taking into account the latter issues, the local peoples of the Americas occasionally retain their agency and sometimes share the helm with the British in the voyage of mutual liaisons.

However, in many of the articles these peoples are generally regarded as classes such as the *estancieros* in the text by Rock, and, even when they are examined as subjects, they are usually taken as metonyms for the classes for which they stand. As Peñaloza seriously observes, little is said in the book about 'those groups who did not benefit from the elites' partnership. How do such groups fit within these seemingly balanced dynamics of power?' (151). An answer to this question would entail further exploration, Thompson suggests, into 'the ways in which class relations have been embedded in capitalist structures' (236). Seldom are other regions of Latin America surveyed in which empire seems to have vehemently worked in the nineteenth century. Though such cases have generally involved disputes over actual territory more than over the less tangible matters of capital and commerce, they are worth considering as well. Think, for example, of the *Zona de Reclamación* ascertained by the Venezuelans or the Argentine sovereignty claim over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, both of which took shape around the 1850s. Though of relatively minor relevance, these cases may direct our gaze towards the improvement of our knowledge about the British

who actually settled in the Americas and of the factual relationships they established with the peoples and the places as subjects and agents of their own histories, a proposal also encouraged by Thompson. It may also have helped to have broadened the scope of the book which, for the most part, focuses on Argentina, and for which, therefore, the intention of the title of rethinking informal empire in *Latin America* appears to some extent unattainable.

Furthermore, the propensity to cast off informal empire as a pertinent description of the British presence in Latin America seems to work together with the inclination of some authors to advance the idea that the hypothesis does work to describe US interests in Latin America in the twentieth century. Both Knight and Deas, for instance, finish their papers suggesting such a possibility. This, on the one hand, may be read as persistence in shedding the British from any genuine intent in enacting empire on the Latin American stage. On the other hand, if Latin America has always existed in the shadows of several empires, it would also be worth analysing the ways in which, perhaps not only through capital and commerce, Britain has often had a strong hold on the region even in the twentieth century. Consider, for example, the potent presence of British English Language Teaching (ELT) in Argentina and Brazil, the significant growth of British capital in the circum-Caribbean region, even in embargoed Cuba, or the privileged diplomatic relationships of Great Britain and, say, Chile. In order to avoid unintentionally excusing the powerful from the definite enterprises they embark upon and of involuntarily excluding issues which really cry out to be considered, in times of a growing Knowledge society, the voice of Latin American specialists – noticeably underrepresented in *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital* – should also be fostered so that the metropolitan sources do not become the only or the final word on informal empire and so that we do not run the risk of potentially promoting a new concealed type of informal empire.

Enrique Alejandro Basabe

Notes

1 Enrique Alejandro Basabe, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA, and National University of La Pampa, Argentina.

References

- Gallagher, John and Robinson, Ronald with Denny, Alice, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' in *Economic History Review* (Glasgow) 6:1 (1953), pp. 1-15.
- Pratt, Mary Louise, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- Stoler, Ann Laura, 'On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty' in *Public Culture* (Durham, NC, USA) 18:1 (2006), pp. 125-146.

Author's Reply

I am very grateful to Enrique Alejandro Basabe for such a thorough, balanced and kind review. His article contains many astute and stimulating observations on the wider research agenda of which the book forms part. I agree wholeheartedly that scholarly precision about exactly which type of actions could have constituted imperialism can often degenerate into terminological naval-gazing. I hope that the book avoids this – though a certain degree of historiographical contextualisation was inevitable – in its attempt to uncover and explain the effects of the foreign presence in Latin America in the (very) long nineteenth-century. Basabe observes that the agency of subaltern groups and individuals can sometimes be neglected in the historical chapters that attempt grand analyses. It should be clear from both my Introduction and Andrew Thompson's Afterword that the future research project that we advocate puts this question at the heart of its analysis.

The book does tilt rather towards Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, as the reviewer observes. As I explain in the Introduction, this was a conscious editorial decision aimed at providing a degree of coherence for a selection of chapters that, as Basabe correctly notes, take very diverse methodological approaches, and often disagree quite sharply on matters of interpretation. Cuba and Mexico, for example, were both discussed at some length at the original conference. I am planning a follow-up conference and volume which will widen the analysis to the regions omitted from *Informal Empire* in Latin America, and onwards into the twentieth century, while maintaining the broad inter-disciplinary approach which I think is one of the book's main strengths.

At the end of the review, Basabe observes that 'the voice of Latin American specialists [is] noticeably underrepresented'. I understand this to mean that there should be more chapters by scholars born in or working in Latin America. There were many such individuals at the Bristol conference who presented excellent papers and who contributed fully to the discussions and dialogues which shaped the published chapters. The choice to include papers in the published volume was taken on editorial grounds in which methodological diversity and thematic coherence were privileged, rather than the origins or affiliations of the authors. The suggestion that such decisions 'run the risk of potentially promoting a new concealed type of informal empire' is interesting and provocative. I make a similar point myself in the Introduction (p.4).

One aspect of the book that Basabe does not mention but which seems relevant to bring up in this forum is the stark absence of the Irish as an analytical category, or even as a group worthy of special mention, throughout *Informal Empire* in Latin America. Though I was aware of this as I edited the book in 2007, the importance of the Irish in the informal empire has become especially clear to me through my current research project on the Battle of El Santuario, which I hope to publish within the next eighteen months. Once again I gratefully acknowledge the SILAS grant which allowed me to

travel to El Santuario in 2007. Was it just a coincidence that so many of the principal figures of British informal empire in Latin America in the nineteenth century were of Irish origin? This is another area where the study of British imperialism in Latin America lags far behind work on, say, Australia or Southern Africa, where scholars have worked to fragment the supposedly homogenous 'British' into the multiple and often internally conflictive national and regional groups serving the empire. In the next stage of this collaborative research project I hope that we will be able to fully bring out the extent to which 'British informal empire' was an umbrella under which many different peoples from across the globe sought opportunities in Latin America, be they Irish, Cornish, German, Indian or Chinese, and to analyse and explain their many as yet untold encounters with the full spectrum of social groups across the region.

Matthew Brown - Asturias 30 April 2009