



The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830-1970

John Darwin

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The renewal in the interest in the history of the British Empire is evident from the number of academic works on the subject that have appeared in recent years. Nor has this interest been limited either to Britain or to purely academic circles. The wider debate over the motivations behind the rise of the European empires, British or those of other powers, the reasons for their fall and the legacy they have left both in Europe and in the colonised world continues to be the source of much controversy. John Darwin's *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830-1970* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), to be reprinted in paperback edition in May 2011, stands out as a major contribution to the work in this field.

John Darwin is of course no newcomer to this subject and has already written extensively on it, notably with works such as *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (1991) and *Britain and Decolonization: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (1988). His latest book draws together much of this earlier work and extends it in an overview of the century and a half which saw the rise, the zenith and then the fall of the British Empire. If the period covered is ambitious the scope is equally wide in its coverage of the various internal and external forces at work on the British Empire. The subject is undoubtedly vast and others have sought to cover it in even greater depth. The multi-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, edited by William Roger Louis and Judith Brown, for example, covers the same period as Darwin's book in no less than 2000 pages. It is to John Darwin's credit that he has been able to present such a vast history, and to present it in all its complexity, all the while giving attention to the various levels at which this history was played out, in such an accessible way. The result is a work that has managed to give an easily read, yet in-depth, history of this vital question.

Darwin succeeds here in bringing together the key elements of the history of the British empire taking this, as his title makes clear from the outset, to cover not just the formal empire but the entire 'British world-system' including the so-called informal empire and, beyond a purely territorial vision, what he terms the 'vast abstract realm of assets and interests' [10] of shipping, overseas investments, railways and the various companies that supported and held together this complex and inter-related world system. Despite the obvious global scope of his book the focus of attention is on Britain itself and on the dominions. His key argument is that the British empire was the product not of 'the assertion of imperial authority' but rather 'the fusing together of several disparate elements.' [xi] Darwin has chosen to look at this history not just from the British imperial centre but by paying particular attention to the 'British connections' that linked it to India and the white dominions. In this he has less to say of the other parts of the formal Empire, something which will perhaps be contested by other historians. Equally Darwin's down playing of the 'nationalist' histories (that) make much of resistance' [12] to imperial rule will be contested by rival schools of thought.

John Darwin rejects the idea that Britain, through its empire, enjoyed hegemony in the world or that it was ever in a position to establish a coherent or centralised control over the 'British world system'. Instead he argues that Britain 'managed' rather than commanded the various overseas components that made this up. Darwin firmly sets out his case in the very first page of his introduction where he argues that the 'British world-system (a term he prefers to that of the narrower and simpler 'British empire') was not a structure of global hegemony, holding in thrall the non-Western world.' Such a 'hegemonic authority', he goes on, 'eluded all British leaders from Lord Palmerston to Churchill.' [1] This is not to say that Darwin regards the British empire or world system as some sort of benevolent family of nations. What he terms the 'empire of authority' remains a 'key element in British world power'. [18] Yet, in Darwin's account, this is not the key to understanding how the British empire – world system came about or how it was maintained for so long. For Darwin the answer to this lies in the ways in which the British were able to combine their own strength with the strengths of the overseas components of this empire-system. It is Darwin's analysis of the linkages between the imperial centre and imperial periphery, or peripheries, that is at the heart of Darwin's account. These linkages he sees as being partly persuasive, partly coercive, some official, some unofficial. What made this system operate so successfully and for so long was, in Darwin's view, that large parts of the business and political elites in different parts of the world were willing to 'acknowledge the benefits that membership of the British system... and concede that its various costs were worthwhile.' [13]

It inevitably follows on from this that in Darwin's view too much has been made in some historical quarters of the 'nationalist histories' over emphasis of the resistance to British rule. If, as Darwin argues, the British in their overseas system 'could make little use (even if they wanted to) of coercive methods or authoritarian rule' [12] then it must follow that there was a good degree of acquiescence if not outright support for participation in this British world system among the local elites. In this way Darwin presents a picture of the anti-colonial movements that is far more ambivalent than that given in many other accounts, a picture where independence movements in colonial societies were looking far more to 'tactical' advantages rather than to a complete 'strategic' rethinking of the relationship with the imperial centre. Autonomy, Darwin argues, was far more likely to be the ambition of these movements rather than outright sovereignty, at least up until the final collapse of this imperial order in the

late 1930s and early 1940s when the international storm that shook the whole world to its roots made the entire British world system untenable. Until that point, Darwin argues, 'in a world of predatory powers, the imperial frying-pan was not the worst place to be. [12]

The foremost strength of John Darwin's book comes from his focus on the geopolitical dimensions of the subject. As such this is a book about much more than empire, bringing in the history of Britain's position throughout the world, its position as great power in Europe and how this interplayed with its imperial role. It is in its consideration of this particular aspect of the question, that of the place of the British empire and the British world system within the even wider global context, that Darwin's account is at its best. The argument that the British world system was 'powerfully (perhaps decisively) shaped by the play of economic and geopolitical forces at the global not just imperial level' [7] extends the scope of his book well beyond a simple question of the British empire. The international alignments of power were undoubtedly one of the key factors behind the emergence of the British world system. The relative decline of the empires in China and the near and middle east were surely, as Darwin points out, decisive in this. The situation in Europe and the inability of the other European powers from 1815 onwards to combine against Britain in any effective way meant that Britain was relatively free to focus its attention and its financial and military resources on its overseas ambitions. It was in 1940, when that balance of power in Europe collapsed, that Britain's imperial and global position was so undermined as to become impossible. The fall of Singapore eighteen months later and the acceptance, in the same year, that India would have to be granted independence after the war marked the end of Britain as a global power. The global context was therefore turned upside down and thereafter the international situation was one dominated by forces working against both the British empire and the British world system. This supports the argument made elsewhere that 1940 was indeed the 'fulcrum'¹ of British history and of its position in the world. In his focus on this broader picture Darwin's work will be of interest not only to historians of the British empire but also to those of international history as a whole.

Darwin is also surely right in emphasising the 'chaotic pluralism of British interests at home and of their agents and allies abroad.' Such complexity of national British interests and of the British empire in its entirety, and the multiplicity of the factors that were at work in determining what were exactly British interests and therefore which policies were actually followed, is underlined in Darwin's account and lies behind his rejection of any overly simplified attempts to answer the fundamental questions that this subject raises. As Darwin reminds us the empire meant many different things to different groups inside Britain and in the different parts of the empire. Equally, the various parts of that empire, ranging from the 'property empire' to the settler societies of the white dominions and the Indian empire, each roused quite different feelings among the British people. Just how far Britain and British society were bound up in empire must, as Darwin convincingly argues, surely depend on which part of empire we are dealing with and which of the numerous constituencies that made up the British 'national' interest is being considered. For Darwin, however, this did not mean that this empire, or British 'world system', was without any coherence and he argues that while it was beyond the capacity of the government in London to impose a system on its empire 'a system emerged nonetheless.'

¹ See David Reynolds "1940: Fulcrum of the Twentieth Century?", *International Affairs*, 66 (1990) (numéro de page?).

Darwin sets out in his introduction his ambition to understand the forces at work behind the 'rise, fortunes and fall' of the British 'world-system'. His case will no doubt meet with many counter arguments. Yet despite the enormous extent of the ground covered here in this book Darwin manages to bring together a series of different elements into a convincing and coherent whole. The reader will find much in this that is both stimulating and well argued. His case is made all the better for being written in such an elegant and evocative style. This subject matter has often in the past suffered from the weight of its own importance. Despite the book's wide-ranging ambitions John Darwin is able to bring the various strands together to produce an overall tapestry that impresses both by its extent and its rich detail. His description of the 'empire of rule' as looking like 'the booty of an obsessive collector whose passions had come with a rush and then gone with the wind, to be replaced in their turn by still more transient interests' resulting in a 'pile of possessions whose purpose or meaning was long since forgotten, half-opened packets of quickly waning appeal, and new acquisitions made on the spur of the moment' will surely render his subject all the more appealing to historians and general readers alike. His portrayal of the forces that lead to the British system's downfall as an 'arena of extraordinary turbulence before 1900,' the result of the 'volcano like chaos in the twentieth century' which saw a 'rollercoaster ride through modern world history' as its component parts were 'at times flung together by centripetal attraction, at times sucked apart as if about to spin off into separate trajectories' is typical of a style that lends itself to what is still a question that continues to fascinate. Darwin's book is an excellent and important addition to the literature on this question, a question that is quite rightly still at the centre of much debate amongst historians, politicians and a wider public.