The British Empire and World History: Some Connective Thoughts

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The current political climate invites us, maybe more than previously, to reflect on the past, present and possible future of Britain as the country seems to be reinventing its connections with the world. Though the outcome must be uncertain, it is worth contemplating how such connections manifested themselves in the past, how they shaped the country and how the country happened to shape the world. To bring home aspects of the global order of things, one can, for example, look at language. While it is incontestable that English is and will remain the *lingua franca* of international relations across Brussels *couloirs*, as well as across the EU and the whole European continent, the only country where it is officially spoken as a first language within the EU will soon withdraw from it.[1] Yet, Britain will not be able to take its language with it, even if it wanted to.[2] This is what I mean by the global order of things.

Now how does this translate into assessing how relevant this order is within the field of World History[3] and what is its relevance for trying to make more sense of what the British Empire was and what a globalised Britain might stand for now? For starters, I will argue that the term 'British Empire' is too narrow to comprehend the globality of the concept, at least in its traditional understanding. The terminological issue has been addressed by a number of scholars in the past, and remedied to an extent through the post-imperial advent of the term 'British World' and others, although the concept has self-imposed limitations, as will be discussed.[4] It should also be noted that the tendency in the UK higher education system has been to develop a more expansive nomenclature, as exemplified by the renaming of the MA in 'Imperial and Commonwealth History' to the MA in 'World History and Cultures' at my own university. In the same vein, the undergraduate module that I currently teach neatly

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[1] In Ireland, both languages, English and Irish, have official status, but Irish is the national and first official language according to the constitution. Thus, Irish is registered as the official language for the Republic of Ireland for administrative purposes within the European Union. There has been a debate recently, also to do with Brexit, to make the most widely spoken English in its 'Hiberno-English' variant the Republic's first language. With regard to Malta, where English is widely spoken and has co-official status, Maltese is registered with the EU.

[2] See, for example, an article from the *Financial Times* from 29 June 2016, thus post-Brexit, entitled 'The EU will still speak English but in its own way', source: https://www.ft.com/content/9c896238-3a0e-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7, accessed 25 January 2017.

[3] The capitals are meant to emphasise its status as a discipline rather than meaning the whole world's history.

[4] Carl Bridge, Philip Buckner and Kent Fedorowich coined the term 'British World' historiographically, see subsequent citations. The 'British World-System' is John Darwin's term in his *The Empire Project: the Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge, 2009), while James Belich coined 'Anglo-world' in his *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939* (Oxford, 2009).

combines the terminology in its title 'The Worlds of the British Empire'. The need for brevity precludes an exhaustive analysis of the most recent historiography of World History or the history of the British Empire, but my aim here rather is to offer some thoughts, through the use of my teaching experience and of the literature and ideas that the intellectual marketplace presents us, on what both concepts might offer and how they might be mutually beneficial. Thus, there can indeed be a significant overlap between what is currently being studied within the history of the British Empire and what 'modern' World History claims as its scope. My point is that a deeper and better understanding of the different facets of the British Empire is valuable for an understanding of history through the lens of World History. Furthermore, the analytical framework of the British Empire is particularly well suited to assess a range of developments that can be best understood from a transnational or global perspective.

As a point of departure, it is worth looking at what the British Empire was (or maybe still is) for the purpose of the present essay and argument. Cartographically speaking, one could point to a world map from the 1920s, the decade of the Empire's greatest expansion, and explain that it was indeed global in its scope, covering (in military red or sometimes a less threatening pink) territories in every continent of the world. Recognising that the red has now been reduced to sometimes unrecognisable sprinkles, the question remains how the imperial map of the past translates into legacies and motifs within the current global order [5]. Looking further back in time, it is easy to see that the red on the map was never static and underwent different incarnations over time. The most significant event of change in these earlier years of Empire, both cartographical and political, was the transition from what is referred to as the 'first' British Empire, which included the North American colonies, to a 'second' British Empire, being much more Asia-Pacific centred after experiencing a 'swing to the east'.[6] But beyond looking at the expansions and contractions of the Empire over time, historians have developed their analytical framework and shifted studies of the British Empire towards a more global, connected, multipolar and universal understanding, akin to modern World History's 'focused attention on comparisons, connections, networks and systems rather than the experiences of individual communities or discrete societies.'[7]

An early shifting of the scholarly goalposts occurred through the work of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson in their article on 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' in 1953.[8] In it, they complained that 'almost all imperial history has been written on the assumption that the empire of formal dominion is historically comprehensible in itself and can be cut out of its context in British expansion and world politics', which they thought was 'like judging the size and character of icebergs solely from the parts above the water-line.'[9] Offering an economic interpretation of events through their concept of 'informal empire', achieved through the imposition of free trade rules, backed up by force or the threat thereof where necessary, they maintained that their hypothesis was more fitting than previous ones to explain the fundamental continuity in British expansion throughout the 19th century, both formal and

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[5] See the dated but useful Geoffrey Bolton, *Britain's Legacy Overseas* (Oxford, 1973).

[6] For a very brief overview of these different concepts, see: Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire: A Very Short Introduction (*Oxford, 2013), p. 72.

[7] Jerry H. Bentley, 'The Task of World History', in: Jerry H. Bentley (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford, 2011), p.2.

[8] John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 6, No.1 (1953).

[9] Ibid., p.1.

informal. This, in turn, facilitated and enhanced the 'exports of capital and manufactures, the migration of citizens, the dissemination of the English language, ideas and constitutional forms', which they described as 'radiations of the social energies of the British people'.[10] In essence, theirs was an attempt to explain the mechanics of the impact that Britain had beyond its formal empire, therefore making their work relevant not only from a British (imperial) point of view, but also highly pertinent with regard to a world historical reading of events. Connecting the largest economy and sea power of the 19th century to the places it was doing business with allowed for an analytical framework which turned out to offer an interpretation covering many different parts of the world and which went well beyond their economic remit.

In later decades, Patrick O'Brien and David Fieldhouse as well as Peter Cain and A.G. Hopkins, asked further questions about the Empire and its economic workings.[11] Without going into great detail about their theses, it can be said that while their work was drawing on how Britain was trading with its empire or even the rest of the world, the analytical framework remained both Anglocentric and domestic, stressing the financial and economic machinations within Britain rather than focussing on its connections with the outside world. Despite their limitations, those economic interpretations of empire nevertheless led on to an important question and widening of the discourse, namely whether Britain's globalisation, which left behind many traces in the field we now call World History, was merely an economic option, a choice among other possibilities, which perforce spread English language, the English law and British culture around the world, or whether there was another dynamic at work.

Moreover, there was the question of what to make of the somewhat one-dimensional distinction between domestic Britain and its empire, and the concurrent divorce after the 1960s between the two both in historiography and in popular culture. This is well reflected in the 1990s BBC Radio 4 series entitled 'This Sceptred Isle', which was broadcast as two 'domestic' series, one on Britain from 55BC to 1901 and the other dealing with the twentieth century, including decolonisation, while the 'Empire' series, produced a decade later, dealt with the time period from 1155 to 1947, with Ireland in the twelfth century as the first 'imperial', non-British venture. While Britain was divorced from its empire, it was also often assumed that the empire that had existed was a one-directional affair. Both those notions were rightly challenged, but only after the country had essentially divested itself of its colonies, or was made to do so, by the early 1980s.[12]

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[10] Ibid., p.5. The Oxford course they taught, borrowing from J.R. Seeley, was called 'The Expansion of England'.
[11] Cain and Hopkins's work on 'gentlemanly capitalism' asserted that British imperialism was driven by the business interests of the City of London and landed interests, while O'Brien analysed whether the Empire was really 'worth' it in his article entitled 'The Costs and Benefits of British Imperialism 1846-1914'. For Cain and Hopkins, see: 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I. The Old Colonial System, 1688-1850', *Economic History Review*, Vol.39, No.4 (Nov.1986) and 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850-1945', *Economic History Review*, Vol.40, No.1 (Feb.1987). For O'Brien, see: *Past & Present*, No. 120 (Aug., 1988), pp. 163-200. For Fieldhouse, see his chapter 'The Metropolitan Economics of Empire' in: Judith Brown, Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. IV, *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2001).
[12] The last wave of decolonisation occurred in the early 1980s: Southern Rhodesia, Britain's last African colony, became the independent nation of Zimbabwe in 1980. The New Hebrides also achieved independence (as Vanuatu) in 1980, with Belize following suit in 1981. Brunei, Britain's last remaining Asian protectorate, gained its independence in 1984, while Hong Kong, a chronological outlier, was only returned to China in 1997, although this deal was reached in 1984.

One challenge dealt with the notion that the Empire was a one-directional feature that actively 'spread' language, culture and law from metropole to periphery. The concept of a metropole-periphery dichotomy was suggested by David Fieldhouse in order to compartmentalise the imperial relationship into a political and cultural centre on one end and a colonised space into which the centre emanated on the other.[13] While the concept was considered a useful intellectual and rhetoric tool, scholars argued that it failed to comprehend the multiplicity of cores and metropoles that came to exist in the British Empire.[14] The point is of universal value, that colonial relationships are not simply one-directional; there is a dynamic between both sides, which makes the metropole-periphery model problematic. Cities such as Sydney, Calcutta, Singapore, Melbourne, Johannesburg, and Toronto had long fed back into the imperial core, or themselves constituted their own regional metropoles, whether through business, finance, labour, culture or on other levels. Sarah Stockwell commented in 2008 that the '[l]iterature concerning imperialism and colonialism has increasingly spun off into distinct historiographies no longer arranged around an imperial centre, but instead characterised through reference to more inclusive and decentralised 'worlds'.[15] The discussion how connections work in two or more directions is thus another example how advances within British imperial scholarship have proved useful to assess developments of a universal character and global scope. These thoughts could indeed be used not only when comparing the British Empire with others, but to assess power relationships in any complex societal structure, from federal states to transnational political unions.

What was more, and drawing on this idea, those same scholars, Carl Bridge, Kent Fedorowich and Phillip Buckner, also came to (re)frame a theme in the Empire's historiography as the 'British World'. This approach, problematising previous, and often racially-charged concepts of a greater and imperial Britain, which reaches back to the 19th century, maintained that the 'neo-Britains'[16] of white settlement had been neglected within the analytical framework of Empire post-World War II and through the decolonisation period, as new, non-white themes of Empire were discovered and developed, alongside a heightened focus on the 'informal empire'.[17] While acknowledging that this was a 'necessary corrective', the claim was made that this came at the price of overlooking what was obvious, which was the continuous cultural connections between the neo-Britains, including North America, which, it was claimed, was actually instrumental in coining the entire concept of 'Britain', because the

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[13] David Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire 1830–1914* (London, 1974).

[14] Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, 'Mapping the British World', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2003), pp. 1-15.

[15] Sarah Stockwell (ed.), *The British Empire. Themes and Perspectives* (Malden, MA, 2008), p.xi.

[16] For an early conceptual framework, see: J.G.A. Pocock, 'British History, A Plea for a New Subject', *New Zealand Journal of History,* vol.8, no.1 (1974), pp.3-21; for the terminology itself, see Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005) and, for an earlier use, James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland, 1996)

[17] Phillip Buckner and Carl Bridge, 'Reinventing the British world', *Round Table*, Vol. 92, No. 368 (2003), pp. 77-88, here: p.78; Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, 'Mapping the British World', in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31:2 (2003), pp. 1-15; for the traditional Greater Britain discourse, see: Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain: a record of travel in English-speaking countries during 1866 and 1867* (London, 1869) and James Seeley, *The Expansion of England : two courses of lectures* (London, 1883).

initial Thirteen Colonies had been in need of a 'more serviceable term' than 'England' and 'English'.[18]

What is particularly striking about their work in the context of a 'world' history are their thoughts and ideas with regard to the concept of 'Britain' and 'Britishness'. It is thus explained that Britishness 'was an ideal that could also be embraced by those who were not of British origin but who found the idea of belonging to the Empire and of imperial citizenship appealing.'[19] Referring to French Canadians and Afrikaners, the claim continues that 'some [of them] were more than willing to accept a definition of 'Britishness' as a form of civic nationalism that included the adoption of certain values and institutions defined as 'British' but did not entail abandoning their own language, religion or separate cultural identity.' By invoking a 'civic nationalism', the grasp is essentially how the concept of 'Britishness' allowed and accommodated participation in the body politic without one's roots within the British Isles. Arguably this concept became sufficiently universal as a values-based patriotism with time for any outsider to buy into by choice, be it from the white settler colonies, from the rest of the Empire, or even from outside it (practitioners of 'civic Britishness' included, at various times, Gandhi, Kenyatta and Mandela). In this context, the 'invention' of Britain as an overarching umbrella of communality can even be interpreted as a tremendously progressive and inclusive national and even post-national community of belonging, reconciling the attachment to a geographic space in the British Isles with a values-based mind-set believed to be universally workable.[20]

A benevolent and outward-looking interpretation of 'Britishness' can thus indeed be understood as defining a 'citizen of the world', as many Britons and neo-Britons would indeed see themselves, although it has to be admitted that the opposite to this view, the perception of 'British' as a concept of 'blood' relation with the Anglo-Saxon 'race' still holds strong currency, especially in current times of a perceived growing national tribalism.[21] (It should be noted that the identification as 'British' by those living in the ex-Dominions was diminishing after the Second World War and has essentially ended today, at least as a national identity.) By contrast, the study of an emerging British pan- or transnationalism offers a window to present-day debates of identity and national belonging in a globalised and globalising world.

As far as the congruence, overlap or possible contradictions between the two fields of study or even sub-disciplines, 'British Imperial History' and 'World History', are concerned, it is worth keeping in mind how both strive to look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state while having a different disciplinary gestation background. While modern 'World History' has emerged since the mid-twentieth century as a distinctive approach in professional historical scholarship, focusing attention on comparisons, connections, networks and systems

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[18] This argument was made based on Nicholas Canny, 'The origins of Empire: an introduction' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol 1 (Oxford, 1998), pp.24-25.

[19] Buckner and Bridge, 'Reinventing the British world', p.80.

[20] Earlier civic imperiums are found in the Roman and Chinese empires, among others.

[21] I would like to draw attention here to the ambiguous and much criticised speech the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, gave last year, in which she claimed that 'if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere', while maintaining inclusive Britishness 'where everyone plays by the same rules and where every single person - regardless of their background, or that of their parents - is given the chance to be all they want to be.' For the full speech, see: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/, retrieved 1 March 2017.

rather than the experiences of individual communities or discrete societies, the renaissance of scholarship regarding the history of the British Empire has been about reintegrating the history of Britain's domestic history, confined to the small spaces that the island represents, to its overseas history (and consequently the national histories of each of the old empire's other nation states), which has been accompanied by a growing interest in the processes of globalisation.[22] This, in turn, encouraged scholars to return to the history of British imperialism in search for the historical roots of globalisation, or 'to write "imperial history" as a form of global history', as Sarah Stockwell maintains.

Akira Iriye concluded as far back as 1989 that we were seeking to 'internationalize history', but that 'it would be unfortunate if our work merely nationalized it in the sense of stressing the uniqueness of each country's historical development.'[23] Transferring this thought to the imperial level, one could equally conclude that, when working on the history of the British Empire and drawing on the convenience and opportunities this work offers, either though the linguistic ease of research, the logistical benefits of having a great body of material to work from in Britain and London, in particular, it would be equally unfortunate if this work merely 'imperialised' history in the sense of stressing the uniqueness of the British Empire's development.

Iriye continues 'Sometimes, it may be necessary to try to denationalize history in order to internationalize it, that is, to find themes and responses common to a plurality of nations rather than those limited to specific subcategories of humanity.' In that sense, it might be worth contemplating using the British Empire not so much as an object of historical analysis but rather as a tool for it. Developments that occurred within the framework of the British Empire could thus be considered unique in the sense that particular sequences of events are always unique at a given time in a given space, but equally general and universal insofar as they allow parallels to be drawn towards other, non-British, globalising developments. At a comparative level, interesting results could then be achieved by the juxtaposition of particular developments or concepts having occurred within particular empires, such as land-based empires like the Russian/Soviet Union or the United States versus maritime ones such as Britain's, or by applying categories such as free trade versus protectionism/state interventionism, liberalism versus totalitarianism or cultural/ethnic homogeneity versus heterogeneity at an imperial and trans-imperial level. World historian Jerry Bentley recognised the problem, stating that although 'enormous change to the theory and practice of professional historical scholarship [has occurred], with historians broadening the thematic scope of historical analysis, […] their de facto attachment to national communities and nation-states persists to the present day.'[24]

In this context, studying the British Empire could indeed be considered either as a remedy or part of the problem. It is a remedy insofar as looking beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state and opening the frame of analysis into the Empire, which, particularly if understood in the 'informal' sense as mentioned above, allows a global setting. It can be

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[22] Jerry H. Bentley, 'The Task of World History', in: Jerry H. Bentley (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford, 2011), p.2 ; Sarah Stockwell (ed.): The British Empire. *Themes and Perspectives* (Malden, MA, 2008), preface, p.xi.

[23] Akira Iriye, 'The Internationalisation of History', *American Historical Review* 94, no.1 (1989), pp.1-10, here: p.4.

[24] Bentley, 'The Task of World History', pp.8-9.

considered as part of the problem, however, if the point of departure is a single nation-state, Britain, located in Europe, exposing the framework of analysis to Eurocentric and/or, even more specifically, Anglocentric ideologies. Bentley formulates the problem at hand as follows: 'It is not so clear that historians should permit nation-based political organisation to obscure the significance and roles of the many alternative ways human beings have expressed their solidarity with others by forming communities based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, language, religion, ideology, caste, occupation, economic interest, status, taste, or many other conceivable foundations.'[25]

Referring to those communities, for instance, historians of childhood and youth have emerged over the years within the scholarship of the British Empire, who have indeed applied the lens of a very universal communality, such as gender, race and age. Fiona Paisley, for example, established connections between age, race and the Empire by claiming in a book chapter in 2004 that 'recent scholarship on gender and empire has shown that histories of childhood have been closely interconnected within imperial and colonial race politics.'[26] More recently, Shirley Robinson's and Simon Sleight's *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* expands on 'understandings of the British world by considering the position within this global network of young subjects in the making', while contributing 'to the history of childhood, which in turn reveals much about broader social attitudes, institutions and transformations.'[27] The result is the 'first detailed history of the place of children and young people within the largest imperial system the world has known.'[28] In another recent work, David Pomfret moves the lens beyond the convention of the British Empire in his comparative *Youth and Empire: Trans-Colonial Childhoods in British and French Asia,* in which he examines the emergence of children and childhood as a central historical force in the global history of empire by weaving local stories with the globality of the French and British colonial empires.[29]

Reflecting on how the British Empire made an impact back home on various societal levels including gender, race, feminism and religion, Catherine Hall's and Sonya Rose's authoritative *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* has set out to deal with no less than the question of the 'impact of the British Empire on the metropole between the late eighteenth century and the present.'[30] While they admit that it 'is British history which is our object of study', they also claim that 'British history […] has to be transnational, recognising the ways in which our history has been one of connections across the globe, albeit in the context of unequal relations of power', thereby recognising the tension between a national or domestic history and an imperial, transnational, and even global history of Britain.[31] According to them, the solution would be for 'Historians of Britain […]

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[25] Bentley, 'The Task of World History', p.9.

[26] Fiona Paisley 'Childhood and Race: Growing up in the Empire', in: Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 240-59, here: p.240.

[27] Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight (eds), *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp.1-2.

[28] Ibid, p.2.

[29] David M. Pomfret, *Youth and Empire: Trans-Colonial Childhoods in British and French Asia* (Stanford, 2016). Also note another example in media history when Simon Potter has moved seamlessly from *News and the British World* (Oxford, 2003) to *Broadcasting Empire* (Oxford, 2012) to his current work on the global history of radio.

[30] Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (eds), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006), p.1.

[31] Ibid, p.5.

to open up national history and imperial history, challenging that binary and critically scrutinising the ways in which it has functioned as a way of normalising power relations and erasing our dependence on and exploitation of others.' One might, however, detect a methodological Anglocentrism even here and prescribe reversion to a multi-metropolitan analytical framework.

Thus, to analyse the British Empire on the basic assumption of its having been a medium through which relationships were established across a number of layers, political, cultural, gender, racial, and more, gives it a powerful, universal and global remit which allows it to speak both to insiders and outsiders. Allowing for the analysis to centre on the colonised and colony not only as spaces of imperial projection, but as agents of their own destinies within the imperial framework, facilitates the questioning of Eurocentricity, which is in tune with World History's approach, where 'historians have worked particularly hard to escape the Eurocentrism of so much historical scholarship.'[32] While it is not necessarily the main task of British imperial scholarship to escape Eurocentrism at all junctures, as one of its principal hinges remains Britain, it is only through a non-Anglocentric approach that the dynamic of the colonial or indeed diasporic dominion relationship can be fully understood. It is also through this approach that it can be appreciated how Britain was as much a projector as a projection space for its global empire.

In the end, it seems clear that the study of the British Empire has come a long way in accommodating the intellectual challenges that the Empire and its globality generated and has much to offer in both asking relevant questions and finding relevant answers (and Brexit will be a minor eddy in this pool). The relationship between World History and the history of the British Empire must be one of gradual tones, as many world historians will have at least dealt with the British Empire at some level because of its global reach, whereas most scholars of the history of the British Empire would find it difficult not to recognise world historical aspects in their work. Thus, the discourse on how the two sub-disciplines will travel together further and continue to cross paths will not and should not cease.

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[32] David Christian, 'Introduction and Overview', p.2, in: David Christian (ed.), *The Cambridge World History,* Vol.I*, Introducing World History, to 10,000 BCE* (Cambridge, 2015).