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### Review

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### Notes on contributor

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### Review

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Imperialism is a contended and contentious subject in political science, a stubborn spectre which refuses to vanish quietly into historical obscurity. Works on imperialism, empire and their colonial offspring continue to proliferate, examining the phenomenon of imperialism from a broad and increasingly diverse spectrum of positionalities. Among the more recent works on the subject, Leo Blanken's *Rational Imperialism: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion* offers an historiographically interdisciplinary, provocative and refreshingly unique examination of a subject which is making a swift return to the forefront of academic politics. The author's prose is both engaging and understandable, and his ability to convey complex concepts with clarity is an asset, and while some of the material is necessarily beyond the level of undergraduate students, the sophistication and level of research in this text renders the book an excellent resource for more advanced scholars of empire and imperialism, from all backgrounds and perspectives.

In contrast to studies which examine the role of the state or individuals in imperialism, or approach imperialism as a socio-economic phenomenon of historical dialectics, Blanken's focus is on the conscious actions of those state institutions which operate under – and indeed, in Blanken's view, engender – empire. For Blanken, the institutions in question span both the imperialiser and the imperialised. His definition of imperialism – control of weak states by the strong (29) – is a classic understanding. However, Blanken acknowledges the shortcomings of such an approach, which, as he outlines, confuses imperialism with colonialism (29) and the author instead adds a second dimension based on Lenin (1917). This dimension is the rivalry between imperial powers during their annexations (30). Together, this synthesis of strong states controlling the weak, and strong states seeking to outmanoeuvre each other, forms Blanken's conceptual foundation.

Of course, Blanken's work is not pure history. In his introduction, Blanken underlines the importance of understanding historical imperialism not only as it formed today's international order, but also as a discussion of imperialism – and even calls for its return, in disguise – have recently become substantial (8–9). In his final chapter, Blanken adopts his theory of institutional imperialism as a framework with which to understand the international arena of today.

Blanken's introduction opens with a sequence of rhetorical questions asked by contemporary observers critical of the United States and its 'imperial dreams' (1), before quickly outlining the book's thesis that the imperial issues of today are analogous to the affairs of the Victorian world. Indeed, the premise of Blanken's investigation is historiographical. We cannot understand Victorian (particularly British) imperialism, he argues, by applying contemporary heuristic tools (4). As Blanken reveals in his citation of Wesseling (1996) and Magnusson (1994), the British Empire of the late nineteenth century was a living paradox of free trade and democratic domestic ideals, alongside aggressive annexation and formal subjugation of other peoples – a paradox both moral and economic (4–6). 'This placid and efficient division... cannot be explained by existing accounts' (52) and the paradox, he argues, can only be approached through a synergistic methodology which he adopts, merging 'two competing modes of analysis – rationalist–materialist and constructivist – that currently are pursued in isolation from each other' (2), with democratic peace theory (24) and game theory (9, 80) making occasional appearances. This approach allows Blanken to examine imperialism as a phenomenon born of material exchange and public ethics – the combination of which, he argues, is fundamental to understanding imperial institutions' engenderment of legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. Indeed for Blanken, the role of an agency is critical as imperialism, in his view, 'was not the product of inertia but rather bears the markings of a distinct and calculated turn in policy' (6) directed by state leaders as 'revenue maximizers' (33). This emphasis on empire as a means of revenue generation and appropriation, develops into a consistent strand throughout the book.

In Chapter Two, Blanken sets forth his theoretical framework and illustrative studies. Blanken's choice of case studies reveals two underlying premises of his theory – the role of the state, and a historical and historiographical foundation in the relations between the West and the non-West in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Of note is his separation of the state into two distinct and mutually exclusive categories: democratic states favouring free trade, and authoritarian states desirous of extracting wealth through violence (26). This, argues the author, is crucial to understanding the three models of imperialism outlined earlier, as democratic and authoritarian states are driven by different styles of institution with divergent aims. Through critical analysis of the Victorian policy, Blanken identifies three distinct strands of conscious, institutionally driven imperialism: *pugnacious imperialism* or aggressive expansion with frequent conflicts between imperial powers, *courteous imperialism* or expansion overseas while maintaining harmony between the imperial powers and *refraining from imperialism*; the rejection of formal annexation by major powers (6–9).

While Blanken's government-level, agent-driven approach is carefully justified, a potential shortcoming is suggested by the use of rational choice theory. While Blanken is arguably correct in asserting that late nineteenth century imperialism was consciously driven by agents in the metropole, greater acknowledgement could be made of two variables. First, the 'state' is not always a monolithic entity pursuing a single goal (Penrose 2011), and indeed the later nineteenth century saw significant struggles in the Parliament between rival Whig and Tory factions with different designs for empire (Hilton

1988). Second, imperialism is also a phenomenon driven by the ‘man on the ground’; a not-uncommon aspect of Victorian international politics. This is especially surprising given that Blanken begins his synthesis by citing the *Punch Magazine’s* infamous 1844 *Peccavi* cartoon of General Sir Charles Napier conquering Sindh – an act contrary to Napier’s orders from London (Bryant 2008). Similar incidents such as Sir Henry Bartle Frere’s unsolicited declaration of war on Zululand in 1879, and General Auguste Dubail’s invasion of Morocco, against orders from Paris, at the height of the 1912 Agadir Crisis (Porch 2001), suggest that Victorian and Edwardian imperialism was not always as clearly and consciously directed from the centre as Blanken suggests. Further, given the extraordinary diversity of the policies and practices of imperial powers from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, Blanken’s self-confessed simple model (20, 23) approaches only a narrow strand of imperialism. His critical reviews of existing studies of imperialism (12–19) are richly detailed but brief. However, it must be noted that no text could do justice to so broad a phenomenon as historical and contemporary imperialism, and Blanken not only acknowledges alternatives – including the pericentric approach (14–15) – to ‘the complex, sometimes fuzzy, and normatively charged literature on imperialism’ (20), but also concedes that ‘the richness of the human world simply cannot be captured in any single equation’ (20). Blanken’s approach might best be considered as one valuable tool among many; a refreshing honesty and a useful practical framework amidst the sweeping generalisations and holistic, politically motivated approaches which define so much writing on imperialism.

Following Chapter Two, three studies are presented which examine the author’s theory through contemporary Victorian case studies. Chapter Three examines the Scramble for Africa from 1886 onwards, while Chapter Four tackles the post-1830s unequal treaties imposed by the Western powers on Qing China, enabling Blanken to unpack his premise of *courteous imperialism* with historical examples. His ultimate assessment, in keeping with the theme of institutional incentives, is that Europeans ‘increasingly desired *access* to the continent’ (Hargreaves 1988, 313, cited in Blanken 2012, 80) and its resources. The case of China is used to highlight Blanken’s division between democratic and authoritarian states, contrasting the democratic European powers’ *courteous imperialism* against the *pugnacious imperial* clash of authoritarian Russia and Japan.

Chapter Five considers ‘temporal variation’ and institutional shift (108–109) via an assessment of Britain’s management of India, particularly following the government’s 1858 takeover of the subcontinent from the East India Company. Here, Blanken considers the transition from violent Company-driven imperialism to the Crown’s *refraining from imperialism*; with a critique of Marxist interpretations subtly interwoven throughout. Of particular note are Blanken’s (115–116) critical analysis of historiographical debates on British India, and his balance of domestic political and commercial institutions in Britain (and France) against those of India in the eras of the Mughal Empire and the transition to the British Raj, in a broad time span stretching from 1601 to 1947 (119–137). This is a densely packed critical discussion, and while the author examines a wealth of data and events, the section could benefit from a longer analytical discussion, to allow the full application of the theory to the case study.

In Chapter Six, Blanken distinguishes the theory’s particular relevance to the study of imperialism (141–142) and international relations (143–144) and applies the model to examine the Western (particularly American) institutional policies since 1945. The chapter finishes with reflections of policy-making implications *vis-à-vis* Africa and China, and asks an implicit question on whether we are heading towards a new phase of *pugnacious*

and *courteous imperialism* – one which would be recognisable to the Victorians of yesteryear.

Following Chapter Six, the book concludes with an appendix which proffers, via a wealth of algebra and mathematical matrices, the rational choice approach which Blanken has adopted throughout. While the logic is clear and the variables carefully and critically considered, placing the theory in an appendix posits two concerns. The first is Blanken's foundational assumption that imperial institutions are *aware* of all their options and are in full *control* of the executive apparatus. As outlined above, and as Blanken (14–15) acknowledges, imperialism is not purely a phenomenon directed from the metropolitan centre by agents who are fully aware of the situation – although Blanken is right to remind us that to a significant degree, conscious agents can indeed drive a deliberate policy. The second concern is that framing the model as an appendix renders the model almost an afterthought to the thesis, rather than its foundation. The book, as a whole, could perhaps have benefitted from a discussion of this foundation prior to the case studies, with clarification for the layman.

In sum, Blanken's *Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion* offers a clearly grounded and richly researched interpretation of imperialism as a recent and paradoxical phenomenon; an economically driven force which requires investigation framed via 'a parsimonious theory of the impact of institutional variation on state leaders' choices' (139). His study should prove to be a valuable addition to the toolbox of investigative scholars seeking to understand imperialism, state expansion and empirical examples of rational choice in action on a planetary scale.

### Notes on contributor

Russell Foster (FRGS) is a PhD candidate at Newcastle University, United Kingdom. His recent publications include 'Tabula Imperii Europae: a cartographic approach to the current debate on the European Union as empire', *Geopolitics* 18(2), 2013; and 'The New Rome? Towards a Ciceronian Understanding of "European Empire"', *Bulletin of the Political Studies Association* (2010).

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