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978-1-107-01183-0 - Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present

Julian Go

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## Patterns of Empire

*The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*

*Patterns of Empire* comprehensively examines the two most powerful empires in modern history: the United States and Britain. Challenging the popular theory that the American empire is unique, *Patterns of Empire* shows how the policies, practices, forms, and historical dynamics of the American empire repeat those of the British, leading up to the present climate of economic decline, treacherous intervention in the Middle East, and overextended imperial confidence. A critical exercise in revisionist history and comparative social science, this book also offers a challenging theory of empire that recognizes the agency of non-Western peoples, the impact of global fields, and the limits of imperial power.

Julian Go is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Boston University. He is also a Faculty Affiliate in Asian Studies and New England and American Studies at Boston University, editor of the journal *Political Power and Social Theory*, and former Academy Scholar at Harvard University's Academy for International and Area Studies. His first book, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism*, won the Mary Douglas Prize for Best Book from the American Sociological Association and was a finalist for a Philippines National Book Award. His other books include *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives*, which he coedited.

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JULIAN GO

*Boston University*



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*For my parents, Heide and Julian, Jr.*

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is about the American and the British empires. In the tradition of macro-comparative historical sociology, it puts the two empires under a critical comparative lens. But this book is also meant as an assault. It is an assault against a way of thinking called “exceptionalism.” Exceptionalism presumes that the United States is special and especially benign. It assumes that the United States has a unique and essential character. It assumes that the United States exemplifies the most perfect liberal democracy in the world. It assumes that understanding what the United States does abroad only depends on understanding what happens within the United States. It also assumes that the United States and its people are the sole agents of history – whether for ill or for good.

Exceptionalism is the North American counterpart to Eurocentrism. It silently structures thought. And it has helped to create and sustain empire. It does this not only by heralding the American empire as unique, but also by assuming the United States and its people have the privilege of directing history. Any analysis of the American empire must therefore confront exceptionalist thought.

This book’s comparative analysis is hereby motivated. Comparison is mobilized to confront exceptionalism. For this task, the tools of comparative-historical sociology help. However, in its challenge to exceptionalism, the analysis also derives much of its inspiration from postcolonial theory. Sociologists do not often peddle in postcolonial theory. This book barely cites any. Yet this book’s critique of exceptionalism, its associated emphasis on the agency of colonized populations, and its implicit examination of the provinciality of American empire would not be the same without the silent influence of postcolonial theory’s critique of imperial knowledge.

Finally, this book might be read as marking a passing. Ten or twenty years from now, to write about the American empire may be akin to writing about the British empire today. It will be about something that has passed. Of course, America’s global power is not yet withered. Its imperial manifestations persist. If the comparison with the British empire tells us anything, however, it is that

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America's global hegemony is already over. Thus arises one of the sobering if not frightful lessons from the comparison in this book: falling empires, like rising ones, do not behave well. As the American empire falls, it will not go down without a fight.

There are many to thank. Craig Calhoun, Fred Cooper, and Kevin Moore's "Lessons of Empire" conference at New York University provided an important forum for me to explore initial ideas; participants there who gave me valuable criticism and/or support include Matt Connelly, Ann Stoler, Jomo K.S., Stephen Howe, and of course Craig, Fred, and Kevin. An invitation from Bat Sparrow and Sanford Levinson to the University of Texas at Austin Law School permitted me to test some early ideas on U.S. overseas colonialism. I am grateful to them and to Christina Duffy-Burnett who pressed my thoughts in Austin. Roger Owen and Eve Trout Powell invited me to their Imperialism Symposium at the University of Pennsylvania where I got insightful comments from participants there, especially from Robert Vitalis, Engseng Ho, and Robert Tignor. Julia Adams and Phil Gorski at Yale University invited me to their Comparative Research Workshop, where Malik Martin, Jennifer Bair, and Peter Stamatov among other participants offered helpful thoughts. Steve Pincus's invitation to attend his conference on colonialisms at Yale offered another arena to test some ideas and receive helpful criticisms (from Steve and Peter Perdue especially). Alyosha Goldstein hosted a productive visit to the American Studies program at the University of New Mexico. Gurminder Bhambra kindly invited me to give two talks at Warwick, U.K. Other forums included Boston College's Department of Sociology; Brown University's Department of Sociology; the Colloquium on Comparative Research at the Watson Institute and Rich Snyder's and Barbara Stalling's graduate seminar at Brown; and the University of British Columbia. The history group at the Humanities Department at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona offered a fantastic place to think, write, and relax; thanks especially to Gloria Cano and Josep Delgado for hosting me.

The indirect and direct guidance of Stephen Howe has been indispensable for this book. In New York City at the "Lessons of Empire" conference, his remarks about the British and U.S. empires helped initiate some of the ideas in this book. And I still think fondly of a lively dinner in his Oxfordshire home with Wm. Roger Louis years ago, an evening that inadvertently served to crystallize some ideas herein. Stephen also read the entire manuscript and provided precise commentary, as did Ian Tyrrell to whom I owe so much. Julia Adams and George Steinmetz continue to nurture and inspire. Phil Gorski perused an initial draft and gave me encouragement when I needed it badly. Many others provided necessary comradeship, encouragement, humor, or helpful suggestions: Nitsan Chorev, Filiz Garip, Neil Gross, Stefan Huemann, Victoria Johnson, Krishan Kumar, Nicholas Hoover Wilson, Michael Mann, Renisa Mawani, Roger Owen, David Swartz, Kathleen Schwartzman, Robert Vitalis, Geneviève Zubrzycki, and my colleagues at Boston University's Sociology Department.

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Julian Go  
Boston, MA

*A note on terminology: With due respect to my Latin American colleagues and my Canadian spouse, I will sometimes use the phrase “American state” or “American empire” to refer to the United States.*

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