

Book Review

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Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion. By Paul Frymer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

How did a dispersed network of communities, united by a “weak” state, conquer an inhabited continent to become the world’s largest settler empire? How did this process shape American society? With a few exceptions, these questions have received surprising little attention from political scientists working in the field of American Political Development (APD), leaving us with myths of rugged individualism, felicitous circumstances, and indigenous weakness, where territorial expansion occurred without much involvement or direction from a central state—or meaningful resistance from Native Americans—and reinforced rather than contradicted the country’s founding ideals.

Paul Frymer’s groundbreaking *Building an American Empire* takes up these questions, demonstrating in rich detail how the federal government directed territorial expansion in ways essential for its success and highly consequential for the country’s racial orders. The book is organized around distinct historical and geographic phases: chapters 2–5 focus on expansion into the territories gained by the Treaty of Paris, the Louisiana Purchase, and from Mexico; chapters 6 and 7 examine efforts to colonize black Americans and debates over new imperial forms in the late nineteenth century. Making excellent use of sources as varied as congressional debates, county incorporation and statehood dates, maps of land sales, executive branch correspondence, new works in history, as well as an innovative comparison with Mexico, Frymer shows how federal policy makers expropriated a continent in ways that seemed compatible with liberal ideals, while failing to create the homogenous white community most of them desired.

For Frymer, what made American expansion most akin to an imperial project was that it entailed “moving people” in order to advance the strategic objectives of central policy makers. He nicely documents how the federal government

deliberately used land policy to set the pace and geography of expansion, designing bounties for veterans, land sales, and settlement laws to strategically place white settlers in compact communities and undermine the ability of the indigenous nations to resist encroachment. As America’s hegemony over the continent became increasingly secure, policy makers allowed settler-led expansion to play a greater role but nonetheless sought to ensure that the geographic patterning of settlement reflected national priorities. Statehood was used as a means of securing settler loyalty and regulating the country’s demography, extended only when a territory was deemed sufficiently large and, more important, sufficiently white.

Building an American Empire makes a number of important contributions to the study of APD, with broad significance for contemporary debates. It marks an addition and corrective to revisionist literatures that have expanded our understanding of federal government activity. The book’s destabilization of any clear boundary between state and society, in this case between a realm of property accumulation and government support, builds on recent works in uncovering forms of government activism that have often seemed hidden from view. But Frymer is ultimately ambivalent about whether the state’s ability to manipulate population movements on a continental scale should be treated as evidence of “strength.” Indeed, the litany of state weakness is impressive: the new nation could not defend its frontiers; forced Indian removals were horrific imbroglios; and efforts to remove black Americans collapsed on the shoals of slaveholder ambivalence, black opposition, and state incapacity, with poor planning and insufficient provisioning undercutting interest in colonization and provoking outrage against Indian removal. The reliance on land policy was largely a response to these weaknesses.

The book’s central contribution is to show how the adaptations of American institutions intersected with America’s racial orders. It was the federal government’s pursuit of both territorial expansion and whiteness that led it to try to engineer white majorities but also to refrain from expanding into ter-

ritories where its ability to do so through land policies was limited. These allowed policy makers to expropriate territory in a way “that was less legible as state action” (10, 151) but also meant that racial diversity could not be fully eliminated, and expansion had less support where such policies would not produce white dominance. America’s racial orders, then, cannot be understood solely in terms of ideological traditions or racial coalitions but need to be reconceived in terms of the state’s institutional adaptations in pursuing expansion, a project that had broad support and was always conceived by the vast majority of its proponents as dedicated to the advantage of the white race alone.

This last point is convincingly demonstrated, with those committed to formalized racial repression almost alone among whites in being willing to acquire territory with large numbers of persons of color. But the reader is given fewer details about why. Racism is surely the answer, but at times Frymer seems to suggest that the pursuit of whiteness, while primarily an end in itself, could sometimes be a means to another end: a way of strengthening the state’s claim to territory and its ability to maintain order, as much a tactic of statecraft as an overarching goal of policy makers. The limits that whiteness, as a goal, imposed on American expansion are revealed in the late nineteenth century, when policy makers “retreated” from establishing an overseas empire (276). At that historical moment, whiteness was useful to opponents of empire, while imperialists were forced to shift the boundaries of racial categories or develop new rationales and institutions that

could justify or contain the racial diversity it entailed. But Frymer also notes some exceptions to this pattern—the annexation of Puerto Rico, the extension of citizenship to Native Americans in early treaties, the conquest of the Philippines—which suggest that it might be analytically helpful to conceive of whiteness—of populating a territory with white settlers and allocating civic status on the basis of race—not only as an end but as a means, more or less useful depending on state capacity, demography, and geopolitics.

The book’s analysis suggests new avenues of research. In particular, we should be looking for other ways in which state and race formation might have intersected, at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond. This would undoubtedly generate new insights about the country’s racial orders, the legacy of a white setter project, of slavery and the black liberation struggle, and possibly of other moments of state/race formation across successive periods of global expansion and retreat, in which whiteness might have been at different moments an ideal to be achieved, a myth to be exploited, and in its more explicit formulations at least, a limitation to be overcome.

Such lines of inquiry are obviously outside the scope of an already ambitious and important book, but *Building an American Empire* provides a critical foundation and strong encouragement for political scientists to take them up. It will be essential reading for scholars and students, graduate and undergraduate, of APD, American politics, and of the legacies and contemporary practices of setter colonialism in other countries.