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David Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 351 pp. Figures, tables, graphs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691171838.

Review by Owen White, University of Delaware.

Whenever I decide on the syllabus for the seminar I teach to undergraduate history majors on imperialism in the long nineteenth century, I ask myself if I should finally let go of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson's article "The Imperialism of Free Trade." The article was published in 1953, after all, before all manner of historiographical "turns" that have influenced the way we write about empire, and it exudes a certain Oxbridge-tutorial air of knowing provocation. Decades of imperial scholarship and direct critique of their argument, however, have not dulled the force of Robinson and Gallagher's opening claim that "it ought to be a commonplace that Great Britain during the nineteenth century expanded overseas by means of 'informal empire' as much as by acquiring dominion in the strict constitutional sense," nor their metaphorical depiction of the British Empire as an iceberg, the bulk of which sat below the waterline.[1] Students may not know enough to question the details, but they easily pick up on the idea that imperialism does not always manifest itself quite as we would expect it to, and—since I teach at an American institution—the conversation often turns naturally to America's exercise of power overseas, if not recent Chinese actions as well.[2] Contextualizing Robinson and Gallagher and their ideas in the era of the Cold War, the Marshall Plan, and movements for national independence adds further dimensions to discussion. Packing an immense amount into its fifteen pages and managing to feel old-fashioned and contemporary at the same time, the article will probably remain on my reading list for undergraduate as well as graduate students of empire for the foreseeable future.

As David Todd observes in *A Velvet Empire*, however, scholars of nineteenth-century France have never seemed particularly compelled by the idea of informal empire. The result, he believes, is a historiography that has overlooked not just the extent of French imperial activity between the fall of Napoleon I and the overseas territorial expansion of the Third Republic later in the century, but also the consistent sense of ideological purpose that underlay that activity. For most of the nineteenth century, he contends—in an opening sentence that consciously echoes that of Robinson and Gallagher—France "expanded chiefly by means of informal empire" (p. 1). His book sets out to show us how and why this was true.

In tackling this topic, Todd is following in a lineage: he credits inspiration to a conversation with the late Christopher Bayly, who was Gallagher's doctoral student at Oxford and later, like

Gallagher, professor of imperial history at Cambridge (where Todd earned his Ph.D.). *A Velvet Empire* builds on ideas Todd first articulated in his important 2011 article, “A French Imperial Meridian, 1814–1870,” whose title alluded to Bayly’s book *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830*.^[3] Todd’s global frame of reference and his penchant for tossing out a variety of ideas around a clear central argument evokes not just Bayly but Robinson and Gallagher, too. The result is one of the most stimulating works I have read about nineteenth-century imperialism in quite some time.

Todd’s endeavor has to navigate at least two large potential pitfalls. The first and most obvious is the very concept of informal empire. Robinson and Gallagher were none too specific about its meaning or dimensions, and Todd acknowledges that the term has “a certain elusiveness” (p. 286). We understand that it does not refer to “formal” or territorial rule, which itself can, of course, take many different forms; we also imagine it has to consist of more than mere influence of one party over another. A volume published in 2008 on informal empire in Latin America argued that for the concept to work, it “must rest upon a three-dimensional framework that posits commerce, capital and culture as three interdependent and mutually reinforcing influences that limited local sovereignty.”^[4] Todd adopts a similar approach in paying “due attention to the roles played by ideas, culture and laws, alongside those of trade and finance, in shaping informal imperial power and the effects it had” (p. 4). His study thus goes beyond sovereignty-compromising commercial treaties and predatory lending to encompass the manipulation of legal systems and the cultivation of local elites through French language and culture. Central to Todd’s argument is his presentation of France from 1815 to 1875 as, for most of that period, a conservative state; a monarchical “laboratory of counter-revolutionary modernity” (p. 11), not a republic in waiting. In this reading, “informal empire” often proceeded by securing the collaboration of “modernizing conservative regimes” who turned to counter-revolutionary (but economically innovative) France as a “protector of choice” (p. 11). If this still does not fully evoke the relations of dominance we associate with imperialism, Todd points to the way the threat or the deployment of force underpinned French dealings with local regimes, from Haiti in the 1820s to Mexico in the 1860s.

Todd excels in his analysis of political-economic thought, and his first chapter sharpens our sense of the possible parameters of informal empire through the ideas of some of its leading advocates. Forms of dominance that did not depend on territorial conquest, Todd shows, had already been promoted before the collapse of Napoleon I’s empire by the likes of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand and the Abbé Dominique de Pradt. After 1815, such men considered how France, “the most civilized of civilizations,” as François Guizot put it (p. 51), might revive its global influence while taking account of—and frequently admiring—an ascendant Britain. The Saint-Simonian thinker Michel Chevalier emerges as an especially influential proponent of “an imperial vision that was more concerned with economic domination than political sovereignty” (p. 57). Chevalier’s vision aligned with the July Monarchy’s preference for seeking treaties that granted special rights to French nationals. Then, after he backed Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup of 1851, he participated in the Second Napoleonic Empire’s negotiation of free-trade treaties with Britain and other European powers. Around the same time, France collaborated with Britain in the Second Opium War to extract commercial concessions in China and signed lop-sided treaties with a variety of polities in Asia and Africa. Chevalier’s ideas were founded on racialized views of non-Europeans as unfit to do much more than supply Europeans with the raw materials they needed for economic development, purportedly for the benefit of humanity. Local obstruction might require military intervention to try to install governments more favorable to French needs

and ambitions—as in silver-rich Mexico in the 1860s—but, Todd stresses, this imperial strategy prioritized control by means other than territorial conquest.

Readers of this review may already be asking themselves a question that points to the second major pitfall lying in wait for Todd's emphasis on informal empire: what about Algeria? Todd does not duck the question, devoting his second chapter to the four decades that followed the beginning of the conquest in 1830, but approaching that period in a way that tries to make Algeria seem less of an exception in relation to other French imperial ventures of the time. Returning to France's initial spat with the Dey of Algiers in 1827, Todd argues that French designs were focused mainly on commercial opportunities in the eastern part of what is now Algeria. Even after the French toppled the Dey in 1830, plans tended to remain limited to small-scale settlement in a few coastal areas, alongside a policy of collaboration with local leaders, seen especially in the 1837 Treaty of Tafna that recognized the authority of the emir 'Abd al-Qadir in much of central and western Algeria. The key reason this system failed in barely two years, Todd suggests, is because the Bey of Constantine was not receptive to a similar arrangement. Once France had taken control of the province of Constantine, the fragile accord with 'Abd al-Qadir broke down, any lingering support for a limited occupation (*occupation restreinte*) evaporated, and a brutally expansive war of territorial conquest followed. Territorial domination and the failure of settlers to come up with reliable ways of earning money made Algeria a financial sinkhole, however, and this, along with the influence of thinkers well versed in more informal methods of dominance, such as Ismaïl Urbain, a protégé of Chevalier, prompted Napoleon III again to explore a more limited approach, summarized in his 1860 description of Algeria as an "Arab Kingdom."

There is some sharp analysis in this chapter. Todd is right to say that several aspects of French policy vacillated after 1830, and that the full-scale colonization of Algeria that the Third Republic would later back so strongly was not preordained. Yet in characterizing Algeria as "informal empire *manqué*," Todd rather muddies the waters of his own stated aim to treat "the French informal repertoire as a distinct form of imperialism, or another empire" (p. 4). On the ground in Algeria, nothing much looked informal from the moment 37,000 troops landed near Algiers in 1830. If we follow Todd in "placing emphasis on the initial intentions of the French" (p. 121), we may start to wonder what the implications would have been if some of these intentions had worked out. For example, the dream of producing cotton at scale was there from the start, and was still one of the things Napoleon III most wanted to talk about when he visited Algeria in 1865. But cotton cultivation, like some of the other crops that inspired hopes of making Algeria less of a financial drain (and more of a complement to France's own agriculture), was a labor-intensive enterprise—hence a persistent debate about how Algeria might find the manpower to do the work required should the industry ever take off.^[5] If the Algerian environment had been more cooperative, one might have ended up with something like the Cultivation System that the Dutch practiced in Java, perhaps, but nothing that would match up to anyone's idea of informal empire, and least of all to Algerians, who were seriously affected even by French plans that didn't succeed. Todd calls French Algeria "the unintended product of a failed project of informal colonialism" (p. 71), but "informal colonialism" is surely an impossibility, as colonialism is inherently about rule on the ground, and actions on the ground remain most relevant to what happened in nineteenth-century Algeria.

Todd states from the outset that his main emphasis is on "the economics of France's informal empire" (p. 23), and to that extent, chapters three and four stand out as the core of his book. In chapter three, "Champagne Capitalism," Todd characterizes the mid-nineteenth-century French

economy in terms of its specialization in the production of luxury goods and the stimulation of consumer desire. Some goods, like champagne itself, were entirely home-grown, while others, like silk, often had to be sourced in raw form overseas. In either case, French producers found outlets abroad as global exchange expanded, “free trade” had a moment, and France branded itself, so to speak, as a fount of sophistication and good taste, with Paris its epicenter. This ebullient and showy model of capitalism, Todd argues, went hand in glove with anti-revolutionary, monarchical politics and the preference for informal empire, which was less likely to antagonize foreign collaborators (including the British, who from the 1850s supplied export-reliant silk manufacturers in Lyon with much of their raw material from China).

The precise relevance of some of this chapter to French imperial activity may not immediately be apparent, but Todd’s intent becomes clearer in chapter four, “Conquest by Money.” Here, Todd explains how France’s laggardly birthrate and the scale of its production of luxury or semi-luxury goods that required mostly skilled labor were among the factors that led the country to accrue a relatively large amount of capital for investment, creating the conditions for what the political economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu would term *la colonisation des capitaux*. This “investment colonization” was not only about financial institutions lending to foreign states like Haiti and Mexico, both of which ended up on the hook to French creditors (p. 178). As much as that, Todd stresses that individual savers acquired a personal interest in France’s overseas ambitions by buying stakes in foreign public debt. Loans issued to the Ottoman Empire and Egypt proved particularly attractive to investors during the Second Napoleonic Empire, a regime that happily condoned the trend. In Lenin’s famous analysis of imperialism he would decry the “growth of a class, or rather, of a stratum of rentiers, i.e., people who live by ‘clipping coupons,’ who take no part in any enterprise whatever.”[6] But the tens of thousands of people who invested in Ottoman bonds in mid-nineteenth-century France were scarcely the monopoly capitalists of Lenin’s imagining. Todd introduces us to a hat seller near Toulon named Françoise Fabre, who owned a single Ottoman bond and signed a petition to object when the Ottoman government stopped its repayments. For anyone who feels that the attempt to fathom the depth of French popular awareness of empire has run its course, becoming overly reliant on the study of international exhibitions or stray references in literary texts, here perhaps is a new frontier. It may seem a peculiar kind of imperialism, of course, when the “imperialized” is itself an empire, which in the Ottoman case still harbored dreams of renewed expansion.[7] But the examples of infringed sovereignty that Todd outlines seem to fit well any definition of informal imperialism, and make this chapter in my view the book’s most important contribution.

In Todd’s final chapter, he explores the way French influence-seeking could revolve around a kind of legal imperialism. His primary example here is Egypt, where a substantial French expatriate community had a notable impact on the local economy, as well as helping to build the appeal of French culture among Egyptian elites. The workload and the power of French consuls in Egypt grew in parallel with these developments and, by the 1850s, led to a drive for extraterritorial privilege in the legal realm. Consular courts, Todd shows, turned into tools for the extraction of wealth, as fines levied against Egyptian officials created a sort of “indemnity business” (p. 259). If highly lucrative for French plaintiffs, this use of extraterritorial privilege seemed unjust not only to Egyptians but even the British, who supported Egyptian efforts to pass legal reform. France’s informal sway in Egypt diminished after the country’s bankruptcy in 1876 and British occupation in 1882, though its cultural hold over local elites continued to influence Egypt’s legal establishment, as young Egyptians traveled to study law in France or received a French-style legal education at the University of Cairo.

Part of the value, and the pleasure, of *A Velvet Empire* is that it encourages the reader to run with Todd's ideas and consider the extent to which they fit individual cases that are not discussed in the book. Recent work on French relations with Qajar Iran, for example, seems to confirm a pattern of informal influence-seeking in an area the French considered strategically important. In that instance, the Iranians saw the British and Russians as greater threats to sovereignty, increasing the attraction of the French as potential collaborators. Validating another piece of Todd's argument, diplomatic negotiations faltered when France became a republic in 1848, republican ideas raising serious concerns in the Qajar court, but came to fruition once the Iranians could deal with Napoleon III's authoritarian regime.[8] After France became a republic again, Wilhelmine Germany would become a preferred Iranian collaborator, just as it did, to build on another idea that Todd briefly floats, for other modernizing conservative regimes in Asia as Germany pursued its own imperial objectives (consider the Baghdad Railway scheme, for example, or even German influence on the 1889 Meiji Constitution).

Other cases do not fit so well. Todd reiterates Robinson and Gallagher's idea that "territorial conquest in the nineteenth century was rarely a goal in itself, but more often the consequence of a failure of informal empire" (p. 274). French territorial expansion in Senegal after around 1850, however, though its basic aims may have been commercial, was not clearly born of any such failure.[9] The informal-empire-preferred argument is similarly tested by examples from Southeast Asia. There is evidence that officials in the Vietnamese court in Hue were caught off guard by the French seizure of territory in southern Vietnam (Cochin China) after 1858, precisely because they had seen French intentions--seemingly borne out by recent events in China--as directed toward extracting informal concessions. It is true that there was some French ambivalence about the territory they had acquired, leading to discussion in the early 1860s about whether to trade it back to the Vietnamese in return for heightened informal influence. Napoleon III eventually decided to make the French presence permanent, though, ensuring new headaches for regional powers like the Kingdom of Siam.[10] The conquest of Cochin China may suggest, in fact, that during the Second Napoleonic Empire certain conservative, counter-revolutionary forces were predisposed to seek more than informal control--in this case particularly the navy, if not also Catholic missionaries and their supporters. (Missionaries, in whose production France was a world leader in the nineteenth century, appear here and there in Todd's book, but are not woven into the argument.) Too many counterexamples of this type may seem to form a pattern of their own and weaken the idea that informal control was the default preference.

One of the reasons I remain intrigued by Robinson and Gallagher's article is that my own feelings about it are not fixed; Todd is right to call the concept of informal empire elusive. As *A Velvet Empire* demonstrates, however, embracing the idea can open new views on France's place in the world and reveal the country's imperial ambitions to have been more expansive than most of us perhaps thought. One hopes this rich and insightful book will inspire more research into what has been, of late, the comparatively understudied topic of nineteenth-century French imperialism. Some, indeed, seem already to have taken up the challenge.[11]

NOTES

[1] John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6/1 (1953): 1-15.

[2] On the United States as a country whose behavior has often been imperial without this necessarily earning a formal definition of empire, see Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116/5 (2011): 1348-1391. For more on the informal/formal empire distinction in U.S. historiography, see also Kramer's "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," *Diplomatic History* 42/5 (2018): 911-931. For a cautionary treatment of recent accusations of Chinese imperialism, see Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," *Area Development and Policy* 5/1 (2019): 1-14.

[3] David Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian, 1814-1870," *Past & Present* 210 (2011): 155-186; and C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

[4] Matthew Brown, "Introduction," in *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*, ed. Matthew Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 21. Brown also offers a brief overview of criticisms of Gallagher and Robinson's original hypothesis.

[5] Claire Fredj, "Des coolies pour l'Algérie? L'Afrique du Nord et le travail engagé (1856-1871)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 63/2 (2016): 62-83.

[6] Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d. [first published 1917]), p. 172.

[7] Mostafa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[8] Mehdi Mousavi, "France among the Most-Favored Nations: The French Commercial Policy and Influence in Iran (1815-1848)," *Iranian Studies* 54/1-2 (2021): 143-167.

[9] Jenna Nigro, "Colonial Logics: Agricultural, Commercial, and Moral Experiments in the Making of French Senegal, 1763-1870" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois Chicago, 2014), especially chapter four.

[10] See, for example, Mark W. McLeod, *The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention, 1862-1874* (New York: Praeger, 1991); and Patrick Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858-1907* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995). In his article "A French Imperial Meridian," Todd suggested that in Senegal and Cochin China the Second Empire "only reluctantly resorted to territorial expansion" (p. 179).

[11] See the journal *Outre-Mers* 410-411 (June 2021), special edition on the theme "L'impérialisme informel de la France et de l'Espagne au XIXe siècle."

Owen White
University of Delaware
owhite@udel.edu

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