

**Jessie Reeder, *The Forms of Informal Empire. Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2020.**

The role played by Great Britain in markets and trade in Latin America, particularly after the disintegration of the Spanish colonial empire, has been and remains one of the most controversial and widely discussed issues in the historiographical debate on the economic development of Latin America. A number of different, sometimes opposed, interpretations have been advanced. Following the traditional approaches of economic history from both the European and the Latin American perspective, scholars have examined the causes, consequences and forms of British economic influence in Latin America, as well as its progressive, gradual and problematic replacement by the United States. For instance, some scholars have come to blame the British presence for the tardiness of the continent's economic development, whereas others have posited that the causes of Latin American economic dependence and slow development had to be traced back to the colonial period. Jessie Reeder's *Forms of Informal Empire. Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* addresses the central aspects of this question.

The author has utilised the research methodologies typical of literary studies in an innovative way, tackling the English presence in Latin America in the nineteenth century from a comparative and transnational perspective, in an unprecedented and original manner.

The work links up with research on British literature, re-examining a series of literary works through a particular application of formalist analysis, not centred on "literary forms" but rather designed to

investigate “specific shapes and structures – that is, forms – [that] nineteenth century texts understood social institutions to take”(p. 21). This analysis allows the author to bring out the multiple ways in which both the British and the Latin Americans perceived the emergence of new transnational relations and forms of subordination alternative to direct colonial rule. Reeder examines novels, poems, essays, letters and travel stories by well-known and lesser-known English and Latin American personalities that until now have been poorly valued on a scholarly level or inadequately analysed, exploiting extensive primary documentation and a multilingual archive. Through this approach, she gives voice to a multiplicity of figures – engineers, intellectuals, diplomats, officials technicians, religious people, colonists, British travellers – who since the earliest stages of the revolutions that led to independence from Spain, crossed the ocean and reached Central and South America, during what a scholar of the calibre of Leslie Bethell has labelled “the British century.”

At the same time, the author provides an analysis of the perspective of the elites and of the other Latin American actors who came to Europe in search of support for the construction / creation of new nation states, and whose contribution to the consolidation of British influence was no less important than that of the English themselves.

The book, then, highlights the problematic coexistence between the broad and openly declared British support for the Latin American peoples’ independence and the unflagging efforts of British investors, officials and traders to penetrate and, in fact, dominate the Latin American industrial and commercial sectors. This effort was substantially coordinated, although without forms of centralized control, and was facilitated by local elites in search of the resources to guarantee the political-institutional stability required for the construction of the new states. In reality, it was the synergy that was forged between English and Latin American actors that contributed to the emergence of what the author defines as Britain’s “informal empire.” As she demonstrates, this empire was built on ambitions and narratives – characterized by

the challenging coexistence of imperialist and anti-imperialist values – which implied the ambivalence of defending Latin American political freedom and independence while installing new forms of subjection to British influence, less direct than colonial control to be sure, but nevertheless pervasive.

In this context, the growing awareness of the dynamics of the complex field of economic-commercial relations with Europe, and in particular with Britain, emerges from the reflections that leading Latin American personalities like Simon Bolivar or Vicente Fidel Lopez chose to set out in their writings, which reveal an ability to grasp the significant impact of the flow of ideas coming from the two sides of the ocean, a flow so intense as to have a pivotal impact on historical developments both in the new Latin American states and in the British world.

The history of the informal British empire as recounted by Jessie Reeder is an exciting narration of the intense, complex and original work of persuasion – and self-persuasion – vis-à-vis the possibility that Latin America could be both free and dependent, a persuasion which involved all the main actors, albeit in different ways. The book is a history of ideas more than of concrete economic processes, which allows us “to explain why, although informal empire succeeded for so long, it also remained conceptually inassimilable to several strains of hegemonic Enlightenment thought” (p. 3).

The author’s perspective allows her to shed light on the distinctive idea of an “informal” empire as a description of the British political and economic intervention in Latin America. This concept was very different from the pre-existing concepts of formal and informal empire, as “it had to grapple directly with the ethics of freedom,” which inevitably generated contradictions and misunderstandings. Such inconsistencies became even more evident in the attempt to reconcile the paradoxes implied by the idea of an informal empire with “two master narrative forms that organized nineteenth-century thought”: history having the “specific shape of progress” and community having “the specific form of a nuclear family.”

Well-argued and fast-paced, the text proposes a non-diachronic narrative in six chapters, offering the reader an unprecedented look at the forms of imperial power and dominion in the nineteenth century, while also providing food for thought regarding the role of informal power today. The question of “informal empires” has been at the forefront since the dawn of the twentieth century and persists today. Indeed, the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of new types of informal power, instituted by actors with greater capacity for action and more incisive, and often more ambiguous, tools. It was in the nineteenth century, however, that the idea of informal empire made its first appearance, thanks to the affirmation of the theories and concrete practices of free trade. Such theories accompanied the aforementioned attempts to reconcile the protection of the political freedom of Latin American countries with new forms of economic subordination. It is therefore to the nineteenth century that we must look for the origin of the issues implicated by the concept of non-formal empire, issues that continue to characterize the relations between nations and, more generally, the global economy and society. With caution, and without yielding to the temptation of offering simple responses to complex questions, Ms. Reeder identifies and exposes the profound but often invisible and elusive entwining of language forms with social forms, and the ways in which they shape one another. In this way, her careful selection and precise analysis of the writings allows her to confer a concrete physiognomy on almost imperceptible political processes by highlighting their limits and thus enhancing their intelligibility.

The understanding of the dense network of transatlantic relations woven between the Latin American countries and Great Britain – and, more generally, of the transnational circulation of people and ideas in the nineteenth century – can now count on a scientific production enriched by this type of approach, which also provides elements useful for a more correct positioning of these phenomena in the vast global scenario.

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