Introduction

International Relations (IR) sports a variety of foundation myths, among them a defeated Athenian general of the 5th century B.C., a brace of early modern philosophers, and the first Chair of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1919 (cf. Schmidt 1998). Central to any of these legends are matters of war and peace, whether the decades-long contest between Athens and Sparta, the problem of legitimate order amid civil war in Hobbes’ England, the survival and flourishing of the principality in the treacherous world of Machiavelli’s Italy, or the great conflagration of the First World War. On any retelling, security relations are at the heart of the discipline. Yet there is a curious limitation in the way security is constructed in the foundation myths, as essentially a problem between the great powers of the day. In disciplinary argot, what is founded is the still predominant ‘states under anarchy’ approach (cf. Nexon and Wright 2007). How states manage or resolve the ever present possibility of war among ‘like units’ with ‘no common power’ is amenable to realist, liberal and constructivist analyses, and as such is the site of defining debates in security studies and IR (Waltz 1979; Wendt 1992). The wars that really matter on scales of destruction and significance are those between great powers.

Another kind of security problematic was evident at each moment of putative foundation, that between the weak and the strong, or the conquered and their foreign rulers. Athens was a maritime empire, and its struggle to control subordinate cities central to any account not only of the Peloponnesian War but of what Athens was as a political entity. The Melian dialogue arose precisely in this context of imperial hierarchy, as Athens sought to check Melian brigandage and demonstrate to subject cities the costs of resistance (Garst 1989, 15). In IR
Hobbes provides a philosophic basis for the sovereign state, the basic entity of the international system. Overlooked is an essential feature of the political and historical terrain Hobbes confronted, that of Norman conquest and colonization, which had shaped the history of the British Isles since 1066. Hobbes faced in *Leviathan* the problem of legitimating a monarchy established by foreigners (1996[1656]). The world wars are remembered and theorized primarily as European-centered great power contests, generating debates about the relative efficacy of the balance of power or international institutions in keeping peace among the powerful (Mitrany 1966[1943]; Morgenthau 1978). Yet they were also inter-imperial wars, struggles for control over other peoples and territories, and moments in the rise, decline and fall of empires (Bayly and Harper 2004). Processes of decolonization after World War II populated the world with many ‘formally alike’ units, symptomatic of the profound interconnections between the world of empires and colonies and that of the post-1945 international system (Spruyt 2005; cf. Kelly and Kaplan 2001). Repeatedly, it would seem, IR was founded amidst empire, but discovered instead only a world of sovereign states and their collective action problems.

As a consequence, security studies and IR lack a coherent and developed body of inquiry on questions of empire (Barkawi and Laffey 2002). There is little in the way of an on-going conversation traversing older and contemporary scholarship on which a review essay conventionally can report. This is an astonishing but also constitutive absence. For many the modern world took shape around the imperial encounter between Europeans and the Americas, Africa and Asia (Bayly 2004; Said 1993; Wolf 1997). From this perspective, a social science of ‘international relations’ that failed to address empire and imperialism, or in significant measure orientate inquiry around hierarchy and domination, is not adequate to the experiences and histories of most of the peoples and places on the planet (cf. Buzan and Little 2000). Alternatively, such a social science is written by and for the powerful (Hoffman
IR and security studies scholars, and their university departments, research centers, think tanks, journals, and publishers, are mostly located in the West, and chiefly in the US, shaping perspectives in manifold ways (cf. Tickner and Waever 2009). Considering the heavy traffic in the US between the academy and think tanks, policy planning staffs, and government, there are power/knowledge problems yet to be fully understood or confronted (Amadae 2003; Gilman 2003; Laffey and Weldes 2008; Oren 2003; Simpson 1998). Unlike anthropology, IR and security studies have not come to terms with their own implication in imperial power and what this might mean for how they understand the world (Asad 1973; Fabian 1983). Postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism in social and political inquiry do not have wide currency in the discipline (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 1986; Slater 2004).

Of course, it is all in how one defines ‘international relations’. The absence of empire and hierarchy is constitutive in that inquiry is oriented around sovereignty and anarchy instead. The central problematic in the discipline is that of a system of independent wills, figured as sovereign states, relating and competing with one another in the absence of higher authority. “None is entitled to command; none is required to obey.” (Waltz 1979, 88) This problematic requires ‘units’ that are ‘formally’ alike, in that they are sovereign entities, even if they differ in their relative power and capabilities. The inattention to hierarchy is principled and systematic, not inadvertent (cf. Lake 2009). A consequence in IR and security studies is that Westphalian terms of reference often occlude and distort imperial relations. One purpose of this essay is to reveal these moments of misidentification and misconception, especially in the form of broad suppositions at work in the literature, and in so doing open new spaces for research.

The central focus of IR situates discussion of imperialism and hierarchy outside the core of the discipline, and on its fringes where scholars from other disciplines engage with IR and
security studies literature. Similarly, in respect of security studies in particular, the focus is mostly on major war between great powers, not ‘small wars’ between the strong and the weak. When ‘small wars’ are considered, as well as other conflicts in the global South, inquiry is all too often informed by sovereign conceptions of the international system, as in many studies of civil war and in the democratic peace literature (Licklider 1995; Ray 1995). In a framing engendered by the idea of the sovereign state, ‘civil war’ in the global south is primarily conceived as an internal phenomenon (e.g. Holsti 1996, 25-26). This is so despite the past and present role of former imperial powers, the activities of international organizations, states and commercial enterprises, as well as the global economic relations which help produce and sustain ‘civil wars’ (Duffield 2001; Gleditsch 2007; Mamdani 2001; Nordstrom 2004; Reno 1998). Alternatively, much literature on ‘counterinsurgency’, ‘counter-terror’ and other conflicts involving Western powers is baldly written from the perspective of ‘how to do it better’, that is, from the point of view of imperial power, a policy science for the powerful (Johnson and Mason 2008; Pape 1996; cf. Al-Qaeda n.d.; Mao 2000 [1937]). Such studies are not generally placed within an overall account of international hierarchy or the long run of imperial conflicts and histories. Yet defeating indigenous armed resistance and determining the conditions under which foreign peoples are governed is the stuff of imperial power. So another task for this essay is to situate existing literature on ‘small wars’, ‘civil wars’, and ‘low intensity conflict’ within a framework of imperialism and international hierarchy, rather than the formal juridical categories of the sovereign state system.

Forgetting empire is often a function of Eurocentrism, of the unreflective assumption of the centrality of Europe and latterly the West in human affairs. In IR this often involves placing the great powers at the center of analysis, as the primary agents in determining the fate of peoples. Too easily occluded here are the myriad international relations of co-
constitution which together shape societies and polities in both the global North and South.

For how else would we be able to address the impact generated by a war in far off Vietnam on the US, and its subsequent role ever since in shaping American society, politics and foreign interventions? Vietnam was neither the first nor last ‘small war’ to have such big consequences, but understanding how and why requires an ‘imperial turn’ in IR (Doty 1996).

The discussion below begins with consideration of the presence and absence of empire and imperialism in IR and security studies, by looking first at some defining moments and then moving on to an overview of the discipline. One upshot is that where inquiry is attentive to force and war, the Eurocentric focus on great powers and sovereign states prevails. In critical work that does attend to hierarchy and empire within and beyond IR, attention focuses on political economy and culture. The political-military dimensions of empire and imperialism do not receive central attention in any discipline. Therefore, the third section below situates existing work on the state and conflict alongside efforts to understand the imperial dimensions of world politics, seeking to reconnect the study of conflict and international order more generally to conceptions of international hierarchy. The final section opens out to consider what IR and security studies might gain by engagement with the study of empire in other disciplinary locations, envisioning a social science of international relations adequate to the imperial hierarchies that have shaped world histories and world politics.

**Defining Moments**

The general disinterest of IR and security studies in empire and imperialism is perhaps best illustrated by the fate of some of Michael Doyle’s publications. In 1986, he published *Empires*, a thoughtful effort to systematize the historiography of empire and imperialism with social science concepts, albeit one that avoided categorizing the US as an empire and with a
relatively narrow focus on empire as political control. It is rarely cited, much less discussed, in disciplinary literature. By contrast, the pair of articles he published in 1983 on Kant and the connection between liberalism and peace revived the democratic peace research program, which became a key pillar of the liberal challenge to realism in the 1990s and is widely debated (Doyle 1983a; 1983b). The democratic peace is rooted conceptually in an international system of sovereign states, defines war in sovereign and formal terms, and can be studied with quantitative methods. Additionally it associates liberal democracy, the form of government in the US, with peace. The democratic peace idea appealed to the theoretic, scientific, and political preferences of many international politics scholars in ways a lone book on empire did not. Doyle incorporated into the articles a discussion of the possibilities for liberal imperialism, liberal motives for intervention, and the baleful consequences of anti-communism in US foreign policy in the Third World and elsewhere, where elected leaders perceived as communist, or insufficiently anti-communist, were covertly overthrown among other fates (1983b). He was sensitive to the fact that three of the leading imperial powers, the US, Holland and the UK, have been liberal in character and so left these openings to international hierarchy and the implication of liberalism in imperialism (Mehta 1999; Pitts 2006). These aspects of Doyle’s original statements were rarely taken up in the subsequent literature, and if so more to dismiss them as challenges to the democratic peace rather than to explore their significance (Barkawi 2001).

The reception of Doyle’s work is indicative of how imperialism can be present but really absent in IR and security studies. Two ‘canonical’ instances of this presence and absence require consideration before turning to an overview of empire and hierarchy in the literature. In Politics Among Nations Morgenthau devotes an entire chapter to imperialism, which he identifies as one of three basic policies states pursue, the other two being status quo and prestige (1978, 53, 58-85). “A nation whose foreign policy aims at acquiring more power
than it actually has, through a reversal of existing power relations . . . pursues a policy of imperialism.” (1978, 53) A state trying to maintain its existing power without seeking to alter the distribution of power in the international system follows a status quo policy. Morgenthau notes explicitly that holding or acquiring colonies does not itself determine whether a state is pursuing an imperialist or a status quo policy. “An objective analysis of the acquisition of the Virgin Islands by the United States might show that it was a part of a policy of the status quo in that region.” (1978, 58) Rather, imperialism applies to a revisionist state seeking to alter the balance of power among the great powers, such as, classically, Nazi Germany. Britain seeking to hold its empire against the Axis powers was not ‘imperialist’ (1978, 59-60). “Not every foreign policy aiming at the preservation of an empire that already exists is imperialism.” (1978, 59) While Morgenthau’s conceptual system is clear, it does not refer to imperialism as normally understood, as for example on Doyle’s definition: “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society.” (1986a, 45) Moreover, while for Morgenthau Britain may not have been pursuing an imperialistic foreign policy after 1870 (1978, 60), the subject peoples of the British empire had a different point of view, as did many Caribbean Islanders and Central and Latin Americans of the US. “In the colonies the truth stood naked, but the citizens of the mother country preferred it with clothes on” (Sartre in Fanon 1967, 7). Morgenthau’s is a particularly stark example of how IR can both deny empire while simultaneously normalizing an imperial perspective on the world: somehow Britain, energetically subordinating populations around the globe, is not ‘imperialist’ but Nazi Germany is! All the while claiming ‘objectivity’, Morgenthau goes on to complete the picture by arguing that ‘containment’ is the appropriate response to imperialism (1978, 77-85). His Cold War politics figured the USSR as imperialist and the US as a status quo power, even as it actively
intervened throughout the ‘free world’ to determine the conditions under which other peoples were ruled, as did the Soviet Union in its bloc.

As this example demonstrates, the question of empire poses both analytic and political challenges to IR and security studies. What would IR have looked like had Morgenthau come of age in interwar India, amid the struggle for independence, rather than Germany? The second canonical matter that requires attention is the discussion and dismissal of Marxian theories of imperialism (Gilpin 1987, 34-43, 50-54; Morgenthau 1978, 61-67; Waltz 1979, 18-37; cf. Aron 2003[1966], 259-278). The theorist most extensively discussed is Lenin (1950[1917]), although some other writers working before and after the First World War are also mentioned, particularly Rosa Luxemburg (1951[1913]) and the social liberal imperialist J.A. Hobson (1938[1902]). Broadly, Marx inspired analyses of the relations between capitalism, imperial expansion, competition between great powers for colonies and markets, and conflict (see Brewer 1989 for an overview). The discussion of these approaches is one of the few places in the mainstream literature where Marxian thinkers are considered at any length. The treatment they receive is notable. The main point Waltz, Morgenthau and Gilpin want to make is that Marxian approaches are economically reductionist and fail to take seriously political and strategic factors. Waltz, for example, conceives of capitalism—a world system—as a ‘unit level’ attribute, in order to fit Lenin and Hobson into his category of ‘reductionist theories’ that cannot account for systemic outcomes (Alker and Biersteker 1984, 134; cf. Wallerstein 1979). This is simply not an adequate treatment either of the these thinkers or of the Marxian tradition, which includes a variety of sophisticated analyses of the relations between modes of production, the state, and prevailing ideas that by no means fit the simplistic formula “all political phenomena are the reflection of economic forces” (Morgenthau 1978, 61-62; cf. Morton 2007; Rupert 1995; Sayer 1987).
Most importantly, this tradition of inquiry into imperialism did not end with Lenin. Others have directly critiqued and developed his work (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Emmanuel 1972), and the ‘dependency’ school focusing on the ‘development of underdevelopment’ in Third World economies in part arose out of it (Evans 1979; Frank 1979; Larrain 1989; cf. Huntington 1968; Krasner 1985). By using Lenin as a straw man to dismiss Marxism, mainstream IR cut itself off from a vibrant and sophisticated tradition of analyses of the capitalist world economy, which, combined with Weberian and other approaches, went on to inform scholarship in history, anthropology, historical sociology and political economy (Cain and Hopkins 2002; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992; Wolf 1997). This is a key moment in the disassociation of IR from developments elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities, especially in respect of imperialism and neo-colonialism and more generally relations between the global North and South. The discipline turned away from a body of international thought concerning the weak and powerless and their conditions of exploitation, the most numerous people on the planet. The general criticism Gilpin in particular makes is valid, that there are important senses in which literature informed by Marx fails to adequately incorporate the state, force, and geopolitics (cf. Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985). But this ought to have been an incitement to theoretical integration and development, not more or less hurried dismissal (Alker and Biersteker 1984; cf. Chase-Dunn 1981). It is in IR that questions of force and war are taken most seriously, and in radical political economy where capitalism and the unequal world it continues to produce receives its most sophisticated treatment. The analysis of imperialism needs to draw on both wells of thought, for it is a political and economic, as well as social and cultural, phenomenon (Colás 2007). By associating the study of imperialism with economism, and then dismissing it, IR missed this opportunity (cf. Panitch and Gindin 2004). The possibilities for situating work in security
studies on intervention amidst analyses of North-South relations inspired by Marx can be glimpsed in William Robinson’s work (1996).

**Overview**

One reason why imperialism is never entirely absent from IR and security studies is that empire and the political, military and other problems it poses are inescapable in much of modern history. It is unavoidable if scholars wish to be relevant to the world around them. Consequently, at times IR scholars have commented prodigiously on empire, even if they did not incorporate it into their theories. That first Chair at Aberystwyth and his most famous successor wrote about the future of the British empire as well as the conditions of colonized peoples, the Mandate system and the League of Nations, and the Japanese and Italian imperial wars which rendered it toothless (Carr 1946; Zimmern 1936). Both in the UK, and in the US as Brian Schmidt (1998) and others have argued, IR first took shape around questions of empire and ‘race relations’ in world politics (Long and Schmidt 2005). *Foreign Affairs*, the Council on Foreign Relation’s journal which began publishing in 1922, had an earlier incarnation as the *Journal of Race Development*. (Vitalis 2005, 161) While these imperial origins of the discipline are significant in the development of university departments, professional associations and journals, they are largely forgotten in contemporary debates.

The Second World War had intervened and focused attention on the problem of major war between great powers, a problem given greater urgency by the nuclear contest between the superpowers. As security studies developed during the Cold War, it was concerned primarily with international system structure, power balancing, the elements of national power, deterrence, nuclear strategy, the causes of war, and the management of crises. Focusing on the power politics of major states and the bipolar contest between the US and the USSR, implicitly or explicitly taking the point of view of a statesperson managing the foreign
policy of a major power, differed considerably from how the Cold War was treated elsewhere in the academy. Throughout the Cold War the notion of an informal American empire operating through Third World clients, a preeminent position in key international organizations, a system of military alliances with subordinate states, the global military presence of its own forces, and an intelligence and covert operations apparatus was a staple of radical and revisionist critiques of US foreign policy (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Kolko 1988). Much of this work built on the traditions of the ‘Wisconsin school’ of US diplomatic history, which argued that the US displaced domestic racial and class problems by expanding the frontier and maintaining the conditions for ‘open door’ investment abroad, where necessary through intervention and war (Kolko 1969; Lafeber 1967; 1984; Williams 1972 [1959]. See also Beard 1936; Fordham 2007). Scholars and other investigators uncovered the covert intelligence and paramilitary apparatuses through which the US intervened in Third World and other countries (McClintock 1992; Prados 1996), while others addressed the involvement of the social sciences in conceptualizing and managing peripheral states and societies in ways conducive to US interests (Gilman 2003; Robin 2001). Studies of interventions and conflicts in the Third World also highlighted the imperial character of the two superpower blocs (Cumings 1990; Gleijeses 1991; 2002).

The prominent exception of Raymond Aron aside (1974), very little of this work found its way into disciplinary IR and security studies during or after the Cold War. It simply did not fit into the framework or research agenda of the discipline. Instead, US pre-eminence often was discussed in terms of ‘hegemony’ and ‘hegemonic stability theory’, that is, as a power sufficiently stronger than others to set the ‘rules of the game’ by which other states interact (Goldstein 1988; Keohane 1984). This conception of hegemony derived from liberal international political economy, in particular the view that a liberal hegemon was necessary to maintain free trade and free markets around the world (Kindleberger 1973; cf. Latham
1997). It was fully compatible with the idea of an international system of sovereign states, sparking a lively debate between neorealists and neo-liberal institutionalists over what happens to hegemonic rules and norms in conditions of hegemonic decline (Gilpin 1987; Guzzini 1998; Keohane and Nye 1989 [1977]).

Empire did make an appearance in this debate, not as a way to theorize world politics or critique ‘states under anarchy’, but rather in terms of ‘imperial overstretch’, the increasing costs to the hegemon of maintaining hegemonic stability (Kennedy 1988; Snyder 1991). This perspective maintained the Eurocentric focus on the situation of the great power itself, rather than addressing the imperial character of international relations more generally. The influence of liberal political economy on hegemonic stability theory meant that free markets and free trade were conceived as a collective good for all states provided by the hegemon, even if the efficiency of the hegemon’s economy meant that it benefitted disproportionately. The interconnections between free trade and informal empire, between commercial penetration and political influence, widely discussed by historians of the British empire as well the Wisconsin school and the dependency theorists, were mostly left unaddressed (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). Radical political economy did critique the liberal conceptions of capitalism at work in the mainstream (Cox 1987; Rupert 1995). But notably, political military and security dimensions received here little mention. For many radicals, hegemony, hierarchy and world order were primarily matters of political economy, despite the long and consequential history of armed conflict between core and periphery. Attention to armed force and conflict was associated with the realists the radicals in part argued against, a casualty of the debate (although see Halperin 2004). The discussion returns below to this tendency of force to disappear in critical analyses of imperialism and hierarchy in world politics, replaced by political economy or, latterly, ‘culture’. 

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With some exception, the advent of constructivism maintained the Eurocentric focus of IR and security studies on the great powers, and particularly the West and the US. There are no index entries for colonies, colonialism, imperialism or empire in Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), as it is an effort to think through a Waltzian systemic logic in constructivist terms. Little attention is given to hierarchy (307-308) and the account of Kantian culture in the West is not situated against the imperial history of core-periphery relations that made the West and Western capitalism possible. It cannot be because like Waltz, Wendt intends his argument to be transhistorical (338) and identifies capitalism as a domestic property of states of a kind that can help build trust between them (361-362). Here, Wendt’s constructivism dovetails with more general liberal arguments about security communities, free trade, and peace (Gleditsch 2008; Oneal and Russett 1997; cf. Doyle 1986b). However as a seventeenth century British mercantilist reminds us, “the Negroe-Trade and the natural consequences resulting from it, may be justly esteemed an inexhaustible Fund of Wealth and Naval Power to this Nation” (quoted in Wolf 1997, 198). The historiography is complex, but New World plantations and mines and the slaves that worked them were crucial in the development of European, and especially English, finance and trade, providing capital essential to the onset of the industrial revolution (Hobsbawm 1953; 1954; Williams 1994[1944]). These are some of the ‘international relations’ that disappear in the ‘states under anarchy’ frame, the remaking of Africa, the Americas and Europe in the early modern period, including transporting some twelve million African captives across the Atlantic (Blackburn 1997, 3; Drayton 2002; Shilliam 2008).

As the turn to concrete histories of imperialism indicates, practices of imperialism are *historical*. As Colas remarks, “the meaning of empire [varies] throughout time and space” and “its deployment as an explanatory concept requires being especially sensitive to the historical particularity of different imperial experiences” (2007, 3). The emphasis on
transhistorical theorizing, most evident in realism, works against consideration of empires and imperialism. Change over time is matched by extension and variation in space. An account of the imperial subjugation of central and south America and the Caribbean would move from conquest, to colonies, to British and then US informal empire in a sovereign state system. Such an account would include networks radiating from centers and peripheries, in this example an Atlantic triangle from Europe to Africa to the Americas, composed of an array of state, military, business, labor and religious relations (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Grandin 2007). The forms, degrees, and mechanisms of domination and exploitation vary considerably. ‘Imperialism’ and ‘empire’ challenge approaches to social science seeking widely applicable formal definitions and generalizations (Cooley 2005; Motyl 1999).

In constructivist security studies, the situation is more mixed with respect to empire. Katzenstein’s widely cited edited volume The Culture of National Security (1996) contains no sustained discussion of hierarchy or imperialism in world politics. Norms and identity are discussed with respect to the US, China, the USSR, France, Germany, and Japan. The powerless show up mainly as objects for ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Finnemore’s chapter, where the slave trade makes a brief appearance but only in so far as its abolition reflected the European ‘universalization’ of the concept of humanity (1996, 171-172; cf. Davis 2001). Similarly, work on strategic culture and norms governing militaries and conflict shows a firm fixation on the West, with some attention to non-Western great powers (Farrell 2002).

Drawing on Said (1979; 1993) and others, critical constructivist work is much more attentive to the hierarchical ordering of identities and the legacies of formal empire in post-1945 world politics (Biswas 2007; Campbell 1992; Doty 1996; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Muppidi 2004; O Tuathail 1996; Salter 2002; Weldes et al 1999). However, much of this work, concerned to elucidate the culturally constructed character of world politics, failed to build in a sustained way on Marxian-inspired analyses of political economy, imperialism and
dependency (Ahmad 1992; Laffey 2000). The social or cultural turn in other areas led to efforts to integrate ‘materialist’ and ‘idealist’ social ontologies (Jameson 1991; Morley and Chen 1996; Thompson 1968; Williams 1977; Wolf 1997). In IR, these became opposing paradigms, power or ideas (Risse 1999; cf. Kegley 1993). Similarly, constructivists attended to the constructed character of threats and danger, often from the perspective of the US, but rarely to the exercise of military power or the processes of armed conflict itself in imperial or other contexts (although see Milliken 2001; Milliken and Sylvan 1996). One exception to this artificial separation of the cultural from the political military and other dimensions of the social is Cynthia Enloe’s study of the cultural, economic, and social consequences of American bases abroad for women and gender relations (1990). Another effort to weave together force, economy, society, culture and politics in imperial context is Chalmers Johnson’s study of ‘blowback’ from American interventions and worldwide military presence (2000).

With the publication of Johnson’s second book on this subject in 2004, empire had moved from the subtitle to the title proper. As in the interwar period, IR scholars could no longer avoid the topic amid the colonial logics of US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and assertions of American primacy (Barkawi 2004; Gregory 2004). A widespread debate broke out over whether or not the US was an empire (Cox 2004; Ikenberry 2004), and if so, what kind of empire (Ignatief 2003; Kagan 1998; Mann 2003). Marxian analyses of imperialism were updated (Callinicos 2002; Harvey 2003). In large measure, the scholarly debate was a reaction to the newfound currency of empire and imperialism in public discourse (Cox 2005). During the Cold War, the left was derided for using the terms, but now they took on positive connotations for those on the right who wanted the US to be more forthrightly imperial in conduct and purpose (Ferguson 2005). For some the question turned on the acquisition of territory, taking their cue from Doyle’s emphasis on empire as political
control (Ikenberry 2004, 615; Lieven 2001). In part, this reflected an impoverished understanding of histories of imperialism (MacDonald 2009). Over the long run of European imperialism, formal colonies and territorial control were but one dimension.

In China, for example, Western imperialism operated through a combination of treaty ports, small colonies, financial instruments, patron-client relations with the Chinese regime, and the provision of military advice and support to help it put down rebellions in part sparked by the Western presence (Carr 1992; Dean 1976). It was a “peculiar mixture of compulsion and liberalism” (Cain and Hopkins 2002, 362). Evocative of Third World countries laboring under structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 90s, one Chinese revolutionary spoke of “invisible financial control by foreign powers” (quoted in Dayer 1988, 64; cf. Ferguson 2006). Even in territories under formal control, British rule often operated through intermediaries, inventing or empowering ‘traditional’ or ‘tribal’ leaders as necessary (Dodge 2003; Lugard 1965). The Raj was a mixture of direct rule by the British-led Government of India and indirect rule through treaty arrangements with the princely states and other territories of the Indian empire (Bandyopadhyay 2004). Direct rule was more expensive, and often reflected a failure of more subtle means of control.

Accordingly, US imperial power was more in evidence during the early Cold War, when its influence over subordinate governments was exercised “routinely and consistently” but with only infrequent need for direct intervention (Nexon and Wright 2007, 266-268). The US created ‘open spaces’ through which US and Western trade and investment could flow, best achieved by maintaining governments abroad committed to free trade and free markets (Bachevich 2002). West Germany and Japan were reconstructed along liberal democratic lines through occupation and then tied in through military alliances and treaty arrangements that rendered them semi-sovereign defense dependencies (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999). In the Third World, this policy often took the form of backing authoritarian regimes and
supplying them with enough military advice and support to maintain order, protect property, and put down popular movements with alternative political visions (Kolko 1988). Times had changed and imperialism adapted to the logics of nationalism and decolonization. By the time of the American empire debate in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, the US no longer exercised anywhere near the kind of control and influence it once had in Western Europe, Asia or the global South during the first decades of the Cold War (Mann 2003; 2004).

Despite increased attention after the invasion of Iraq, theorizing international relations from the perspective of empire remains rare (Barkawi and Laffey 1999; Colas 2007; Hardt and Negri 2000; Nexon and Wright 2007). The focus on the US and the popular comparison with the British empire reflects Western-centrism and a limited historical purview (cf. Motyl 2001; Münkler 2007). In the absence of rethinking ‘states under anarchy’ as the core problematic for IR and security studies, inquiry on empire and imperialism remains hamstrung. Some have developed the concept of ‘hierarchy’ as one route out of the anarchy problematic (Clark 1989; Lake 2009; cf. Krasner 1999). This work generally is centered on relations between sovereign states (cf. Cooley 2005) conceiving them as hierarchically ordered, in relations of super- and subordinination. Taking empire seriously in international relations, however, requires thinking state power beyond sovereignty and addressing the co-constitution of core and periphery as social formations (cf. Wendt and Friendheim 1996; Weber 1995). Looking at the hierarchical ordering of relations between different state authorities alone is insufficient. Consideration must be given to the social, cultural, economic and military dimensions of imperialism. The international mechanisms determining peoples’ fates do not revolve around political control and influence alone.

**Power, States and Conflict in Imperial Context**
Studies of imperialism in sociology and history are not limited to questions of political control. Imperialism is a ‘full spectrum’ social phenomenon, reworking economies, cultures, and polities through agencies as diverse as missionaries, businessmen, soldiers, poets and state officials. Many of those colonized in the era of European imperialism were more likely to encounter a missionary than a soldier, or European products in their market than a district official. The colonization of a population’s social imaginary—‘cultural imperialism’—was in many respects a far more profound intervention than occupying an indigenous capital with a few battalions (Clenndinnen 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Silverblatt 2004; Tomlinson 1991). Equally, inserting a peasantry into the world market could as well occur through informal means, as for China, as through territorial rule, as in the Raj. Imperialism draws attention to the many dimensions through which power operates internationally, and prompts rethinking of the concept of power (Barnett and Duvall 2005a). How people and places are remade, how their fates are determined, how their choices are constrained, and how they are coerced when they make the ‘wrong’ ones, all this can occur through a variety of agencies and sites, near and far, in the hierarchical ordering of world politics. Broadly speaking, for those who find the concept viable, ‘imperialism’ is the study of these multiple hierarchies of power in international relations.

Stated in this way, there is no reason why ‘imperialism’ cannot operate in and through a formally sovereign state system. As Fanon remarked, “To the strategy of Dien Bien Phu, defined by the colonized peoples, the colonialist replies by the strategy of encirclement—based on the respect of the sovereignty of States” (1967, 55). In principle, a realist perspective is compatible with the idea that ‘sovereignty’ is part of the toolkit of power politics, say when a great power grants or withholds sovereign recognition to other entities in accordance with its interests. But for security studies sovereignty is usually understood as a defining feature of the international system. It constitutes the ‘units’ that make up the system.
Two other concepts are combined with it, the territorial state and the nation, to produce a world made up of sovereign and territorial nation states. The power of this image can hardly be underestimated in scholarly, official and popular discourses about world politics. It is derived from European great power politics and envisions a world of ‘units’, each with political-military autonomy, in relations of strategic competition with one another. The units are presumed to have a monopoly on legitimate force at home and to use their ‘official’ armed forces for defence and the servicing of interests (Thomson 1994).

These underlying assumptions about the character of the ‘formally alike’ units that make up the international system are built into the data sets that inform much work in security studies. The categories of interstate war and civil war in the Correlates of War (CoW) data, of state in the Militarized Interstate Disputes data, and of autocratic and democratic states in the Polity data are all defined in terms of the sovereign territorial state (Jones et al 1996; Polity IV n.d.; Small and Singer 1982). These data sets appear neutral with respect to competing theories of international relations and are used to ‘test’ opposing claims. The questions arises, however, as to whether the sovereign and territorial state is an adequate guide to the character and dynamics of political military relations between the global North and South (cf. Agnew 1994).

Consider how formal and juridical indicators structure CoW’s conception of the conflicts in which states can be involved. For CoW, ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ wars ended with the passing of the formal European empires (Small and Singer 1982, 52; Wayman et al 1996, 6). After decolonization, the new states could be party to intra- or interstate war, or wars against nonstate actors, but not ‘imperial’ war. They are treated like any other formally alike unit. The possibility of ‘neocolonial war’, of an informal empire within a sovereign states system, and of the use of clients, proxies, covert and foreign forces to wage war and exercise force in
this empire is *apriori* excluded by the coding rules that create the database. If one grants that such things happen, then the database actually *participates* in occluding them.

For example, the conflict in Guatemala in 1954 is coded as a civil war by CoW, with the explanation that “there was no formal American participation in this war, although the CIA armed, trained and financed the winning rebel force” (Small and Singer 1982, 324). Holsti codes it as a case of Honduran and Nicaraguan intervention in a civil conflict between the government and right wing rebels (1996, 216). Small and Singer are closer to the truth, as the US sponsored force was trained and based in these neighboring states, and the small air force the CIA provided flew from bases there as well. The use of the term ‘formal’ is crucial in excluding American participation and coding the conflict ‘civil’, but incorrect. The CIA operation was approved at the top levels of the Eisenhower administration (Gleijeses 1991, 243). US officials identified a “pliant” Guatemalan colonel to lead the ‘rebel’ force, which was composed of mercenaries trained by US personnel, while the CIA pilots were a mix of US citizens and other nationalities from the CIA’s proprietary airline Civil Air Transport (Gleijeses 1991, 250, 292; Prados 1996, 101). Without the ‘informal’ US operation there would have been no ‘civil war’ in Guatemala in 1954. The invasion was an act of US policy designed to change the government of Guatemala and end its land reform. The CIA later reimbursed Lloyd’s of London for a freighter sunk by its air force (Prados 1996, 106).

Significantly, Guatemala and other events like it do not fit CoW’s conceptual scheme, or that of other data sets based on the sovereign state and juridical indicators of combatants. In Latin and Central America, the US favored periodic interventions over the building of a formal empire. Sometimes these interventions were conducted by US forces, sometimes covertly, and sometimes by private individuals with tacit government support. Whether one calls this ‘hierarchy’ or ‘informal empire’, it operates in and through a sovereign state system.

Not only armed conflicts but also militaries are structured differently in core-periphery relations. Armed forces are not necessarily national in character or purpose. Imperial powers typically supplement their metropolitan forces with locally raised police and military forces, including quite substantial colonial armies (Kiernan 1998; Killingray and Omissi 1999; Mason 1974). These forces were ubiquitous and used to put down local rebellion, to expand empires, and as imperial fire brigades for great power war (Clayton 1988; Echenburg 1991). Colonial armies saw extensive use in the World Wars, and were used in number as late as the Algerian war of independence. The exercise of Western military power in the non-European world has always heavily relied on forces raised from colonized populations themselves. In a world of formal empires, these forces were ‘official’ and served under the imperial power. At decolonization, they were ‘reflagged’ as the national armies of the new states, but often retaining close and diverse links to the former imperial power, with officers training at St. Cyr, Sandhurst, and other metropolitan facilities for example. When necessary, these military to military links became a conduit for the continuing influence of the former imperial power, such as covert support for coups (Martin 1995).

Outside of the Philippines, the US did not raise extensive colonial forces of this kind. Rather, it relied on mechanisms of ‘advice and support’ to achieve similar outcomes (e.g. Spector 1985). During and after the Cold War, this involved large scale training of Third World military personnel and the provision of weapons, munitions and equipment (Lumpe 2002). Programs of this kind were conceived by various US administrations as a means for utilizing foreign military and police manpower for their own purposes (Gaddis 1982, 153; Huggins 1998). Across the Third World in the Cold War, US advised and supported forces confronted insurgencies and rebellions. Additionally, US military aid relations with the Third
World offered other avenues for political influence (Gill 2004; Rowe 1974). The Soviet Union maintained client armies in Eastern Europe and provided its own extensive assistance to Third World allies and insurgent forces. The continued significance of ‘advice and support’ is evident in post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the US has expended considerable resources training indigenous security forces.

In the discussion of political economic approaches to empire above, an important idea was broached. This is the notion that without the slave trade, without empire in its myriad forms, the West would not have been the West. There are relations of co-constitution between core and periphery, relations that shaped Europe as well as its colonies. A similar research agenda opens in respect of the political military dimensions of empire, formal and otherwise. Colonial armies and other indigenous forces made possible Western imperialism, sharply reducing the military demands core states made on their own populations. That is, civil military relations in core states were shaped by the availability of foreign forces to secure empires. The US could not police the ‘free world’ solely with its own forces. The extensive programs of ‘advice and support’ shaped civil military relations in both the US and the Third World. Those covert instrumentalities were also used inside the US, to gather intelligence and subvert domestic opposition to US foreign policy (Halperin et al 1976). All of these are political military and security relations in the broadest sense, but fall outside of the kinds of approaches and questions currently at work in security studies and IR. They are the kind of questions that empire forces scholars to confront, as the model of the sovereign nation state turns out to be a poor guide to the organization of military power for much of world politics.

This discussion has focused on the Third World or global South, and on bilateral relations between core states and clients. US dominance in the post-1945 period also prompts questions about state power more generally. Core states like Japan and those in Western Europe were tied into the US treaty system and rendered, at least for a time, semi-sovereign.
Many states in NATO lack political-military autonomy in that their militaries are ‘hard wired’ into NATO’s command, control and intelligence structure, and are organized to meet specialist needs within NATO’s overall force structure. NATO exists alongside other inter-governmental organizations that have come to play an increasing role in world politics, among them the EU, the UN, the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank. At the same time, democracy promotion and economic globalization has unleashed legions of consultants and other advisors who shape political and economic policies in subordinate states from Eastern Europe to Africa and Asia (Guilhot 2005). Sociologists and political economists have begun to speak in terms of an ‘international state’, a loosely articulated and messy agglomeration of state power based on the US, the EU and the main IGOs (Panitch 1996; Shaw 2000). There is very little in the way of investigation into the specifically political military dimensions of this international state (although see Abrahamsen and Williams 2009; Laffey and Weldes 2005). Here, empire and imperialism give way to the research agenda of global governance (Barnett and Duvall 2005b)

**An Imperial Turn?**

Imperialism was referred to above as a ‘full spectrum’ social phenomenon. In recent decades, imperial history has become an increasingly vibrant field of inquiry, often supplemented by anthropologists, sociologists and political theorists (Bell 2007; Cohn 1996; Mintz 1985). An important frame for this work is the ‘imperial turn’. The basic idea is that of co-constitution of core and periphery, in cultural and social as well as political-economic terms (Cooper and Stoler 1997). These relations are conceived as on-going, evident today in the use of English in India as in the availability of curry in the United Kingdom. The old colonial practices of divide and rule continue to shape politics in many postcolonial states, while diasporic populations flow back and forth on paths forged by empire, with multiple
effects (e.g. Varadarajan 2008). Much of this work is written in a cultural register, prompted in part by the path breaking work of Said (1979) and Todorov (1999), as well as that of the mostly Indian scholars who worked under the label of subaltern studies (Guha 1997). This scholarship has issued in an extensive multidisciplinary conversation that has crossed over into critical IR but is almost non-existent in security studies (although see Porter 2009).

Implicit in this work is a rich conception of the ‘international’ as a ‘thick’ social space of interaction and co-constitution, in which flows of people, goods and ideas shape the states, societies, and other entities that populate international relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). By *beginning* with the state, and *then* analyzing its activities in world politics, IR loses sight of these relations of mutual constitution, many of which are imperial in character (Barkawi and Laffey 2002, 112; Jackson and Nexon 1999). In this respect, the ‘imperial turn’ points the way to a social science of international relations of far broader purview than IR as currently configured, one in dialogue with other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

At the same time, to read much of the work that travels under the label of the ‘imperial turn’ is to enter a world in which domination and exploitation occurs seemingly entirely in the realm of culture and political economy, as if no peasants or laborers were ever lined up and shot or corralled into a work camp by armed men. With exception (e.g. Guha 1999), the place of force and the political military dimensions of empire remain understudied in *any* discipline. Little help is available from military history, which remains an analytically underdeveloped field with little real purchase in major history departments in North America. While there are also significant exceptions here, it is an overwhelmingly Eurocentric intellectual enterprise, focused on warfare in the West (Black 2004). For military history, peripheral conflict and ‘small wars’ broadly conceived remain a specialized field (Belich 1986; Porch 2000; Moor and Wesseling 1989). In IR, ‘small wars’ have prompted questions about how and why the ‘weak’ prove so formidable in places like Vietnam and Algeria,
winning wars against major powers (Arreguin-Toft 2005; Merom 2003; Mack 1975), and more recently have led to extensive interest in counterinsurgency arising from US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From the perspective of the imperial turn, such cases open up a much broader research agenda focused on the significant and consequential role ‘small wars’ have come to play in metropolitan politics, society and culture. ‘Vietnam’ remains the single most important event of the last half of the twentieth century for understanding US politics. The Algerian war led to regime change in France, as did wars of decolonization in Mozambique and Angola for Portugal. Here are international relations generated by ‘small wars’ that come to play major if not world historical roles in the core. In the case of Vietnam, there is disjuncture between the studies of the cultural and political effects of the war at home and those of the war itself (e.g. Jeffords 1989). The relations between small wars and combatant societies are mutually constitutive and home fronts and war fronts can be productively kept in the same analytic frame (Bradley 2000; Renda 2001). Equally, there are global ramifications to attend to (Daum et al 2003).

The imperial turn suggests strongly that these various intellectual enterprises should be brought into conversation with one another in and through an historically reinvigorated IR reconnecting with some of the knowledges of empire discussed in these pages. In this way, security studies might become the queen of the social sciences and humanities, not by denying the cultural and political economic, or taking sides in the great international struggles between the weak and the strong, or by insisting on a separation of domestic and foreign, but by incorporating these dichotomies and tensions in a renewed engagement with the ‘international’ as a dense space of flows. In so doing, it would revive and deepen the insights of those realists who have long argued for the decisive role of the political military in shaping human histories, for in the final analysis imperial frontiers are won and lost by force of arms.
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References


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Web Resources

H-Net/H-Empire Discussion Network: http://www.h-net.org/~empire/