

What Is Informal Imperialism?

Mathieu Gotteland, M.A.
 Doctorant en histoire, allocataire du Ministère de la Défense
 Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne

Abstract: This article aims to explain in a theoretical way, but with practical historical examples the complex notion of informal imperialism. First analyzing imperialism(s) and colonialism as a whole, it will then try to characterize and categorize more specifically what is informal imperialism. Comparing imperialism with the our understanding of space, a grid of understanding is thus applied to imperialism as a whole, to then qualify and address the informality of the phenomenon, and give theoretical tools based on practical historical cases for the historian and the political scientist.

Keywords: informal imperialism, imperialism, empire, colonialism, colony

"In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle,
 but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.
 Indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth,
 unending as the flow of the rivers and streams;
 like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew;
 like the four seasons, they pass away to return once more."
 Sun Zi 孫子, *The Art of War*, V, 5-6 (tr. Lionel Giles)

Introduction: Analyse and Theory of Imperialism(s) and Colonialism

Imperialism is the obtention of a decisive influence on a country or one of its elements in the aim of controlling it. We can always consider the notion of imperialism as an ideology, a process and a result with this constant: it is the will to (*ideology*), the attempt to (*process*) or the very creation (*result*) of an empire. It is a very large spectrum that we find at every era of human history when existed politically organized societies¹. It is applicable all the same to Ancient Roma,

1 Ann E. Killebrew, in her book *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.* (Society of Biblical Lit., 2005), in her chapter about "Egypt in Canaan", regrets that so little attention be given to "these phenomena in premodern periods of history." (p. 53)
 © 2017 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 15, Fall 2017 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>
 See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

Alexander the Great, China, or European colonialism in the globalization era, but is still a valuable historical concept in recent history and nowadays.

Thucydide first said so, 24 centuries ago². After him, the *pleonexia* (πλεονεξία), which is the desire to own more than others do, is one of the fundamental feelings leading both individuals and states. Taking the example of the conquest of the city of Melos by Athens, he explained then that imperialism went through three periods: *euphoria*³, *excessiveness*, and *failure* in establishing a stable situation as the imperialistic state faces a resistance ready to every sacrifice rather than surrendering to it, and ends up by the control of a vacuum, which is the punishment of his *hybris* (ὕβρις; the breaking of the rules of the cosmos).

This spectrum that is imperialism, such as space, has three dimensions: the width would be the *target*, the depth would be the *intensity and formality*, the length would be the numerous *domaines* concerned by imperialism. A specific combination of these three parameters, which nuances are infinite⁴, truly defines imperialism applied to a specific historical case.

The attempt of this paper is first to try to define imperialism as a whole, and search for suitable and scientifically relevant categories so as to order the different concrete cases of imperialism within these three above mentioned dimensions and different combinations of nuances and intensities in these dimensions, from *nominal* to *total imperialism*; secondly to define more specifically and deepen the analyse about one specific and until now underestimated type that is *informal imperialism* in both a theoretical and applied manner. We will thus try to answer the remark of Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch about the inability of the specialist to confront theory of imperialism with its historical global reality⁵.

The width or *target* can greatly vary, and imperialism may apply to such geographical scales as a country, a region⁶, but also a city or an even smaller area⁷. In the same way, imperialism may target not only a territory, but a people (ethny, "race"⁸, nation, communities defined by such criterias

2 Inaugural lesson of Georges Méautis, pronounced in Neuchâtel, on November 9th 1939, about "Thucydide and the Athenian Imperialism", quoted on <http://www.contrepointphilosophique.ch> (May 2003)

3 Probably best summed up in the rhetorics of an advisor to George W. Bush published in 2004 in The New York Times Magazine, and quoted in STEINMETZ, George, "Empire et domination mondiale", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), p. 6

4 Imperialism as been qualified as a spectrum in GOLUB, Philip, "'Un goût de sang dans la jungle' : l'Empire américain revisité", *Mouvements*, nr 57 (2009), p. 161

5 COQUERY-VIDROVITCH, Catherine, "De l'impérialisme britannique à l'impérialisme contemporain : l'Avatar colonial", *l'Homme et la société*, nr 18 (1970), pp. 61-90

6 Such as influence zones and their nuances, for example in the dying empires (China, Ottoman Empire), but also in Persia, or in so-called buffer states.

7 Such as concessions, leased territories, trading posts...

8 Justification of imperialism and colonialism through racist theories can lead to the realization or the deepening of this imperialism/colonialism against specific "races."

as religion⁹, culture, language, common history, etc.), a natural resource, real or virtual (sometimes imagined and theorized by the imperialistic entity¹⁰), or even an undefined target. The Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter¹¹ gave this very definition of imperialism, that is "a targetless disposition of a state to violent expansion with no possible boundaries¹²."

The depth or *the intensity and formality* can be very light or total from one historical case to another. The lightest intensity would bring *nominal imperialism*: nominal integration of a specific target into an empire, with no or few concrete measures as a realization of this virtual state of affairs; this goes for Chinese tributary states, the organization of the ancient Persian empire or some cases of colonized areas with no colonial rule. *Total imperialism* would have full intensity in all domains of imperialism on a specific target and can be translated into a full annexation of one territory, eventually followed by the killing, displacement or considerable diminishing of its indigenous population (in modern history, the Caribbean area, Asian Russia, the United States, Australia are the most famous examples, in recent history, note the integration of such a policy in nazism for instance), so as to entirely dispose of the said target¹³.

The *formality* of imperialism, which is another character to be included in the depth dimension, is a relatively new question in historiography, as we will see later on, as we describe and analyse *informal imperialism*. It can yet be defined in a first approach as the opposite of a *formal imperialism*, that is a *colony*, or another kind of formal integration of a specific target into an empire, which is recognized (inside and/or outside the empire) and administered as such.

The length or the various *domains* touched by imperialism can be extended very largely, but is traditionally ordered in four categories, which are: *political imperialism*, *military imperialism*, *economic imperialism*, *cultural imperialism*. An imperialism touching every of these domains should be considered as really *total*, although for some amount of time now awareness is raised as to the behaviour, understanding and reaction of the colonizing and the colonized one; it is a process

9 The muslims of China, the christians of the Ottoman Empire, etc.

10 Through the relation between knowledge and power, cf. ASANO TAMANOI, Mariko, "Knowledge, Power, and Racial Classification: The 'Japanese' in 'Manchuria'", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 59, nr 2 (may 2000), pp. 248-276 ; FAN, Fa-Ti, "Victorian Naturalists in China: Science and Informal Empire", *The British Journal of the History of Science*, vol. 36, nr 1 (March 2003), pp. 248-276

11 Austrian Minister of Finances in 1919.

12 SCHUMPETER, Joseph A., *Aufsätze zu Soziologie*, Tübingen, 1953, p. 74, cité in FISCHER, Nils, *Die militärischen Auslandsinterventionen der USA seit 1945 - Sicherung des Friedens oder Neo-Imperialismus?*, GRIN Verlag, 2007 (Examensarbeit, 2004, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität-Münster)

13 As a counter-argument, Eugênio Vargas Garcia has argued that this stage is almost never reached, as too many counter-weights hang in the balance, and reaffirms the relativity of power as one of the basis concepts of political science. VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), pp. 356-357

seen as a relation of domination between collectives¹⁴.

This is a trap to easy to fall into when studying the process of imperialism to see it as one-sided, and to equalize domination and determination, danger pointed out by Philip Ehrensaft: Imperial domination of a target does not make it a passive periphery, but dominated dynamics and proper realities interact and function within the framework of this domination¹⁵. Some authors try to point out a primacy of the periphery¹⁶, others plead for a reassessment of the place of the dominated ones¹⁷, but most now agree to get out of a framework of thought opposing what Eugênio Vargas Garcia calls the radical-peripheric theory versus a superimperialistic theory, one focusing to heavily on the periphery and the other on the metropole¹⁸, with grave outcomes in each case when studying empire.

When the colonized one has the ability to react to imperialism or colonization through submission, adaptation, selective collaboration or resistance¹⁹, not to forget adhesion, the colonizing one has various motivations, moral concerns towards the imperialism process and this *moral dimension* is not to be forgotten, given its importance and consequences.

Now we should analyze a specific kind of imperialism, and probably the most widely known, which we claim is a subcategory of this concept, that is *colonialism*. Too often in the wider audience are these two notions used as synonyms. These dimensions of imperialism we quickly attempted to order and define so as to give theoretical tools in the interstanding of this wide concept can be used to define colonialism as a mere *subcategory* of imperialism.

Firstly, we must remark that colonialism is a historical concept useful, like imperialism, for the study of every era of human history knowing politically organized societies. Secondly, in the West the notion of colonialism is too often restricted to European colonialism in the rest of the world between the end of the 15th century and the "decolonization era" following the Second World

14 OSTERHAMMEL, Jürgen, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Princeton, 1997

15 EHRENSAFT, Philip, "The Political Economy of Informal Empire in Pre-Colonial Nigeria, 1807-1884", *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne d'études africaines*, vol. 6, nr 3 (1972), pp. 451-490

16 WEBSTER, Anthony, "Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 43, nr 4 (Dec. 2000), p. 1009; STEINMETZ, George, "Empire et domination mondiale", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), pp. 5 & 17

17 DUMASY, François, "L'Impérialisme, Un débat manqué de l'histoire contemporaine française ?", *Afrique & Histoire*, vol. 3, nr 1 (2005), pp. 57-69

18 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 354

19 MÜHLHAHN, Klaus, *Herrschaft und Widerstand in der "Musterkolonie" Kiautschou, Interaktionen, 1897-1914*, München, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2000 ; Eugênio Vargas Garcia insists that cooperation always stays an option, also in the case of informal imperialism: VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), pp. 357

War (roughly 1945-1975), partly through a eurocentrist viewpoint on world history and partly because of the extensive development in Europe of pro- and anticolonialist theories. Although European worldwide expansion in the so-called globalization era offers good case studies of imperialism and colonialism, such a notion as colonialism may not be restricted to such examples. It is important to keep this in mind to understand that the very notion of colonialism is a useful tool to understand historical situations in European and extra-European contexts before, during this era of roughly 5 centuries, and after the so-called "decolonization era" until nowadays (To take a few examples of nowadays extra-European colonialism, we could lay our eyes on West Papua [Indonesia], or Tibet and East Turkestan, a.k.a. Xinjiang 新疆 [China]).

The notion of colonialism refers to an imperialism on a specific, designated territory in a most intense and an absolutely formal way – most of the time through annexation – with recognition inside the colonizing country – and in the case of European colonialism internationally. The aim is to directly administrate the territory, control natural resources, dispose of a human capital which can be used as a work force, for conscription, or as a market, without interference of any kind from the indigenous population, although the behaviour from the colonizing one towards this indigenous population can greatly differ from one colony to another.

The colonizing one may want to befriend, assimilate, exterminate, displace the indigenous population, or simply may stay indifferent to its fate (for instance when the aim is only the control of the territory and its natural resources). This is mainly this parameter, along with the scale of the target, which really categorize the colonies. Colonies might be only partially controlled and influenced economically and culturally, or not militarily occupied on a wide scale, but the political power is always in the hands of the colonizing one.

I- The Width or Target: From the "Concessions Studies" to a Wider Scale Application

We will now try to introduce, conceptualize and analyze the notion of *informal imperialism*, which is discussed since 1953 with the papers of J. Gallagher and R. Robinson²⁰, and which we evoked earlier through the issue of formality and informality, with the grid we created for analyzing imperialism as a whole. Earlier theories though already engaged the debate about such a form of imperialism: Karl von Roseritz, leader of the German community in Rio Grande do Sul (in Brazil), supported in a public speech in 1886 the *Greek colonization* as opposed to a *Roman colonization*.

20 GALLAGHER, J., ROBINSON, R., "The Imperialism of Free Trade", *The Economic History Review*, (1953) ;

ROBINSON, R., GALLAGHER, J., DENNY, Alice, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 1963
 © 2017 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 15, Fall 2017 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>
 See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

The latter one, he claimed, sought political annexation; the Greek way, though, sought economical and cultural penetration in a country remaining politically independent²¹. Bismarck himself in his overseas expansion policy, always in a view of maintaining the balance in Europe and avoiding conflicts, preferred this option over a franker and more formal imperialism, which would need a colonial administration, a military occupation and unnecessary expenses. The informal, indirect rule, sometimes labeled as *pénétration pacifique*, can be both more efficient and less risky for the imperialistic nation, but is also very fragile and is likely not to be very long-lasting, which brought some decision makers, sometimes against their better judgement, to formalize this informal empire²².

We will for this purpose and in the aim of applying this theory to a specific historical case, use mainly the example of China as the recipient of multiple and diverse informal imperialisms. On the part of the imperialist nations, Great Britain, Germany, but also France are commonly quoted for having established an informal rule in Latin America, the Ottoman Empire, China, etc. It is also noticeable that Japanese imperialism was conceived in the Chinese context of the *treaty port system*, which came to define this very system and became "a Japanese definition of success"²³.

H.S. Ferns in 1953 identified four ways of achieving subordination of a target to an empire: these are conquest; establishing a government of native people implementing policies agreeable to the interventionist power²⁴; the use of advisory officers to pilot the policies of the weaker one; and finally the establishment of extraterritorial privileges, military bases, and special areas where the law of the stronger one prevails²⁵. We should also add to this list maintaining a target in a state of dependency through trade and investments; and bringing support to ethnic, religious minorities, political, military factions²⁶, etc. so as to pressure and/or salvage a government from the danger thus created, while obtaining more direct control²⁷ over specific areas/populations/resources. This

21 FORBES, Ian L.D., "German Informal Imperialism in South America before 1914", *The Economic History Review*, vol. 31, nr 3 (august 1978), pp. 384-398

22 SCHÖLLGEN, Gregor, KIEBLING, Friedrich, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, Oldenburg Verlag, 2009, p. 52; WEBSTER, Anthony, "Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 43, nr 4 (Dec. 2000), pp. 1003-1025

23 BEASLEY, William G., *Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 14

24 MANN, Michael, "Impérialisme économique et impérialisme militaire américains – Un renforcement mutuel ?", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), pp. 21-22

25 FERNS, H.S., "Britain's Informal Empire in Argentina, 1806-1914", *Past & Present*, vol. 4 (nov. 1953), pp. 60-75

26 BELL, Peter, "Desarrollo del capitalismo en Tailandia: Imperialismo y clases sociales", *Estudios de Asia y Africa*, vol. 15, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2000), p. 317

27 The notion of control is central for imperialism itself, but vital when it comes to the informality of empire. cf. VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 354 & 357; DOYLE, Michael W., *Empires*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, quoted in STEINMETZ, George, "Empire et domination mondiale", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), pp. 6-7

demonstrates very clearly that formal imperialism (conquest/annexation) is merely an option for an imperialistic state²⁸, and that many other ways – which belong to the category of informal imperialism – are at their disposal to bring a target into their power.

Economical and financial asymmetry *de facto* can indeed participate of an imperial process, but it is insufficient by itself to be part of informal imperialism. There is an autonomy between political and economical power (with selective collaboration): The economical dominance can only be decisive in the diagnosis when added to other factors²⁹, such as was the case for China.

During about a century (from the treaty of Nanjing 南京 to the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the consequent civil war) when China was a prey to foreign imperialism, the country knew, from various metropolises simultaneously, all these ways applied to her: annexation of territory in Macau (a.k.a. Aomen 澳门) and Hong-Kong (a.k.a. Xianggang 香港); the establishment of a native government favorable to the interventionist power(s) (notably through foreign support to the republican revolution); the use of various foreign advisors to government, provinces and army; extraterritoriality status, creation of concessions, leased territories, influence zones³⁰ (special areas); maintaining the country in a state of (financial) dependency, through loans, investments, trade, the control of customs, etc.; support to various seditious or dangerous factions while creating a directer threat to the central power through the establishment of permanent foreign occupation corps in the north of the country.

The very concept of informal imperialism has found in the past years a rebirth with the deeper and more thorough study of the foreign establishments in China, that is the *influence zones, leased territories* and above all the study of the *concessions*. Pierre Singaravélou points out in his paper about the concessions system in the Northern Chinese city of Tianjin that "the study of the concessions allows [...] to territorialize the informal empire", which "is also inscribed in the urban area³¹." The common understanding of imperialism is the control by a dominating power of

28 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 354

29 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 356

30 Pablo Lacoste defines influence zones as model of analysis in an international system with two relatively strong and expansionist actors A & B, and two relatively weak actors C & D, influencing the policy of one of these actors vis-à-vis the other three. It is a power policy, of a machiavelic kind, where the subordinated actors are not consulted and their interests are disregarded, in a realistic mechanism aiming for peace keeping, together with the concept of a balance of power. LACOSTE, Pablo, "El concepto de Zonas de Influencia y su aplicación en las relaciones entre Argentina y Chile", *Estudios internacionales*, year 33, nr 131/132 (July-Dec. 2000), p. 66; in the case of China, the concept has been used mainly to maintain a monopole over prospective or real imperial power in definite areas, without Chinese consultation.

31 SINGARAVÉLOU, Pierre, "Dix empires dans un mouchoir de poche. Le territoire de Tientsin à l'épreuve du

countries or new large entities federating several former political entities (for example in India); but imperialism may as well target smaller territories.

Concessions, which were first designed by China, and intended so as to keep the foreigners from entering the Chinese territory, became later on a symbol of the unequal treaties and the foreign imperialisms in China. They are themselves only a small part of a wider Chinese city, and are always very small areas. Often concessions responding to different foreign authorities exist in the same city. The extreme case is the city of Tianjin, where nine different nations owned a concession at some point in time (France, Great-Britain, Japan, the United States, Germany, Russia, but also Belgium, Italy and even Austria-Hungary), and which is a true microcosm, in the Greek sense of the term (a miniature world). This concession or *treaty port system* is based on the principle that paradoxically, the cessions of the said territories "don't affect from the point of view of the law the territorial sovereignty of China³²." In the spirit of the establishment of such concessions, which is a *de facto* system, in the zones thus occupied by foreigners administrative powers were only conceded on a *municipal* level, and "in the aim of ensuring a peaceful residence for foreigners³³". Overtime, these restrictions went obsolete, which explains the many subcategories of concessions proposed by the author of this PhD thesis of 1925 on the question: *settlements vs. concessions, Konzessionen* (national) *vs. Niederlassungen* (international), and *de facto vs. de jure*. We won't go further in the detail of this complex question, but only to state that these "concessions" grew naturally in the 1890's to become national "micro-colonies" where the imperialistic powers controlled the leasing of the ground, had their own police, perceived taxes, were outside the jurisdiction of Chinese law³⁴, and in the special case of the city of Tianjin 天津, obtained the right to fortify the said concessions, to keep troops, so that China held few regalian powers if any in these theoretically Chinese territories. This illustrates perfectly the very fine border between the different historical notions we here discuss, as what began as a very informal and non-imperial process on Chinese territory ended as a form of imperialism closer to colonialism than informal imperialism: this very fine border can also be very blur, even for the involved actors.

We also could illustrate the possibility of imperialism targeting not a territory but a more abstract target such as a religious group with the traditional French protectorate over Christians in Turkey and China particularly (even if in the late 1890's Germany obtained the religious

phénomène concessionnaire (années 1860-1920)", in BLAIS, Hélène, CORONIL, Florence, CORONIL, Pierre (eds), *Territoires impériaux, Une histoire spatiale du fait colonial*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011, pp. 271-296

32 SING, Chan Chung, *les Concessions en Chine*, Paris, les Presses universitaires de France, 1925, p. 3

33 *id.*

34 *id.*, pp. 78-79

protectorate over the Christians of the Shandong 山东 province), or the ongoing battle between France and Germany in China between the Boxer War (1900-1901) and World War One for the protectorate over and the control of Chinese muslims (with Russia and the United Kingdom trying the same in their respective influence zones and beyond).

We evoked earlier the possibility for an imperialism to have an undefined target. The Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil theorizes that this untargeting imperialism is the third stage of imperialism: a *global imperialism*, as opposed to a *national imperialism*, which would seek informal rule with the means and in the interest of one nation. Global imperialism, on the contrary would be an imperialism carried on by transnational networks, in a globalized economical and financial context, themselves being supported by the so-called metropolises, even though among them the United States assume a hegemonic role³⁵. What Coronil here describes is a system which can be satisfied with any and every prey satisfying on an economical point of view, but no specific target. Beyond Coronil's theory, this paves the way to consider other metropolises than states: metropolises, as were stated earlier, have to be politically organised societies. Banks, churches, corporations, or on a smaller geographical scale street gangs can very much fit in this perspective as actors for informal imperialism.

II- The Depth or the Intensity and Formality: From "Informal Colonies" to the Case of the "Dying Empires"

One extreme case of colonies which developed mainly in the end of 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century are so-called *informal colonies*, in such extent as these colonies fulfill every criterium which makes a colony, except the pure formality of it. Such are the so-called *protectorates*, secured through the elaboration of asymmetrical treaties. In the case of China, the so-called German influence zone in the Shandong province was in fact a German colony, recognized as such not *de jure*, but *de facto*, both by China and internationally. The examples though of such informal colonies are infinite, and we could quote for France: Morocco, Tunisia, Annam; for Great Britain: Indian principalities, Egypt, etc.

Another case is a metropole formally entirely withdrawing from a target country, without losing so much in the intensity of its endeavours in the said country, as to bring it into a sphere of influence and a commercial/political dependency. Such is the *sub-imperium* granted to Brazil, by

35 CORONIL, Fernando, "Globalización liberal o imperialismo global? El presente y sus diferencias", unpublished PhD thesis, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Sede Ecuador, 2002, p. 9

Great Britain, for Uruguay³⁶. London then so-to-say subcontracted its imperial duties to an intermediary state without losing influence in the target country, which was then considered a commercially strategic stake. The same Uruguay will later on be taken back from Brazil by Great Britain, in an always very informal, but also an always more intense way so that she, until the 1900's at least, became a British informal colony. This successful coming back of the European metropole into Uruguayan affairs proves enough the on-going intensity of British endeavours in the country during the "sub-imperium era." Another example would be the so-called "Françafrique"³⁷, the French "pré carré" in the former colonies the metropole held in Africa and let go for the most part in 1960. A system of informal imperialism, based on economical, commercial, military, cultural, political dependency has lived on for at least half a century, and the debate is now very alive in France and Africa, as to whether "Françafrique" is still governing these theoretically independent countries; debate revived by the recent French interventions in Centrafrica and Mali. Without taking any position on this issue, this example shows at least how blur a line there is by means of informality, when it comes to empire.

Shifting the focus to both informality and intensity in the imperial process once more opens new ways of investigations for history as well as for social sciences. The typical case of the early 20th century was the very unstable situation of both the Ottoman Empire and China³⁸. While weakening and being taken down slowly into a state of anarchy, these states were in the same times the preys for many imperial nations, competing to get a share. It is safe to say that in the history of both countries, none of the above knew such a state of decay in terms of power, law enforcement, finances, in one word in terms of *control*, than in the 15 years preceding World War One. And while these states lost controls over their nations, territories, ressources over the years and under international pressure, the imperialistic powers took over and competed from the political to the economical level. The greatest part of regalian power was taken away, and then distributed.

That is what Sun Yat-Sen called a *hypocolony*, with a reference to chemistry: while colonies are the prey of one nation only and submit to the one, hypocolonies such as China were to submit to many nations, thus putting her into an inferior level still³⁹. Analogies can be found in Hobson's and Lenin's works with the term *semi-colony* being used for Latin America.

36 WINN, Peter, "British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century", *Past & Present*, vol. 73 (nov. 1976), pp. 100-126

37 ZACK-WILLIAMS, Alfred, "Neo-Imperialism and African Development", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 40, nr 136, pp. 179-184

38 They are called by Reşat Kasaba: "reluctant friends" to Britain, in his case study: KASABA, Reşat, "Treaties and Friendships: British Imperialism, the Ottoman Empire, and China in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of World History*, vol. 4, nr 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 215-241

39 WEN, Suen, *le Triple Démisme*, Shanghai, Bureau sinologique de Zi-Ka-Wei, 1930

This leads us naturally to the question of the "failed"⁴⁰ or "failing states". We will not enter the very vivid debate over these "black spots"⁴¹ on the map, and/or the "fragility" of the said states, debate inflating ever since the fall of the USSR, but which overlaps some concerns over the decolonization process, notably in Africa. Yet indubitably, there are countries (or regions) which either lack the means, the will to enforce supposedly regal powers, while other where these powers are enforced, are very much disregarded by the international community as unlawful themselves. This situation, beyond the ongoing debate, is very real and creates a sort of vacuum of power, such as the one we could describe for the dying empires with a historical point of view.

This issue is not new though in human history, and we only have to link separatism with foreign influence to establish an imperialistic frame to some of these states or regions, the most obvious examples during the 20th century being Manchukuo (with a Japanese informal imperialism, 1932 to 1945) and Katanga (with a Belgian informal imperialism, 1960 to 1963).

We could bring the argument as far as linking anti-imperialism itself with informal imperialism, which was true for the American "*Libertadores*" during the Spanish-American War of 1899-1900⁴², or through the Panislamic views (Germany and the Ottoman Empire around the 1914 global declaration of *jihad* against France, Great Britain and Russia) of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, or the Panasiatist views of Japan (with the establishment of puppet states or puppet provisional governments in "conquered" areas during the war, 1937 to 1945).

In the same way as Germany or the United States of America, and mainly for similar reasons (promoting official anti-imperialist views while creating an empire), Japan built her own empire through informal rule everytime she could. It may also be a way to escape responsibility coming along with power in formal imperialism⁴³. Renouncing any territorial expansion gets the U.S.A. a *moral supremacy* which is the very ingredient of success for their establishment of an empire, inside and outside of the country⁴⁴.

Conclusion: A Desirable Imperialism?: Inner Strengths and Contradictions to the Concept

There is no real issue concerning the length dimension, that is the domains touched by an informal empire as opposed to a more formal way of establishing control. Only two remarks are of

40 See the Failed States Index of *Foreign Policy* and the Failed States Index of the Fund for Peace.

41 STANILAWSKI, Bartosz Hieronim, "Global Black Spots: Threats from Governance Without Governments", *The National Strategy Forum Review*, vol. 20, nr 3 (Summer 2011)

42 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 361

43 BRANDS, H.W., *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines*, Oxford University Press, 1992

44 MELANDRI, Pierre, "les États-Unis : 'Un empire qui n'ose pas dire son nom' ?", *Cités*, nr 20 (2004), p. 17

© 2017 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 15, Fall 2017 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>

See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

importance here, but probably also a primary concern when dealing with the concept of informal imperialism.

Firstly, each and every domaine of imperialism with a formal imperialistic policy frame can be applied to informal imperialism. *Ergo*, it is theoretically possible, although it depends also and perhaps mainly on the first two above mentioned dimensions of imperialism, to attain a state of *total imperialism* within *informal imperialism*. As far as domaines touched by such a policy are concerned, the addition of all of them, much like bricks building a wall, would very well fit within the customary theoretical grid: *political imperialism*, *military imperialism*, *economical imperialism*, *cultural imperialism*.

Secondly, and while it is still maintained that a *total imperialism* over a said target can be achieved through informal means, none of the above categories, in an informal point of view, can be seen alone as an imperialistic fact, but rather as a tool. If these categories are bricks, the cement must be the will of either collective (as imperialism is always a dynamic relationship) to use those tools to build an imperial relationship or an empire.

The intention of the imperialist himself is in question with this form of imperialism: some may say it is "an unintended by-product of [...] economic expansion, resulting more from local political instabilities and fragilities at the periphery of empire, than any metropolitan drive for colonial conquest⁴⁵", so also suggests the marxist latin-american theory of *dependency*⁴⁶. Sometimes, imperialism is mainly a *fait accompli*, either established through imperial agents not mandated therefore, or sometimes even through demand of at least a class, either religious, political or economical, of the periphery-to-be⁴⁷. Then imperialism occurs if this *fait accompli* is either taken over and/or simply acknowledged by the metropolitan power.

Without entering the debate of who is responsible for such the result of this imperialistic process we call empire, and it is believed to be very singular to each historical case. This makes empire in its informal form a contradictory mix of equality and hierarchy⁴⁸; or we could even argue so far than notwithstanding the asymmetry of power which is central to the understanding (and the diagnosis) of imperialism, informal empire itself is a periphery *extra imperium*⁴⁹.

45 WEBSTER, Anthony, *The Debate on the Rise of British Imperialism*, Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 71

46 VILLAREAL, René, "Economía internacional: Las teorías clásica, neoclásica, del imperialismo – Dependencia y su evidencia histórica", *El Trimestre económico*, vol. 46, nr 182 (Apr.-Jun. 1979), pp. 377-460

47 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 361

48 WENDT, Alexander, FRIEDHEIM, Daniel, "Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State", *International Organization*, vol. 49, nr 4 (Aug. 1995), pp. 689-721

49 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 353

There is an overlapping area between cultural imperialism and *soft power*, between economical imperialism and *financial and/or commercial dependency*, between military imperialism and *the establishment of military bases and personnel*, between political imperialism and *a political alliance*. By the very definition of terms, these can only be used as imperialistic tools if there is an imperialistic will, and if at times they are an indication of an informal empire, they do not constitute proofs as such.

To this issue needs to be reminded the power of the *moral dimension* evoked earlier through, for example, the American *Libertadores*, a drive which can also be established through soft power⁵⁰, or (religious⁵¹ or political⁵²) missionary rhetorics. The role of this dimension must not be underestimated as such, and always plays on the contrary a very central role in the imperialistic process, and in dealing with the result of this process, namely empire.

Defining the informal imperialism and *in fine* its result the informal empire puts to light most importantly the fragility of the process. The dynamic relationship⁵³ turns into more of a *blur line*, and this is for political scientists and historians to find the proper tools and the proper approach to identify and diagnosis a case of (informal) imperialism; while it is for politicians of each era, and imperial agents to go back and forward from informality to formality (the case of Upper Burma is a very fine example in this perspective⁵⁴), or to formality to informality (such as some decolonization processes, for which the *Françafrique* system is a reference, if anything for the notion of *continuity* between both states of affairs⁵⁵). The system of influence zones as a realistic way to keep peace and a politics of power, as seen above, is also a perfect illustration of this blur line (going from independence of a state to the status of influence zone to annexation/colonization, and back to the status of an influence zone and eventually independence⁵⁶).

Informal imperialism is extremely fragile and likely to fail over time and according to circumstances, or if not to fail *per se*, at least to change shape; but it is also probably the sharpest, and most efficient way to establish empire, and may have an appearance of legitimacy. This

50 VARGAS GARCIA, Eugênio, "¿Imperio informal? La política británica hacia América Latina en el siglo XIX", *Foro internacional*, vol. 46, nr 2 (Apr.-Jun. 2006), p. 357

51 DEZALAY, Yves, GARTH, Bryant, "l'Impérialisme moral, les Juristes et l'impérialisme américain (Philippines, Indonésie)", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), p. 42

52 MANN, Michael, "Impérialisme économique et impérialisme militaire américains – Un renforcement mutuel ?", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr 171-172 (2008), p. 23

53 NEWITT, Malyn, "Formal and Informal Empire in the History of Portuguese Expansion", *Portuguese Studies*, vol. 17, pp. 1-21

54 WEBSTER, Anthony, "Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 43, nr 4 (Dec. 2000), pp. 1003-1025

55 GOLUB, Philip, "Un goût de sang dans la jungle' : l'Empire américain revisité", *Mouvements*, nr 57 (2009), p. 161

56 LACOSTE, Pablo, "El concepto de Zonas de Influencia y su aplicación en las relaciones entre Argentina y Chile", *Estudios internacionales*, year 33, nr 131/132 (July-Dec. 2000), p. 66

definition of informal imperialism should justify further historical and political enquiries into case studies, with no geographical or chronological boundaries. As was put by Robert W. Winks: "Efficiency is the last refuge of the imperialist", and informal imperialism, as regards efficiency in controlling a target, may be very superior to a formalization such as known through colonization,

c

o

n

q

u

e

s

t

s

,

o

r

a

n

n

e

x

a

t

i

o

n

s

p

h

e

© 2017 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 15, Fall 2017 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>
See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

o

m

e

n