

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIV-24

David Todd. *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780691171838.

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Introduction by Alexia Yates, University of Manchester

With *A Velvet Empire*, David Todd places nineteenth-century France squarely at the heart of two of the organizing dynamics of the modern era: empire and capitalism. Applying insights and frameworks from a historiography that has redefined our understanding of the British empire and Anglo-world, Todd digs into the apparent paradox that France could be recognized as the world's second colonial power in the nineteenth century while seemingly lacking the territorial possessions that could colour a map of the world in blue, white, and red. The notion of informal empire allows him to restore the political ambitions and content of the country's cultural and commercial *rayonnement* from roughly the 1820s to the 1870s. From investment capital to champagne, from elite taste to legal codes, French exports carried a coercive agenda—a soft power or “velvet empire”—that forged continuities (if not identities) between the ‘old’ imperialism of the *ancien régime* and its ‘new’ version in the late-nineteenth century. Among the most important of these was a liberal ideology deeply informed by racist thinking. Formal and informal empire found common ground in their operationalizing of difference and the construction of hierarchies among people and places.

These arguments have significant implications for our understanding of how the global and the imperial were mutually constituted and reinforced in the modern era—and ‘how’ stories are vital to understanding the assemblage of imperial formations. Situating the book within “imperial history’s global turn,” reviewer Martin Thomas offers the striking formulation that the book sheds “new light on the pernicious infectivity of imperial influence.” Todd urges us to take a taste for empire (and the empire of taste) most seriously. He focuses our attention on the agency of a global, aristocratic elite—as well as the aspirational *haute bourgeoisie*—whose economic preeminence and political ambitions fueled France’s cultural and commercial success beyond its borders. The reviewers in this roundtable do not focus overmuch on the new importance Todd seeks to attribute to authoritarianism as a red thread in France’s (global) nineteenth century. Yet one of the book’s most important contributions is its articulation of an alternative modernity for France, one that is less driven by democratizing forces, and whose dynamism—politically, economically, culturally—is counter-revolutionary as much as revolutionary. By drawing parallels between the soft power of mid-nineteenth century empire and contemporary coca-colonization, Todd in fact figures informality as the engine of the modern.

This revival of this notion of informal empire is positively—if not unreservedly—received by the roundtable contributors. For Samir Saul, the fact that French historians could have taken so long to delve seriously into the matter since John A. Hobson and Vladimir Lenin alerted them to it more than a century ago “leaves one in a state of wonder.” He credits Todd for pulling off “a *tour de force*” that “finally brings France within the ambit of informal imperialism.” Thomas praises Todd’s reconstruction of a “champagne capitalism” for persuasively demonstrating “the continued relevance of informal empire” and illuminating the multiple and overlapping practices pioneering “what might now be described as ‘soft power.’” All the reviewers are especially convinced of the power of Todd’s economic analyses—a notable enthusiasm, given the reticence with which matters such as public debt and balance of trade can be met in political and cultural histories, as well as the difficulty historians encounter placing modern France in the history of economic thought or the history of capitalism.

Yet the notion is also not without its shortcomings, as Miranda Spieler astutely draws out. Some of these are definitional—how much, how big, how many, how *violent* does an imperial space, personnel, or gesture need to be before informality ceases to encompass its operations? Todd’s response to her challenge, in which he stresses, for example, that the treaty of Saigon which serves Spieler as an example of territorial expansion dealt with only 20,000 km² of territory rather than the 700,000 km² that would eventually constitute Indochina, rather reinforces than resolves her misgivings.

Other hesitations center on the particular application of the concept as Todd pursues it. A reliance on foreign relations archives—rather than colonial or military collections—tips the scales in favor of informal relations,

as Spieler flags. And for all the contributors, the notion of a *preference* for informal empire (rather than simply its existence) poses a few more problems. If Saul finds Todd's arguments for a French model of informal domination persuasive, even in the face of the bloody conquest of Algeria the country initiated in the 1830s, he also notes that given France's industrial latecomer status, informal empire "was in fact the only feasible course, or the least likely to fail." Spieler asks who or what precisely lies behind the 'France' that purportedly held and expressed a preference for an informal imperium. Todd's response—that he refers simply to the French state with this grammatical subject—pushes the question to another remove, especially when, as Thomas notes, "the apparatus of state institutions are substantially absent" from this account. (This absence otherwise constituting, of course, one of the key contributions of the book.)

Thomas reminds us in his review that part of the dissatisfaction with informal empire as a lens of analysis had to do with a sense that it "was too abstract, too cold and impersonal to cope with scholarly recognition that understanding empire must involve those living under colonialism rather than just the imperialists imposing it." In some respects, *A Velvet Empire* may have been unrecognizable to those enslaved, indentured, expropriated, and otherwise dominated—in the hard power sense—by France's imperial program in the nineteenth century. But a mosaic of imperial formations is a central reality of empire's reproduction and endurance. Todd's research both expands and more precisely interrogates the range of individuals, institutions, and impulses that sustained imperial societies, even as they endeavored to dress them in other clothes. The France that results is, in Saul's words, "almost always a nation-state and an empire," whose co-constitution and negotiation is on brilliant display in this text.

Participants:

David Todd is professor of history at Sciences Po and coordinator of the Centre for History and Economics in Paris. He is also the author of *Free Trade and its Enemies in France, 1814-1851* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Alexia Yates is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Manchester, where she is co-director of the Centre for Economic Cultures. She is a historian of economic life, focusing on urban political economy, business history, and the history of popular finance in modern Europe. She has been awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize in History, and her most recent book is *Real Estate and Global Urban History*, part of the Elements in Global Urban History series with Cambridge University Press. Her first book, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital*, appeared with Harvard University Press in 2015 and won the Wallace K. Ferguson Prize for the best book in non-Canadian history from the Canadian Historical Association in 2016. She holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and previously held postdoctoral fellowships the Center for History and Economics at Harvard University and at the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities at Cambridge.

Samir Saul is a professor of History at the Université de Montréal. He is the author of *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l'Afrique du Nord (1945-1962)*, (Genève, Librairie Droz, 2016) and of *La France et l'Égypte de 1882 à 1914. Intérêts économiques et implications politiques* (Paris, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 1997). He is also the co-editor of *Méditerranée, Moyen-Orient : deux siècles de relations internationales* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003).

Miranda Spieler is an Associate Professor in History and Politics at The American University of Paris. She holds an AB from Harvard College, where she studied the history and literature of France and Germany. In graduate school at Columbia University in New York, she worked as assistant to the writer Susan Sontag, taught Columbia's flagship course, Contemporary Civilization, and served as lecturer in Harvard's History and Literature program. After graduate school, she joined the department of history at the University of Arizona,

where she received tenure in 2011. She is an historian of France and the overseas empire and writes about law and imperial violence. She is especially interested in using archives to recover the elusive and fragmentary traces of marginal people, including slaves, former slaves, immigrants, prisoners, and vagabonds in France and in former colonies. Her research for *Empire and Underworld* (Harvard University Press, 2012) led her to archival depositories in France and in French Guiana.

Martin Thomas is Professor of Imperial History and Director of the Centre for Histories of Violence and Conflict at the University of Exeter. He has written widely on the French Empire and European decolonization, and is currently finishing a book for Princeton University Press, *Globalizing Decolonization*.

Reading David Todd's book leaves one in a state of wonder. Why has no one perceived French informal imperialism before? Informal empire and free-trade imperialism are commonly associated with Great Britain, so much so that other countries in the nineteenth-century are not considered in the light of those concepts. After a lull extending from the 1870s to decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, when formal empires were pre-eminent, informal empire and free-trade imperialism staged a comeback as the United States established its predominance, mainly without colonial possessions.

There is no doubt that the influence and reputation of British classical economists and their Adam Smithian disapproval of colonies played a part in identifying laissez-faire, informal empire and free-trade imperialism with Britain. But France had its own classical liberal economists, like Jean-Baptiste Say and Frédéric Bastiat, along with a keeper of the faith in the shape of the *Journal des économistes*. Mid-century British political leaders were also more loquacious than their French counterparts in forsaking empire, at least in their discourse, if not in their policies. Did not Disraeli fret about colonies being 'millstones around our neck'? Annoyance did not prevent him from making Victoria Empress of India. Be that as it may, no such complaining was heard on the French side, in part because France had so few colonies to its name.

It is a fact that French imperialism tends to be equated with formal territorial control overseas, even with settler colonialism. Wars in Indochina (1945-1954) and in Algeria (1954-1962) did nothing to dispel that impression. And yet all who know the famed French *bas de laine* remember that France efficiently flexed its political muscle in the nineteenth-century by using loans and investments to win friends (Russia), weaken enemy alliances (Italy), and bring formally sovereign countries under its sway (Ottoman Empire). In high society, the French language was the *lingua franca*, and French culture, lifestyle, taste, norms and social graces had been the standard since the *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century, even since Louis XIV.

In the nineteenth-century century, French models spread from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie in France and abroad. By virtue of the emphasis on expository or normative texts ('Cartesianism'), as opposed to the British reliance on precedent and tradition, French law, political philosophy, administrative practices, and military organization were more accessible to foreigners and provided ready-made solutions to countries aspiring to modernize. France was engaged in informal imperialism for a long time without drawing much attention. Only historians familiar with the Hobsonian and Leninist interpretations of imperialism as based on the export of capital were cognizant of its application to France, even if they did not share the notion of free-trade imperialism.¹

So Todd's book is an eye-opener. It is also an ambitious undertaking. Bringing to light manifestations of informal imperialism and pinning down evidence of French influence around the world over a century run into the problem of the "diffuseness of sources" (23). It amounts to a thankless task requiring massive research. Amazingly Todd has done just that. Brimming with footnotes, his book is a treasure-trove of bibliographic references to archival sources and to the historiography, old and new. On that score alone, his contribution is remarkable, a firm starting-point for further investigation.

Beyond the impressive scholarship, the argument is what makes the book stand out. We now have a revisitation and a reappraisal of the 1815-1870/80 period, which had hitherto been thought of as a hiatus in French imperial history, falling between the formal Caribbean empire lost during the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic empire, and the formal empire acquired at the end of the nineteenth century. Todd shows that the intermediary decades were not simply an imperial pause, but that they had a life of their own. France did not renounce empire. French liberals did not become imperialistic in the middle of the

¹ Jacques Thobie, *La France impériale, 1880-1914* (Paris : Éditions Mègreis, 1982).

nineteenth century; they consistently harbored imperial ambitions (29). France had “an empire without sovereignty” (title of chapter 1). In fact, foreshadowing the present age, its informal empire was ahead of its time by virtue of the priority it gave to immaterial commodities and services. Between the downfall of Napoleon’s empire and the Third Republic, “France’s resurgent imperial status relied far more on the global projection of its influence than on the expansion of its sovereignty” (3). Todd sees the informal empire declining with the collapse of the “Latin Kingdom” in Mexico in 1867 and the waning of French influence in Egypt in the 1870s. This is a book about France’s “forgotten empire,” (4), not about France as an “imperial nation-state” or an “imperial republic,” such as in Gary Wilder’s *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* and in Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison’s, *La République impériale: politique et racisme d’État*.²

A look sideways at Britain is helpful for the sake of comparison. That country was the paragon of informal empire and free-trade imperialism. It had at the same time the largest colonial empire in the world, one that it never considered letting go of at any time in the nineteenth-century, even at the height of the era of *laissez-faire*, informal empire and free-trade imperialism. This reminder is in order, lest it be thought that free trade negated formal empire, except in classical economic theory. Informal empire was an addition to the traditional colonial methods of expansion abroad. It arose from unique circumstances, viz. Britain’s industrial supremacy (as ‘workshop of the world’), allowing it to envisage the whole world as its market and to successfully confront any economic competitor anywhere, including on his home turf; the superfluity of occupying new territories and incurring unnecessary costs, as long as rivals were kept out of them; and the necessity to open new markets, by peaceful or violent means, in countries that could not be occupied for geopolitical reasons (Ottoman Empire, China). Informal empire was a rational choice and it accompanied formal empire.

What about France? It had no formal colonial empire to speak of in 1815. More importantly, were it to embark on the acquisition of one, it would unavoidably run into complications with Britain, which was ubiquitous overseas and watchful of all intruders. For France, informal empire may have been a preference, but it was in fact the only feasible course, or the least likely to fail. French industry was not on a par with Britain’s, although it narrowed the gap during the Second Empire. Opening markets to French commodities would not have been enough to establish ascendancy. Wine, champagne, and *articles de Paris* (luxury goods) provided a foothold with local elites. But the deployment of the other, immaterial, assets—such as language and culture—adding up to a “velvet empire” was necessary.

That said, for France as for Britain, informal empire did not preclude formal empire. The military expeditions to Algeria, Indochina, Lebanon, and Mexico offer a mixed picture. In Algeria, an extreme case of colonial rule would seem to belie the thesis of a “velvet” informal empire. Todd devotes a fascinating and innovative chapter to Algeria. He argues that the original plan was not full territorial conquest and annexation, but the setting up of a limited coastal settlement under direct control, coupled with influence in the rest of the country through cooperative Algerian authorities led by ‘Abd al-Qadir, in other words, informal empire. Conquest of all of North Africa by Muhammad Ali of Egypt on behalf of France was also considered. For their part, Marseilles commercial interests promoted full-scale colonization of Algeria as a substitute for the loss of Louisiana and Saint-Domingue. In any case, the situation spun out of control, resulting in vicious warfare, waves of land-hungry *colons*, and a brutal system of direct rule-*cum*-dispossession in the form of large-scale settler colonialism. Thus, “Algeria did not only become a very formal type of colony by design; it can also be construed as a case of informal empire manqué” (78). The takeover of Algeria is the most obvious negation of the idea of a preference by France for informal empire. Todd’s research effectively disposes of the problem, while opening a whole new avenue of research on the years 1830 to 1847. Napoleon III’s

² Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *République impériale: politique et racisme d’État* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

dabbling with the project of an “Arab Empire” in Algeria marked a revival of the early schemes of indirect rule, as Todd points out (110-122).

In Indochina, Napoleon III did not forego direct tutelage. South Vietnam was occupied and annexed between 1858 and 1867, and Cambodia was made a protectorate in 1863. In China, France and Britain waged the Second Opium War (1856-1860) to open the Chinese market by brute force. Todd does well to emphasize that, like Britain, France had commercial aims, to wit, to secure the supply of raw silk from the south of the country. Lebanon and Mexico were more ambiguous cases. The aim was to establish French influence, in line with the outlook of informal imperialism, but the military means look suspiciously close to those of formal rule. France withdrew from Lebanon and Mexico, but only in Lebanon was it able to garner influence. In Egypt, formal imperialism was all but impossible, with Britain barring the way to what it considered the route to India. Even informal empire was challenged. France’s patronage of Muhammad Ali was militarily disrupted in 1840 by a coalition of the four other European powers, led by Britain. In the subsequent three or four decades, France made significant economic, cultural, and educational strides in the extension of informal imperialism in Egypt. In all, the idea that a French informal empire prevailed in the nineteenth century passes muster. But, as for Britain, coercion and formal empire were never far behind.

The substantial chapter entitled “Champagne capitalism. The commodification of luxury and the French empire of taste” is a novel theme focusing entirely on the pride of Reims and a unique French asset. The subject is obviously relevant and it is usually overlooked. The author carried out extensive and enlightening original research in “France’s champagne-capitalist model of development” (173). An intriguing suggestion is put forward to the effect that “the floundering of France’s model of development after 1870 was connected to its republican turn on the domestic stage and the embrace of formal imperialism abroad” (126). This reviewer comprehends the relationship as being the other way round: the economic depression that befell Europe from 1873 to 1895 and the rise of protective tariff walls implied deceleration of growth for all economies, gave free trade a body blow, rendered informal empire unsustainable, and set off a general scramble for formal imperial control of reserved markets overseas. The issue will no doubt come up for fruitful discussion in the roundtable.

The next chapter is about capital exports or “Conquest by money: The geopolitics and logistics of investment colonization.” Todd submits the observation that France’s capital exports aligned with its geopolitical goals, namely aspirations to informal empire (186). He considers that political control had primacy over profit as the *ultima ratio* of capital exports (179). Rich historical literature was produced by Pierre Renouvin, his students and, in third and fourth generations, their students on this vexing *problématique*: is profit or politics the driving force of capital exports?³ Whatever the case-by-case findings, the consensus is that, in international affairs, private interests and state policy normally converge one way or another, willingly or through pressure. Interestingly, on another matter, Todd breaks ranks with the common view and does not read Paul Leroy-Beaulieu’s well-known *De la colonisation* as advocating formal empire. He interprets “*Colonisation des capitaux*” (“investment colonization”) as an alternative to territorial empire, therefore an argument in favour of informal imperialism (196).

The final chapter is about Egypt, French expatriates in that Ottoman province, extraterritorial jurisdiction granted to them, the public debt owed to French and British bondholders, and the crisis surrounding

³ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Tout empire périra. Théorie des relations internationales* (Paris : A. Colin, 1992); Pierre Guillen, *L’Allemagne et le Maroc de 1870 à 1905* (Paris : PUF, 1967); Raymond Poidevin, *Les relations économiques et financières entre la France et l’Allemagne de 1898 à 1914* (Paris : A. Colin, 1969); Jacques Thobie, *Intérêts et impérialisme français dans l’Empire ottoman (1895-1914)* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1977); René Girault, *Emprunts russes et investissements français en Russie, 1887-1914. Recherches sur l’investissement international* (Paris : A. Colin, 1973); Jean-Claude Allain, *Agadir 1911* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976); Georges-Henri Soutou, *L’or et le sang. Les buts de guerre économiques des grandes puissances* (Paris : Fayard, 1990); Samir Saul, *La France et l’Égypte de 1882 à 1914. Intérêts économiques et implications politiques* (Paris: Comité pour l’histoire économique et financière de la France, 1997).

imminent bankruptcy. France is described as having been keen on salvaging its informal dominion in Egypt, going so far as to envisage a rapprochement and collaboration with the nationalists led by Colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi in order to avoid formal joint Franco-British imperial rule (267-269). This would have been an astute move but it amounted to no more than groundless speculation emanating from the British side. All the archival evidence shows that the nationalists were anathema to European bondholders and officials.⁴ The British wanted to assassinate ‘Urabi, and the French purported to see in him a pan-Islamist who threatened their interests in Egypt and their hold on the Maghreb. France’s position in Egypt was being undermined by Britain, but it was bound to the bondholders and therefore adamantly opposed to the nationalists. There is no definitive explanation for France’s withdrawal from the joint military operation in 1882. War with Germany was not imminent, but joint rule of Egypt promised to be fertile ground for conflict between France and Britain, leaving France vulnerable to Germany. The recent falling out of Prussia and Austria in the context of the condominium over Schleswig-Holstein was not lost on contemporaries. No doubt France would have preferred a French informal empire in Egypt, if only to facilitate prevailing upon the viceroy in all issues of concern for France. However, Britain’s forward policy and its deepening involvement since 1876 had all but eliminated that option. Britain set the pace but France did not let it steal a march on her and intervened likewise in Egyptian affairs. Following the advent of a nationalist government in 1882, both Britain and France inclined toward some form of military action to re-establish the viceroy’s authority (in reality, European rule).

The book’s conclusion proposes several profound points. “Most empires are composites, based on informal and formal instruments of domination in varying proportions” (283). France’s late nineteenth-century French colonial expansion was due to a desire to attenuate the waning of its international *rayonnement* of the informal empire era rather than to seek revenge for defeat in 1870 (283). International global and external constraints are more important than domestic factors on the development of imperial formations. Finally, France was not a nation-state that experienced aberrant imperial moments, but almost always a nation-state and an empire, which does not mean it was an ‘imperial nation-state.’

All in all, Todd has pulled off a *tour de force* by producing a challenging and thought-provoking study that finally brings France within the ambit of informal imperialism. It is the sort of grand interpretation that will be a milestone at the intersection of French history and international history. One can easily see it branching out in the triple direction of specific countries where French influence was felt, of comparisons with British informal imperialism, or of identification of possible persistence of French informal imperialism past 1870.

⁴ For British sources, see Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians. The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961); for French sources, see r Saul, *La France et l’Égypte de 1882 à 1914.*

David Todd's *Velvet Empire* is a wide-ranging account of French global ambitions after the defeat of Napoléon Bonaparte that seeks to revise our understanding of the French imperial project. The book's originality lies in its skillful weaving together of economic, political, and cultural history to illustrate how banking practices and commercial growth shaped and were shaped by foreign policy. Todd contends that historians have sought the essence of nineteenth-century French imperialism in *fin de siècle* territorial expansion under the Third Republic, while overlooking forms of informal empire that flourished decades earlier under nineteenth-century French monarchs (1815-1870). To interpret French informal empire in the nineteenth-century, Todd develops a conceptual framework that takes inspiration from Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's classic article, "The Imperialism of Free Trade" (1953), from their work on Africa, and from Peter J. Cain and Antony G. Hopkins later concept of "gentlemanly capitalism."⁵ In early pages of this study, Todd traces the origins of French informal empire in the writing of Anglophile economic liberals who looked to Britain as a model colonizer and imagined partnering with Britain in the industrial and commercial conquest of the world. In this book, England provides the model for how to make an empire and also for how to interpret one.

Todd writes against the tendency among historians of post-revolutionary France to ignore the regimes of nineteenth-century monarchs (who nonetheless governed for most of the nineteenth century). In diminishing the significance of these anti-democratic regimes, while focusing on the rise of the Third Republic, historians have misread the true scope and constitutive practices of French imperialism. Misled by the puny square footage of the colonial empire before 1870, they have failed to recognize modes of global expansion that did not require conquest or formal sovereignty. Under nineteenth-century French kings and especially Napoleon III, empire was less about conquest than capitalism. By contrast, empire in the nineteenth century, direct or indirect, was always about race. French advocates for informal empire understood this as a white supremacist project through which civilized races might dominate barbarous lands through technology, manufacturing, and free trade. Todd's emphasis on the importance of racial categories to economic liberalism in nineteenth-century France is one of several contributions of this important book.

A striking feature of *Velvet Empire* lies in the pointed archival choices that guide the study. Although this is a copiously researched book about empire, Todd does not rely on archives of the army or navy that are gathered at the *Service historique de la Défense* (which is not listed in his bibliography). He also makes little use of imperial archival series at the *Archives nationales d'outre mer* (Aix-en-Provence). Instead, Todd founds his claims about informal empire on the archives of the foreign ministry, on French economic and financial records, and on materials concerning foreign debtors and the Ottoman Empire.

Todd chides historians of French overseas colonies for their reliance on documents that warp their perspective. He contends, plausibly, that colonial archives, which are exclusively focused on war, coercion, and territorial administration, blind historians to the full scope of French overseas ambitions. Todd's exploration of neglected sources in the foreign ministry reveals how French political elites busily subverted whatever sovereignty they nominally recognized in nonwestern places by conquering markets and encouraging relationships of financial dependency.

French colonial subjects could not, under so-called *droit international privé*, engage in formal diplomatic relations with their colonial overlord—or with anyone else, for that matter. Because of the nature of the foreign affairs archive, documents contained there, insofar as they concern French influence-peddling abroad, will necessarily tell a story about *informal* empire—except at turning points, as when formerly sovereign

⁵ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. 6, no. 1 (1953): 1-15; Peter Cain and Anthony Gerald Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 2nd ed., (Harlow: Longman, 2012).

countries underwent imperial conquest (the case of Algeria in this study) or when they transitioned to independence. The inclusion of a country, or region, within the archive of the *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* requires that it enjoy some degree of recognition by the French government as a sovereign entity.

Todd's first chapter looks at nineteenth-century treatises, written during and after the Napoleonic era, which sought new tools for expanding French power without resorting to formal conquest. Statesmen including Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand and the socialite diplomat Abbé Dominique Georges Frédérique Dufour Du Pradt (confessor to Napoléon) viewed commerce and the extension of credit as alternatives to formal sovereignty. Todd reads these men as early contributors to a discussion about informal empire that became central to nineteenth-century political economy. The statesman François Guizot was also among the nineteenth century writers and statesmen who pictured informal empire as a Franco-English commercial and financial project. The utopian theorist Henri de Saint-Simon even hoped for an actual merger between the countries. Joined together by rail or tunnel, a new Anglo-Gallic cartel state would colonize the world and launch “a new era in the history of mankind” (53). Saint-Simon's mystical writings, in diluted form, became the credo of a generation of liberal technocrats. The economist Michel Chevalier, an apostate from Saint Simonism, imagined a new international division of labor dominated by England and France, with these two countries acting as the world's only manufacturing powers. Chevalier, who became professor at the College de France, became the architect of international treaties in the 1860s opening borders to free trade among European nations.

Chapter 2 attempts to resolve an apparent contradiction between this book's thesis—about the informal nature of French empire before 1870—and the French invasion (1830) and subsequent annexation of Algeria. This mammoth endeavor scarcely resembles those weaponless incursions discussed by nineteenth-century statesmen and mystics. Todd opts to represent Algeria as an instance of “informal empire *manqué*” (the title of chapter 2, 72). He urges us to distinguish early French plans for the colony during the 1830s from what French Algeria later became. Todd draws attention to efforts at collaboration with local elites with a view to ruling Algeria indirectly—including an early alliance with Abd el Kader, who became emir of Oran province with French support through the Treaty of Tafna (1837). According to Todd, it was the unwillingness of Ottoman officials to collaborate with infidels together with the clamor of settlers and the outbreak of famine that made informal empire impossible.

Informal empire meant that France could (and should) dominate foreign countries by commerce and credit without the aid of troops. Such a strategy presupposed a flourishing industrial sector and inexhaustible willingness to finance foreign loans. In chapter 3, Todd describes the worldwide enthusiasm for French consumer goods from 1820 to the fall of the Second Empire (1870). On the strength of luxury and semi-luxury goods with an identifiable brand—the *je ne sais quoi* of *bon goût*—French manufacturers enjoyed a level of prosperity and global reach that invites comparison with their British counterparts. French goods on the world market included wines and spirits, perfumes, cloth, and ready-to-wear clothing. New textiles, a particular focus of this chapter, were the key to France's rebirth as a commercial power in the wake of the French Revolution. Silk was France's leading export after 1850, helped by new loom technology enabling the production of innovative patterned textiles, especially velvet jacquard cloth (hence the book's title). After cloth came champagne, a global commodity that doubled as an enabler of global commerce. In Britain, which led the world in champagne consumption, the drink was the lubricant of the business world whose disappearance would “threaten a collapse of our social system” (123).

The role of French institutions in extending credit abroad were no less essential to the practice of informal empire. Chapter 4, “Conquest by Money,” is a brilliant exposition of France's role as the world's creditor, with loans raised in nineteenth-century Paris being paid to lenders including post-colonial South American states and the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan financed his wars with French loans. As Todd notes, acted as creditor to foreign states while amassing the world's largest national debt; in turn, the French treasury managed the debt by issuing bonds to the French public, who were avid small-scale investors: housewives

funneled their savings into state securities. Todd links this national predilection for public debt and habit of public bondholding to practices that originated under the Old Regime and found a champion in Talleyrand during the Restoration. This chapter also links the massive indemnity that Charles X imposed on the Haitian government in exchange for diplomatic recognition to the emergence of Paris as a capital of global finance. The need to provide massive loans to Haiti spurred the development of new lending structures that made Paris emerge “almost simultaneously with London as an international market for government bonds” (205). Investment was particularly high in the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt—setting the stage for the next chapter.

The fifth and final chapter of this book reconstructs the development of French informal empire in Egypt prior to that country’s 1882 annexation by the British government. Todd ends this book by offering a French perspective on a case study that imperial historians (notably Robinson and Gallagher) tend to view as the primal scene of Britain’s Scramble for Africa. French people (mostly men) were never more than a small fraction of Egypt’s European residents. Nonetheless, French culture attained an ascendancy in Egypt that exceeded that of any other nation, including Great Britain. The French civil code served as the model for the Ottoman civil code. Fluency in French was required of all Ottoman civil servants. Even judicial reforms in Egypt that were imposed to reduce French meddling in Egyptian internal affairs were modeled on France in the layout of courtrooms, the costumes of lawyers and judges, in courtroom etiquette, and in judicial procedure. Where previous chapters focus on the commercial, fiscal, and diplomatic character of informal empire, this chapter gives particular prominence to the law as a lever of French influence.

Todd is concerned with the mechanics of extraterritorial jurisdiction as embodied by consular courts. He tracks the maneuvering of French foreign residents as they scuttle the Egyptian legal system and award huge sums in civil damages to themselves. Frenchmen rejected the jurisdiction of local Egyptian courts over cases pitting European plaintiffs against Egyptian defendants. They also shrank the number of local intermediaries to whom their government accorded protected French status. The illegal extension of French extraterritorial jurisdiction made it possible for French merchants to extract massive indemnity payments from the Egyptian state for alleged wrongdoing by locals. These indemnities contributed to Egypt’s galloping public debt, which French banks stepped in to finance. The importance of lending by French and British banks to the ruined Egyptian state would generate new Egyptian state institutions, like the *Administration de la Dette publique* and the *Caisse de la Dette publique*, which remained key sites of French influence even after the Egypt’s annexation by Britain in 1882.

Todd’s book does not do much to revisit the nineteenth century as unearthing submerged portions of it. Blending economic, legal, and intellectual history, Todd’s narrative enlivens a period that has suffered neglect (though perhaps not as much neglect as he suggests). The book’s chapter on public debt and ideas of indebtedness, which Todd frames in fiscal, intellectual, and sociological terms, was a particular pleasure to read. That chapter can be read (and assigned) alongside chapters from Rebecca Spang’s *Stuff and Money during the French Revolution*, which delve into notions of debt and indebtedness during an earlier period.⁶

This book is beholden to British imperial historiography, which Todd invokes throughout the study (Chris Bayly, Robinson, Gallagher).⁷ This is not a reasonable grounds on which to fault Todd’s book, given the richness of British imperial historiography when compared with the French equivalent, at least until recently. Moreover, *Velvet Empire* diverges in key respects from the very British historians whom the author cites as influences. Despite this book’s admiring glance to the work of Bayly, Todd’s story of informal empire in this book sits uneasily beside Bayly’s emphasis on the violent authoritarianism of nineteenth-century legal regimes.

⁶ Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁷ Christopher Alan Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830*. Studies in Modern History (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016).

In an earlier article, “The French Imperial Meridian” (2011), Todd placed far more emphasis on the violence that subtended informal empire than he does in this study. The reason for this change of opinion, in view of the folkways of hardboiled French counterrevolutionaries circa 1820, is not clear.⁸ Given their detestable clamor about Haiti, their enthusiasm for reconquest, extermination, and re-peopling, it is curious that the same men, after Waterloo, should apostatize so readily to this new creed of soldierless dominion.

Despite superficial resemblances, *Velvet Empire* also diverges from the argument of Robinson and Gallagher in “The Imperialism of Free Trade.” Todd frames his study by insisting on the distinctive goals, methods, and Anglophile worldview of informal empire-builders who served nineteenth-century monarchs and opposes them to later republican exponents of territorial conquest. By contrast, the point of Robinson and Gallagher’s article was to challenge alleged discontinuities in the narrative of British imperialism by insisting that different manifestations of imperial power—by informal or formal means—pursued the same end.

It is not apparent where Todd draws the line between informal and formal empire. Nor is it clear from the chapter on Algeria how many soldiers there need to be on the ground before one concludes that the enterprise has veered irreversibly in the direction of conquest. According to Benjamin Claude Bower, for instance, there were nearly 30,000 soldiers in Algeria in 1834, increasing to 40,000 in 1837 and then 61,231 in 1840.⁹ Todd’s chapter on Algeria is useful in recalling the uncertainties that attend all imperial beginnings. Nonetheless, these troop numbers hint that the ultimate character of this colonial venture was determined by the army and not by the foreign ministry. Since the book’s methodology leads Todd to forgo colonial documents and the archives of the Armée de Terre in favor of diplomatic records, we see little of the tension between diplomatic schemes and army rampages. Finally, it is not easy to reconcile Todd’s understanding of informal empire with the royal *ordonnance* of 22 July 1834 placing “our possessions in North Africa (the former regency of Algiers)” under the authority of a governor-general, “exercising his powers under the orders and direction of the secretary of state, minister for war.”¹⁰ The 1862 annexation of three southern provinces in Vietnam by the treaty of Saigon raises the same question.¹¹ Why would King Louis-Philippe, or Admiral Bonard, the French negotiator in Saigon, bother with annexation if their goal was informal dominion?

My quibble with this engrossing book is perhaps not that it is too English, but that it is too French. Take the sentence, “France’s first intentions to colonize were tied in with Algeria’s potential, especially as a provider of tropical raw materials” (108). Or “France’s conquest of the Ottoman Empire by money was successful” (217). Or “France’s abstention, therefore, manifested a peculiarly strong attachment to informal dominance in Egypt” (270). Throughout this book, Todd hews to the Gallic tradition of depicting *la France* in anthropomorphic terms, as though the country were a one-headed volitional agent. This syntactic oddity has important consequences for the argument of this book. Only when it becomes possible to picture France as a collective being does it become reasonable to ask what she (third person singular) is thinking or planning. From what I know of unprofitable and ill-intentioned colonial ventures during the Second Empire (1852-1870), it is plain to me what anthropomorphic depictions of France always mask. By propping the colonial archives of French Guiana and the military archives of French Algeria against Todd’s book, we discover competing voices, clashing projects, men who favored conquest, and other men who envisaged empire in commercial terms. What ministry one happened to work for mattered to what sort of power one hoped to leverage and to what one said one believed. What we do not feel in Todd’s admirable book is the

⁸ David Todd, “A French Imperial Meridian 1814-1870,” *Past & Present*, No. 210 (February 2011), 155-186.

⁹ Benjamin Claude Bower, *A Desert Names Peace: The Violence of France’s Empire in the Algerian Sahara 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 43.

¹⁰ *Moniteur universel*, Wednesday, 15 August 1834, No. 225, 1. <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/gazette-nationale-ou-le-moniteur-universel/13-aout-1834/149/2005639/1>

¹¹ See Pierre Brocheux, *Indochina: an Ambiguous Colonization 1858-1954*, translated by Ly Lan Dill-Klein (Berkeley: University of California, 2009).

interministerial friction, joined by pressures from above and below, that shaped the practice of statecraft and the future of empires.

Explorations of informal empire have not been in fashion lately. Imperial history's cultural and global turns have shifted attention away from the economic processes, trade patterns, and metropolitan investments intrinsic to European empire-building in the long nineteenth century. For those interested in concealed structures of imperial influence, the United States has offered more abundant evidence for recent debate. Political scientists have isolated elements of soft power, of influence without annexation, and of undeclared empire, but their preoccupations have been largely American and twenty-first century, not European and nineteenth century.¹² In that earlier period, informal empire was for a long time associated primarily with the free trade imperialism of the British Empire, the power of its trading monopolies, and the tentacular reach of its global commerce.¹³ Extraterritoriality in China and the development of exclusive export arrangements with Latin America, Argentina especially, were favored examples of the process in action.¹⁴ The term informal empire offered a useful shorthand to describe external political influence exercised without the usual institutional and coercive instruments of 'formal' colonial control.¹⁵ It also gave imperial historians a nice dilemma to chew over: if the economic benefits of imperial exclusivity could be extracted without the human and financial costs of colonialism, why wasn't informal empire more prevalent? Answers were varied. Historicization offered reminders that latter day empires were built on the sediments of older ones—so administrative structures literally came with the territory. Inter-disciplinary interest in globalization indicated that transformational changes in technology, communications, migration, and transnational connection were too generic and just too global to allow even hegemonic imperial powers to keep particular regions or territories under their economic spell.¹⁶ Explorations of settler colonialism pointed to the violent reordering of societies on an inexorably expanding white frontier that globalized the color line.¹⁷ Geopolitics and strategic calculation suggested that imperial competition between European and, later, North American and Japanese rivals, was too intense to allow the more elastic, invisible ties of external economic control to

¹² The literature here is enormous. Foundational and hotly debated texts include Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Notable exceptions taking a longer-term view include: Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Marc-William Palen, *The Conspiracy of Free Trade: the Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalisation, 1846–1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Paul A. Kramer, "Embedded Capital: Political-Economic History, the United States, and the World," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 15 (2016), 331–62.

¹³ The classic exposition of this view and, tellingly, the first footnote in the present work, is John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, series 2:6 (1953), 1–15.

¹⁴ For a review of the literature in these connections, see: John Darwin, "Imperialism and the Victorians: the Dynamics of Territorial Expansion," *English Historical Review*, CXII:447 (1997), 614–42; Atul Kohli, *Imperialism and the Developing World: How Britain and the United States Shaped the Global Periphery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 2: "Britain's Informal Empire: Argentina, Egypt, China"; Ian Phimister, "Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China, c. 1900–1912," *Modern Asian Studies*, 40:3 (2006), 737–59; Jürgen Osterhammel, "China," in Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: IV: the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 650–60; Andrew S. Thompson, "Informal Empire? An Exploration in the History of Anglo-Argentine Relations, 1810–1914," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 24:2 (1992), 419–36. For the ensuing imperial disputes, see: Andrew Cobbing, "A Victorian Embarrassment: Consular Jurisdiction and the Evils of Extraterritoriality," *International History Review*, 40:2 (2018), 273–91. An excellent comparative treatment is: Turan Kayaoglu, *Legal Imperialism: Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Key exponents of the argument are Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins, see their *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), part II; more recently, and with a stronger focus on transnational culture: Gregory A. Barton, *Informal Empire and the Rise of One World Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁶ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Lorenzo Veracini, "Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination," in Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1–3; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

survive unchallenged. Most of all, informal empire was too abstract, too cold and impersonal to cope with scholarly recognition that understanding empire must involve those living under colonialism rather than just the imperialists imposing it.¹⁸

David Todd is no apologist for past historical fashions; nor is *A Velvet Empire* an intellectual throwback. Quite the reverse: the singular achievement of this superb book is to demonstrate the continuing salience of informal empire as an explanatory mechanism for imperialist reasoning and gathering colonial influence from the late eighteenth century to the start of the twentieth. Not only that, but it does so in reference not to the British Empire but to the French. This marks a big change of direction—away from the primacy of either the British Empire or the expanding settler ‘Anglosphere’ in studies of nineteenth century imperialism, and a welcome reassessment, not just of why and where French imperial networks of control extended, but of how they did so.¹⁹ So what does he say?

Taken in the round, *A Velvet Empire* navigates the routes taken by French ideas, French settlers, French money, and French products as agents of imperialism and, more precisely, of informal empire from the beginning of the French Revolution to the eve of World War I. Foregrounding transnational networks and patterns of connection from which the apparatus of state institutions are substantially absent, Todd questions simplistic narratives of nineteenth-century colonial conquest and unilateral imperial sovereignty. These, he makes clear, tend to misread the disputation and legal pluralities surrounding sovereignty arrangements with supposedly ‘dependent’ territories.²⁰ They also risk exaggerating the extent to which governments and other state agents saw ‘formal’ colonial incorporation as the logical endpoint of their imperial ambitions. In this reading, Algeria, the centerpiece of France’s nineteenth-century empire and a site of the cruellest excesses of colonialism, was not somehow destined for formal conquest but faced outright colonial annexation only after more elastic arrangements and local co-options were deemed to have failed. Todd, in other words, has much to say about that imperial history dilemma mentioned earlier: whether by accident, design, or cost-benefit analysis, the republics and monarchies of nineteenth century France went much further than is commonly recognized in accepting the wisdom and welcoming the fruits of informal empire. Indeed, whether in terms of French literary, artistic, and other cultural production or the luxury commodities—wines, silks, and high-end consumer products—intrinsic to what Todd dubs ‘champagne imperialism,’ France was a pioneer both of informal empire and what might now be described as ‘soft power.’

A Velvet Empire’s foremost concern is with the mid-century Second Empire of Napoléon III. More usually associated with the consolidation of formal colonial control in Algeria and a series of frustrated imperial adventures elsewhere, the Second Empire presided over a massive, imperially focused trade boom, which saw the volume of French exports more than treble over the two decades from 1848 (128). To be sure, this growth fitted a wider expansion of global trade at mid-century, but what Todd identifies as “the global commodification of French taste” was unique (151). Luxury trade became the motor of informal French imperial influence within the broader globalization processes of the time. Critically, this ‘champagne imperialism’ and the commercial prosperity that came with it declined markedly after the Second Empire fell.

¹⁸ Again, from a vast literature, a couple of foundational works are: Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ The most innovative treatment of this ‘Anglo-World’ remains James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: the Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Todd’s findings are consistent with the pioneering work of Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014) and, from the legal history standpoint, of Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: the Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), of Lauren Benton, “From International Law to Imperial Constitutions: the Problem of Quasi-Sovereignty, 1870-1900,” *Law and History Review*, 26:3 (2008), 595-619, and Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Not only would the subsequent Third Republic turn to more conventional methods of formal colonial conquest in Africa and Asia but successive French governments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw formal empire as precursor and partner to protectionism.

In a sense, then, *A Velvet Empire* is less iconoclastic in its treatment of the Third Republic, which was established after defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, than in its analysis of the mechanisms of expanding French global power that preceded it. In part, this informal imperialism of the 1820s to the 1860s rested on the prevalence of French merchant manufacturers (rather than factory-based corporations), the strength of their municipal trade lobbies, and the eagerness of regime officials to assist their quest for additional foreign markets. In part, it derived from the idiosyncrasies of France's mid-nineteenth-century financial market in which small investors—rather than wealthier City of London-type 'gentlemanly capitalists'—predominated. Facing limited opportunities for high returns on domestic investment, French small investors, of which there were many, jumped at government-sponsored schemes to put money into foreign lending. Todd is especially adept at showing the underlying continuities here, from Haiti in the 1820s, through Mexico in the 1860s, to the Ottoman Empire from the 1850s onward. Unusually, then, France's investment colonization was both statist and small investor-driven. French ministers and consular officials, French lawyers, and French banks were staunch defenders of extraterritoriality, refining its legal apparatus to meet France's imperial requirements. Large numbers of private investors meanwhile put their small pots of cash into state loans that became the financial instruments of French imperial influence, particularly so in the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptian Khedivate.

Todd might tread a well-worn path in viewing the Third Republic as a conventional territorial empire-builder, sending in troops and putting down flags, but he is not done with the arguments for the enduring importance of France's more informal imperialism. Central to his case is the insight that "formal" colonial control was sometimes the last resort option when opportunities for informal influence seemed likely to be closed off (274). In a final chapter disaggregating the substance of French connections inside the nominally 'British Egypt' established in 1882, Todd highlights the pivotal economic presence, the enduring cultural resonance, and the surreptitious political power of other foreigners—in this case, French ones—within the dependency of another imperial power. The extent of this influence, a French cuckoo in the nest of Britain's veiled Egyptian protectorate, looks starkly disruptive when these mechanisms of informal imperialism are laid bare.

Brought together, the arguments of *A Velvet Empire* make a powerful case, not just for the continued relevance of informal empire but for a more subtle reading of its operation. The power of money is part of the equation, but there's also much more. Drawing on the insights of legal history into layered sovereignty, on transnational perspectives about the power of cultural emulation, and on imperial history's global turn, the book throws new light on the pernicious infectivity of imperial influence and the benefits of keeping it hidden.

Response by David Todd, Sciences Po

Empire is about more than conquering and ruling colonies. This is the essential insight—of many historians and social scientists before me—that my book seeks apply to the French imperial experience in the nineteenth century.¹ I am thrilled that all three reviewers agree that this approach, despite the simplicity of its premise, offer something novel to our understanding of French imperialism, and especially honoured that this endorsement comes from such leading experts in the field. My students will know this to be heartfelt because over the years they've had to read a lot of Samir Saul on France's relations with the Arab world, of Miranda Spieler on the legal aspects of French colonial domination, and of Martin Thomas on the French colonial project in the twentieth century.² I would like to thank the reviewers warmly for locating the book's main argument so deftly in the historiography of modern empires and for wringing out so many interesting implications, several of which I had failed to perceive. And I am very grateful to Alexia Yates for her generous and insightful introduction to the roundtable.

However, it would be ill-mannered of me—especially in relation to a book that dedicates an entire chapter to the importance of good taste—not to focus here on the reviewers' legitimate and well-articulated reservations. Let me try and address three main concerns: the first has to do with my neglect of another, more violent and coercive facet of the French aspiration to empire (Spieler); the second with my hasty account of the unravelling of French informal power, especially in Egypt (Saul); and the third with the place of informal empire in the historiography of imperialism (Thomas).

Spieler is right that the book gives short shrift to another, “violent” and “unprofitable” facet of contemporary French imperialism—although I think the facet I focus on was also “ill-intentioned.” This was deliberate. I do not mean to elide the role of overt violence and coercion in nineteenth-century French imperial history. In some cases, such as the resurgence of the illicit French slave trade between 1815 and 1830, this violence could even be profitable. But early on in the project, I decided to highlight another dynamic, because its explanatory power seemed greater, and because so many scholars were already engaged in uncovering the coercive aspect of French imperial endeavours—not least Spieler in her own important work.³ I worried that violence, inherently more spectacular, risked overshadowing more insidious aspects of French imperial power. Saddling poor ex-colonies with unsustainable debt in order to turn them into client states may seem like a minor imperial sin, but this style of domination has also diminished the liberties and cut short the lives of millions. My book was an attempt to complete the history of nineteenth-century French imperialism rather than to give a full account.

Spieler also finds the book “too French”. I plead guilty to this charge, but I would like to invoke an extenuating circumstance: despite my name, I was born a French citizen, was raised and educated in France, and after twenty years in Britain, recently returned to live in France and work in a French university. What Spieler especially objects to is that I occasionally employ “France” as a grammatical subject: as a result, the book “hews to the infuriating Gallic tradition of depicting *la France* in anthropomorphic terms, as though invoking a one-headed volitional agent or humanoid grammatical subject.” I am not sure that using a country's name in this way is peculiarly French. (I checked: two eminent non-French historians, Linda Colley

¹ On early debates about the concept of informal empire, see Wm Roger Louis, ed., *Imperialism: the Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976).

² For instance Samir Saul, *La France et l'Égypte de 1882 à 1914: intérêts économiques et implications politiques* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 1997); Miranda F. Spieler, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Martin Thomas and Richard Toyce, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ In addition to Spieler, *Empire and Underworld*, see for instance Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, exterminer: sur la guerre et l'État colonial* (Paris, Fayard, 2005) or Benjamin C. Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: the Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

and Jürgen Osterhammel, whose scholarship has done much to demolish essentialist conceptions of the nation-state, also employ “Britain,” “China,” and many other countries’ names as grammatical subjects.) In the examples given by Spieler, “France” is a short-hand for “the French state” and not an attempt at personification à la Jules Michelet. I’m glad Spieler finds that the book is simultaneously very “English.” It is true that whatever analytical virtues it has owes a great deal to British imperial historiography, and I’m happy to record here my gratitude to my British teachers and colleagues for all I learnt from them.⁴ My book certainly does not conform to the research agenda of US historians of European empires, who tend to view slavery and settler colonialism as the true marks of imperialism. I confess I often find such US scholarship “too American” in the way it projects its national concerns onto the rest of the world.⁵ Historians should keep asking different questions and resist, as it were, the informal imperialism of US academe.

Spieler points to a more serious shortcoming when she notices the absence of French military archives in my bibliography. This is an important gap, which I hope others will fill. But these sources will not necessarily diminish the significance of the aspiration to informal domination. French soldiers were not all hell-bent on ultra-violence and territorial conquest. The book does consider a few military documents which made their way to other archives. For instance, it looks at the reports to the government from Ange de Mackau, the navy officer in charge of imposing harsh terms of independence on Haiti in 1825, who was adamant that securing commercial and financial privileges was preferable to a hazardous attempt at re-conquest. What the leaders of the French Navy and the French Army hoped to achieve in the Rio de la Plata in the 1840s, in the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean war (1853-1856) and the intervention in Lebanon (1860-1861), in China during the Second Opium War (1856-1860) or in Mexico during the ill-fated attempt to create a monarchy beholden to French power, should be investigated. But it does not seem self-evident to me that their goal was territorial aggrandizement, if only because in most instances it would have been grossly unrealistic.

As emphasized by Christopher Bayly, historians need to eschew the retrospective teleologies of the late-nineteenth-century, “high imperialist” era.⁶ The ordinance of 22 July 1834, invoked by Spieler to suggest that Algeria was from the beginning a formal colonial project, merely legalized *de facto* military occupation in Algiers and three other coastal towns. Contrary to another version of the decree which the French government rejected, it emphatically did not annex the Regency of Algiers.⁷ Spieler finds further evidence of French territorial ambitions in the size of French military forces stationed in North Africa (c. 60,000 in 1840). Yet to repeat the point made above, not all large-scale military operations aim at formal annexation. Do the hundreds of thousands of US military forces employed in the Gulf War of 1991 or the Iraq war of 2003 prove that the United States was seeking territorial dominion in the Middle East? It was factors beyond original French plans—the failure of earnestly attempted collaboration with Abd al-Qadir, and a desire to avenge French humiliation during the 1840 Eastern crisis—which convinced French officialdom to undertake the formal conquest of the entire former Regency of Algiers.

Spieler also suggests that the 1862 treaty of Saigon, by which France annexed the eponymous town and its hinterland (c. 20,000 km²), prefigured the establishment of French Indochina (c. 700,000 km²). But the initial purpose of this acquisition was to facilitate economic expansion and the projection of French power in Asia, rather than territorial empire-building. French officials wished to emulate British Singapore rather than the British

⁴ I am especially indebted to the work of the regretted Christopher Bayly, including his *Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). I was also influenced by Peter J. Cain and Anthony H. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2015* 3rd ed. (London, Routledge, 2015) and John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ In the case of the French empire, see for instance the extraordinary breadth of US scholarship on Saint-Domingue (Haiti) and, to a slightly lesser extent, on colonial Algeria.

⁶ Christopher Bayly, “The First Age of Global Imperialism, c. 1760-1830,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26: 2 (1998): 28-47.

⁷ Claude Bontemps, “Une première occasion manquée en Algérie: le projet de loi Mérielhou,” in Chahira Boutayeb, ed., *La Constitution, l’Europe et le droit* (Paris : éditions de la Sorbonne, 2013), 83-114.

Raj in India. Hence the instructions of the minister of the Navy to Admiral Bonard, the negotiator of the treaty, in 1862: “We do not wish to found [in Cochinchina] a colony in the sense given to this word by our fathers, with European settlers, institutions, regulations, and privileges.” Instead, it should serve as the centre of “a veritable empire” by which he meant an economic empire, based on “free commercial intercourse” for all nations.⁸ Informal empire does not preclude—in fact, it probably requires—small annexations, which constitute nodes for the global projection of military and economic power.

How do such imperial formations unravel? On this, Saul is correct that the book can be tentative at times, because I find it hard to pinpoint a single cause. Instead, I put forward several explanatory factors, some domestic and some global. But in the conclusion, I emphasize the role of external changes, especially the emergence of new protectionist great powers (Germany, the United States), and the onset of the Great Depression of 1873-1895, which dealt a severe blow to French luxury and leisure industries. When I wrote that the rise of republicanism and formal imperialism were “connected” to the floundering of the French model of development, I wanted to suggest that the former—the adoption of a more territorial political economy—derived from the latter—relative economic decline—rather than the opposite. I did not mean to suggest that republicanism *per se* brought down informal imperialism. It seems that Saul and I therefore essentially agree on the sequence of events.

On the unravelling of French domination in Egypt, the jewel of France’s informal crown, Saul is unconvinced by my attempt to explain French abstention in 1882. He is right of course that the nationalists led by ‘Urabi made unlikely collaborators of informal rule. But delusions can play a significant part in history, and I only meant to suggest that the prospect of such collaboration was entertained by Radical Republicans such as Georges Clemenceau—not by government officials—and that this sufficed to deprive the moderate republican ministry of the parliamentary majority it needed to intervene. In any case, my main point was to try and change the conventional exam question set to generations of British history undergraduates (“Why did Britain occupy Egypt in 1882?”) and ask instead why the French did not take part in the occupation, although they were invited to do so by their British partners. By pointing to a broader breakdown in international or imperial cooperation Saul helpfully points to another, perhaps more significant factor.

In his review, Thomas offers a masterful account of the historiography of informal empires, and its connections to the interest of International Relations theorists in the role of soft power. To complete this, one may wonder why such a relatively old concept was neglected for so long by (mostly French) historians of French imperialism. I can think of two main reasons. The first is the rapid dismantling of imperial history in French universities in the wake of decolonisation: while in Britain privately endowed chairs survived and their holders had to reinvent the field, in France the state encouraged historians to turn their attention to topics more germane to the country’s new geopolitical goals—hence the vibrancy, in French scholarship, of transnational perspectives on European history, with a special focus on the entanglement of French and German history. The second is the prevalence of a Marxist-Leninist understanding of what imperialism consisted in, so that even anti-Communists such as Raymond Aron felt obliged to dismiss the concept of informal empire as a variation on a Marxist theme.⁹ Conversely, the lesser importance of orthodox Marxism in Anglo-American debates facilitated the emergence of subtler analyses of the economic impetus behind imperial expansion: not only the emphasis laid by Robinson, Gallagher and their disciples on informal empire, but also William A. Williams’ “Wisconsin school” of diplomatic history, which highlighted the quasi imperial nature of the United States’ efforts to integrate the global economy in the twentieth century.¹⁰

⁸ Quoted in Marcel Emerit, “Les méthodes coloniales de la France sous le Second Empire,” *Revue africaine*, 87 (1943), 210.

⁹ Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1962), 263-279.

¹⁰ William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing, 1959).

Informal empire may come across as a little quaint, but it is not a stale concept. It quietly continues to inform influential interpretations, such as the paradigm of gentlemanly capitalism in the history of British imperialism, and in a more understated way, broader historical interpretations of empire as the layering rather than full imposition of sovereignty.¹¹ I think that it was worth reviving in its original raw form in the French case because it had not yet been done and can help generate new questions about France, European empires, and the world in the nineteenth-century. But I believe there are other merits in going back to the original insight of informal empire. Dismissing it as too vague and focusing on formal colonial rule carries the implicit message that the West's imperial tendencies were something of the past. Using it undiluted can help ask awkward questions about enduring French domination in Sub-Saharan Africa or the United States' policies in much of the world. Could it be that we scholars want to shun the concept because it is *too* relevant to our present style of imperial misdemeanors?

But I want to end on a self-critical rather than accusatory note. The reviews by Saul, Spieler and Thomas are very generous about the book's accomplishments, and too kind or polite to highlight two limitations I feel I ought to acknowledge. The first is that it says too little about French informal imperial endeavors within Europe. Informal imperialism can draw on cultural essentialism as well as racist conceptions to legitimize asymmetries of power. A prominent example in French imperial history, prefiguring the efforts examined in the book, was the creation of revolutionary Sister Republics in the 1790s and of a wider array of monarchical satellites in the Napoleonic era, beyond the formal empire of the 130 *départements*. A second, even more significant omission is that the book does not adequately discuss the motives and role of foreign collaborators with French informal domination.¹² This is a slightly disingenuous regret, because I lack the linguistic skills to tackle most aspects of this question, but I would be thrilled if others were to carry out further research along those lines.

¹¹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹² In the manner which Edward Shawcross examined the contribution of Mexican monarchists to French attempts at informal dominion in Mexico, in *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).