

Title—The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830-1970
Author—John Darwin
Year—2009

Categories: British Empire, Colonialism, World History, Politics

Place: The World

Time: 1830-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Darwin's book is a study of the rise and fall of the British world system. The British world system was not a structure of global hegemony, but also was more than a formal territorial empire. Darwin highlights three ways the British system was becoming global by 1840: 1) it exerted its presence, commercial or military, in every world region, 2) the point of the system was to promote the integration of these widely separated places, commercially, strategically, politically, and culturally, and 3) the success and survival of British connections depended on world events, not just British interests. According to Darwin, a central characteristic of a system is the interdependence on its parts—in the British case the most obvious forms were naval and military. The book grapples with the continuous interplay of two sorts of tensions, external and internal. Internal tensions referring to the chronic disagreements over how the British system should work, usually expressed as political conflict over the connection with Britain. External tensions refer to how the meaning of British connection was informed by the exogenous forces of the global environment.

Darwin explicitly attempts to move away from the binary of nationalism and imperialism. He argues that keeping the main elements of the British system in a single field of action allows a more realistic view of Britain's imperial power. He breaks the British empire into three discrete parts: the property empire, the white dominions, and the 'Indian empire.' Importantly, Darwin reveals that the importance of India and the property empire are common themes across the literature, at the expense of the white dominions being ignored.

The book is divided into two sections, the first section attempts to describe how a British system emerged in the long Victorian peace up to 1914 and the second section attempts to trace its fate in the period that followed. Darwin argues that the fate of the world system was largely determined by geopolitical forces outside of British control. He identifies the trajectory of the British economy pre-1800 and the accompanying emergence of a polite and commercial society as essential foundations for the development of this world system. A reliance on cooperation and partnership, not coercion and conquest, were vital to the stability of British global connections. Darwin posits that the first world war represented a critical shift, that encouraged dominion isolationism and spurred Indian resentment at the war economy. The empire nearly avoided total collapse during the period from 1938 to 1942 that was partially characterized by a wave of economic, political, and ideological revolutions across Eurasia. However, the cost of staying alive during the period and the ensuing collateral damage was irreparable. Darwin concludes by claiming that what remained of the British world system was used for the task of Western containment until its final death in the late 1960s.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- While imposing a system on British expansion was beyond the power of the government of London, a system emerged nonetheless
- The fate of the world system was largely determined by geopolitical forces outside of British control
- Industrialism changed the context and equation of imperial power