
REVIEW ARTICLES

Rethinking British Imperialism *

Gerold Krozewski

Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva

1. A General Appreciation

Cain and Hopkins have produced two self-contained books on British imperialism that constitute an authoritative and stimulating contribution to the history of international relations. More importantly, however, they have succeeded in establishing one coherent interpretation of the rationale of Britain's imperial connection, explaining impulses of expansion as well as the British presence overseas from the late seventeenth to the end of the twentieth centuries. In doing so, they suggest nothing less than a novel way of viewing Britain's history in the modern period.

In the most general terms, *British Imperialism* exhibits three principal achievements. First, the analysis makes the history of the British empire an intrinsic part of British history.¹ Next, the argument re-establishes the role of British history as the linchpin of the history of international relations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the study weaves an explanatory web that connects the social, economic, and political realms without either falling into the conspiratorial trap or becoming deterministic. Rather than merely rejuvenating a largely politically-oriented imperial history, the authors set out an entirely new programme for a history of the British empire.² By choosing a problem-

* P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism*: [vol. 1] *Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, 504 pp., £. 38 (paperback £. 16.99), ISBN 0 582 49175 4 CSD, 0 582 49176 2 PPR; [vol. 2] *Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990*, 337 pp., £. 30 (paperback £. 11.99), ISBN 0 582 20966 8 CSD, 0 582 20965 X PPR, Longman, London and New York, 1993.

¹ In this sense, Cain and Hopkins take up the issue where their predecessors, the celebrated imperial historians Gallagher and Robinson, left it before embarking upon their influential book. Compare J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade", *Economic History Review* (EHR), VI, 1953; with *idem*, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, (London, 1961), 2nd ed. 1981.

² Even well-established academics in the mainstream of British imperial history are often

oriented historical account, and in covering a long period of the history of international relations, *British Imperialism* represents a rare species in a discipline in which cumulative causation is still the rule. The closest comparable exception is Marseille's important contribution on French imperialism.³

Cain and Hopkins' study derives much of its explanatory strength from the parsimonious conceptual framework it employs in organising the rich historical material that it synthesizes. This integrative dimension makes the volumes positively stand out above the largely political textbook accounts of roughly comparable range in time (though none matches it in scope),⁴ or the numerous interpretations of Britain's economic and political decline.⁵ Therefore, while the books are primarily intended as a study of international history, they suggest important points of connection to a wide range of subjects, not least to the permanently topical debate on Britain's economic performance.⁶

2. The Format

Formally, the study is divided into two books of different lengths but of symmetrical internal structure. The overall argument is conveniently stated at the outset and related to general theoretical considerations as well as to the pertinent historiography (vol.1, ch.1). Each book starts with a historical part on 'the gentlemanly order' within Britain (vol.1, chs.3 to 7; vol.2, chs.2 to 5). This

ill at ease with approaches that venture into economic and social history, or draw inspiration from political science, albeit with a great deal of historical empiricism. The otherwise complimentary review by Peter Marshall in the *Times Literary Supplement* (20 August 1993, p. 22) appears guarded possibly for this very reason.

³ J. Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français: histoire d'un divorce*, (Paris, 1984).

⁴ Paul Kennedy's diplomatic history bestseller that also incorporates Britain (albeit in passing) springs to mind: P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (New York, 1987). A more recent example is D. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy & World Power in the 20th Century*, (London, 1991).

⁵ Such studies are legion. They range from apologists of empire like Lord Beloff to rigorous and subtle arguments by scholars like Perry Anderson. It seems, moreover, that putting the word decline in the title has become a marketing strategy.

⁶ The positive reception of the books in the serious press suggests this. Moreover, the study's relevance is probably also prompted by the fact that the authors pursue their argument down to the present. See B. Riley in the *Financial Times*, 8 May 1993; W. Hutton in *The Guardian*, 7 June 1993, p. 12; G. Owen in *The FT Review of Business Books*, 22 June 1993, pp. 1-2; and R. Oakeshott in *The Spectator*, 27 November 1993. C. Coquery-Vidrovitch's review in *Le monde diplomatique*, October 1993, p. 31, also emphasizes the performance perspective. A review from the perspective of imperial history is J. Osterhammel, "Gentleman-Kapitalismus und Gentleman-Charakter: Neues zum britischen Imperialismus", *Neue Politische Literatur*, XXXIX, 1994 (forthcoming).

is followed by a part in which the authors pursue the theme of 'the wider world' (vol.1, chs.8 to 13; vol.2, chs.6 to 10), ranging from areas of formal British colonial rule (the Dominions, India, and Africa) to areas of informal influence (South America, China, the Ottoman empire and Persia).

Although these are long books (together they cover more than eight hundred pages, and 25 chapters), they are immensely readable and accessible to a wide audience as well as to specialist readers. Summaries *en route* allow the books, and even certain chapters, to be read as self-contained pieces. However, it must be emphasized that any real appreciation of the study requires not only reading all the chapters, but also both books jointly.

References are usefully acknowledged at the bottom of the page. Perhaps regrettable is the absence of an index of authors contained in the footnotes, given the lack of a consolidated bibliography at the end. But this concession to editorial constraints is certainly preferable to the radical reduction of footnotes sometimes employed.

3. The Concept

The core of the argument is advanced for the period 1850 to 1945 (rather than 1914) (vol.1, chs.3 to 14; vol.2, chs.2 to 10). But Cain and Hopkins start much earlier and end later than traditional studies of British imperialism. They start earlier because they have identified a socio-economic complex linked to financial relations, rather than to the industrial revolution, as the main impulse of imperial expansion; they end later because they still see forces at work in the British polity at present that relate to this long-established theme.

The leitmotiv that underpins Cain and Hopkins' ambitious interpretation is centred on an analysis of the internal forces at work in British society since the end of the seventeenth century. By shaping economic priorities, a distinctive gentlemanly culture made its imprint on the stratification of society and the running of the state. The gentlemanly order is related to the financial and service sectors of the British economy, and closely bound up, in turn, with economic and political decision-making. These cultural and social components tied in with the economic and political realms led Cain and Hopkins to develop the concept of gentlemanly capitalism.⁷

In the most general terms, their argument holds that gentlemanly capitalism emerged with the revolution settlement of 1688 and continuously transformed itself as it adjusted to changed conditions over the centuries; but it remained a force that critically influenced power relations. The purpose and context of the

⁷ See P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas", *EHR*, XXXIX, 1986, and XL, 1987. For an early version of this argument see *idem*, "The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1815-1914", *EHR*, XXXIII, 1980.

exertion of this power are the main focus of the analysis of *British Imperialism*.⁸ The authors explain Britain's overseas presence and policy, whether formal or informal expansion, in terms of these socio-economic relations, and also develop an important argument about the legacy and rationale of major British institutions.

4. Summarizing the Argument: Themes, Novelties, Controversies

The landed aristocracy was a powerful force in British society from 1688 down to the mid-nineteenth century. Based originally on commercial agriculture, it was able to benefit from new opportunities presented by the financial revolution of the 1690s, when the national debt was created and the Bank of England was established to generate war finance and to expand Britain's already considerable international trade.

During the nineteenth century in particular, landed gentlemen ventured into occupations that were financially rewarding but also allowed for leisure, rather than those tainted with the image of manual labour. Employment in the City of London's financial institutions, rather than manufacturing, allowed them to pursue and even enhance the lifestyle of the 'leisure class'.⁹ This union was hugely successful and began to steer the economy and indeed the polity as a whole. An orthodoxy evolved that married cheap government and a small, though centralized, state with policies of 'sound money'.

The move towards free trade from the 1820s was related to financial reforms after 1815. By 1850 free trade had become the established doctrine, not least because it allowed to sustain the by then well established cosmopolitan net of commercial relations based on sterling. Thereafter, as agriculture declined, the landed aristocracy waned as a socio-political formation; but the power of the gentlemanly elite re-emerged, albeit transformed. It was able to renew itself, facilitated by common social values and family ties, via the service sector that expanded rapidly in the third quarter of the century.

By this time, Britain's visible exports had decreased (except for India) in relative terms and her exporters needed to rely more on underdeveloped markets. Significantly, as Cain and Hopkins maintain, this was exactly the time when Britain was about to become the linchpin of the world economy. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the decrease in visible exports was adequately replaced by earnings from 'invisibles' and increasing returns on overseas investment. As the home economy lacked prospects, gentlemanly investors sought more profitable outlets overseas and were often more innovative abroad than at home. Britain's commercial services and credit

⁸ '[W]hy [were] actors of a certain kind .. where they were when they were and why [they acted] in the way they did' (vol. 1, pp. 48-9).

⁹ Veblen's term; cf. vol. 1, p. 23.

facilities were generally far superior to those of its emerging competitors. The City of London was even strong enough to forgo involvement in certain areas, as it still retained plenty of opportunities elsewhere.

Gentlemanly capitalism shaped British institutions and the state, and defined the national interest. This meant that financial interests in the broadest sense were paramount. Industry and finance operated in separate social and economic contexts. Industry tended to be marginalized and was not the crucial driving force of the economy as a whole. The defeat of Cobdenism, the success of Gladstonian finance from the 1850s, the recurring debates on the gold standard at various points in time (after 1815; 1880/90s; 1920s), and the related bimetallic controversy of the 1880/90s, are important illustrations of this argument.

Exceptions to the dominant role of finance can be found at times of severe crises. During the two world wars, for example, industry and finance moved closer together, as the selection and allocation of resources became an urgent consideration. However, the interwar period (as in some way the period after World War II) meant a return to prewar aims. No finance capitalism in Hilferding's sense emerged and no fundamental changes occurred in the way political power was distributed.

As *British Imperialism* demonstrates, the export version of gentlemanly capitalism aimed at adopting or even creating local societies that were dominated by landed classes. These societies sought to emulate the lifestyle and convictions of the British establishment and, therefore, to pursue similar principles in policy terms. The Dominions, India, but also countries in South America provide ample evidence of this strategy.

Gentlemanly capitalism, too, meant a peculiar kind of management of overseas policy that served financial and service sector interests. Free trade allowed overseas borrowers to service their debts. Adherence to the gold standard, which in effect meant stable exchange rates pegged to sterling, a stringent fiscal regime, and satisfactory export performance on the periphery, was crucial in making such management operational. The degree of British interventionism depended on how successfully these aims could be achieved.

This vantage point leads Cain and Hopkins to an original reinterpretation of Britain's rule in India (vol. 1, ch. 10; vol. 2, ch. 8), where it is particularly difficult to avoid the Marxian influence in using industry as the main axis of analysis. Even in India, however, the primary British concern was to 'maintain the credit-worthiness of the Raj' (vol. 1, p. 319). India's export performance was crucial to guarantee debt repayment; therefore, particular attention was given to rupee-sterling relations, which in turn, ironically, hampered British manufacturing as it promoted Indian exports.

A similar rationale underpins examples throughout the books. Whether in areas within or outside their formal control, the British strove to support or install governments that would fit into the established global net of overseas lending and debt servicing. Policies towards South America's export economies

in the nineteenth century link up with these priorities (vol. 1, ch. 9) as do the rather more cautious policies towards the Ottoman Empire and China (vol. 1, chs. 11, 12). Exchange rate controversies with India¹⁰ or with Kenyan settlers (vol. 2, pp. 220/1) follow a similar logic. The oft-quoted Ottawa trade agreements in the 1930s, too, continued earlier practice under changed circumstances (vol. 2, pp. 83-8). When insuperable economic adversities at a global scale meant that cosmopolitanism had to be abandoned, Britain withdrew into the confines of the discriminatory sterling bloc. Ottawa conceded preferences to the Dominions not least in order to sustain the sterling system as a whole, at a time when capital exports were not feasible on any meaningful scale.

In this light, Africa's colonial partition (vol. 1, ch. 11) is a side issue that nonetheless bears out the general assumptions of *British Imperialism*. It is maintained as a unit for historiographical rather than analytical reasons. South Africa and Egypt were of course important for British trade and investment. Tropical Africa, however, was an "extra" that offered compensation to less competitive interest groups in Britain at a time of growing international rivalry for markets.¹¹ The City of London could not be duped by adventurers on the spot into believing that tropical (West) Africa offered great potential for prospective investors. But once the African colonies had been acquired, they too, thanks to government guarantees, offered secure investment outlets for less potent or risk-inclined investors, and so 'played the game' (vol. 2, ch. 9).

Cain and Hopkins thus reappraise a variety of established explanations and periodizations, and also take issue with a number of scholars concerning interpretations of the wider logic of Britain's overseas policies.

They strongly disagree with the late D.C.M. Platt's assertion that Britain's relationship with South America was fairly evenly balanced (vol. 1, pp. 276-8). It must be realized, the authors contend, that peripheral societies were managed and governments influenced to suit wider British interests, even though such management need not necessarily be detrimental to the overall performance of the peripheral economy. Similarly, Drummond's reasoning that the Ottawa preferential system amounted to giving in to Dominion demands is doubted (vol. 2, p. 90), as the policy is perfectly explicable in terms of sterling relationships. Gallagher and Robinson see their conception of free trade imperialism drown in the broader logic of imperial financial relations.¹² Cain and Hopkins' argument points to the very success of free-trade at a time when

¹⁰ A cogent analysis for the interwar period published in this journal that also suggests important qualifications on this general interpretation is G. Balachandran, "Gold and Empire: Britain and India in the Great Depression", *Journal of European Economic History*, XX, 1991.

¹¹ There are certain similarities here with Marseille's interpretation of the case of France in *Empire colonial*.

¹² Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade".

Gallagher and Robinson discounted it as a spent force. Moreover, Africa's partition is not treated as a knock-on effect of Britain's occupation of Egypt.¹³ Finally, while Cain and Hopkins agree with the major categorisation that underpins the statistical research in Davis and Huttenback's *Mammon* (vol. 1, p. 183),¹⁴ they maintain that any straightforward profitability argument at the national level is mistaken.¹⁵ While both agree that business and elite investment was separate, Cain and Hopkins' argument has a rather more political edge because they insist on the importance of links with separate social webs and, in turn, with the distribution of power within British society (vol. 1, p. 199).

At the more general level, points of controversy importantly relate to the respective roles played by industry and finance in Britain's expansion. First, gentlemanly capitalism connects a historical construct with theoretical work by Bhagwati and the analyses of Britain by Clive Lee on the importance of the service sector in promoting economic growth independently of industry (vol. 1, pp. 21, 113-6).¹⁶ This strongly contradicts both neoclassical as well as Marxist assumptions that emphasize the crucial importance of industrialisation. Secondly, *British Imperialism* also challenges the historiographical orthodoxy concerning the pivotal significance of the industrial revolution for Britain's overseas expansion. Such seemingly irreverent treatment of the role of industry is bound to evoke criticism. In this connection it is, therefore, important to point out that Cain and Hopkins emphasize that their argument does not belittle the industrial revolution but rather suggests a regrouping of the fleet under a different flagship (vol. 1, pp. 4, 19, 470, vol. 2, p. 300).

5. Evaluating the Argument: Limits, Aims, Contexts

One way of criticizing Cain and Hopkins is, of course, to scan the text for possible historical inaccuracies.¹⁷ However, it seems more constructive in the present context to situate the study and to discuss where in general terms problems of evidence might be located. Any study must first and foremost be

¹³ As suggested by Gallagher and Robinson, *Africa and the Victorians*.

¹⁴ L. Davis and R.A. Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860-1912*, Cambridge, 1987.

¹⁵ See also A.G. Hopkins, Accounting for the British Empire, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (JICH), XVI, 1988; and for similar criticism G. Balachandran, Imperialism: The Auditor's Report, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXVII, 1990.

¹⁶ J. Bhagwati, Splintering and Disembodiment of Services and Developing Nations, in *idem*, ed., *Essays in Development Economics*, vol. I, (Oxford, 1985); C.H. Lee, "Regional Growth and Structural Change in Victorian Britain", *EHR*, XXXIV, 1981.

¹⁷ See A. Porter, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and Empire: The British Experience Since 1750?", *JICH*, XVIII, 1990. This critique of Cain and Hopkins appears to be launched at the wrong analytical level.

measured within its self-defined limits. Commentators can then proceed to discuss whether these limits are appropriate for the chosen purposes.

Its ontological basis defines the study as aiming at an 'understanding' or 'explanation' (vol. 1, pp. 46-51) of the historical process, a perspective that owes a great deal to Max Weber. The concept of gentlemanly capitalism, too, has an important social and cultural dimension as well as a political component, as do Weber's constructions representing capitalism. The study is, therefore, sharply distinct from the positivist utilitarianism that inspires neoclassical economic history, as exemplified for empire by Davis and Huttenback's *Mammon*.

As for conceptual delineations, the technical way in which imperialism is defined constructively differs from its general use in the mainstream historical literature.¹⁸ Imperialism is conceived as a social constant linked to capitalism, as indeed is the case with the classics on the subject, from Hilferding to Hobson.¹⁹ This allows the authors to develop a framework that captures long-term historical continuity and change in the socioeconomic formation they identify, as well as its political relevance. Here lies the real power of Cain and Hopkins' argument.

But unlike the classics, and in common with Gallagher and Robinson, they are interested not only in the metropolitan order but also in the informal and formal manifestations of imperialism overseas and, therefore, require some conceptual device that allows them to capture this dimension too. Here, imperialism is distinguished from expansionism by measures of infringed sovereignty of the peripheral state (vol. 1, pp. 42-46). This idea is separated from the notion of economic exploitation of the periphery. This approach is equally unimportant to liberal classics on imperialism from Hobson to Schumpeter,²⁰ and also to Marxists like Hilferding,²¹ but it is clearly central to the dependency school.²²

Such definitions of purpose and concepts imply that *British Imperialism* avoids establishing too direct a link with the general debate on British economic performance that ranges from Wiener's culture critique to Elbaum and Lazonick's institutional criticism, and has affinities, too, with Davis and

¹⁸ Political historians often describe the steps towards formal colonial rule in the 'age of imperialism', instead of seeing imperialism as a phenomenon that requires systematic explanation.

¹⁹ Incidentally, Peter Cain is an established authority on Hobson.

²⁰ As they are concerned only with formal empire towards 'backward nations', and, moreover, subscribe to a non-conflictual notion of capitalism (cf. vol.1, p.16). See, for example, P.J. Cain, J.A. Hobson, *Financial Capitalism and Imperialism in Late Victorian England*, *JCH*, XIII, 1985.

²¹ Since imperialism is perceived as a class relation. See A. Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, (London, 1980), ch. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, part III.

Huttenback's profitability argument.²³ But Cain and Hopkins' approach means that they can offer important points of connection, in particular with those debates on British economic performance that accept that economic relations are social relations, and thus have a historical dimension. Here, their study adds an important political component.

Unlike much of the literature on Britain's (economic) decline, *British Imperialism* is not targeted towards answering the single ultimate question of causation. Because it allows for a more detached stance, it may, therefore, be less exposed to ideological misappropriation.²⁴ Moreover, while Cain and Hopkins' argument implies that much of the British elite's success eventually turned out to be self-defeating, they also put less emphasis on criticizing retarded modernisation than did Marseille on the French case, for example.²⁵ Another strength is that the study was designed from the start as a large-scale enterprise²⁶ and is not merely the application of a specific study to a general problem. The books are, therefore, also different from a recent historical contribution on Britain's decline by Rubinstein,²⁷ incidentally allied to Cain and Hopkins' gentlemanly capitalism. Rubinstein's book is an enlargement of his detailed socio-cultural research, but it lacks the rigour of *British Imperialism* in its argument about the economic and political dimensions of the problem.

On the other hand, the theoretical basis of *British Imperialism* also implies that it has no direct relevance to the debate on peripheral economic performance *stricto sensu*. But it directs attention to areas of peripheral politics and economic change that should be investigated more closely. As noted, this is not the imperialism of the dependency school which, as it is primarily concerned with identifying causes of peripheral underdevelopment, inextricably binds the concept of imperialism to the notion of exploitation. Here, it is tempting to pre-empt the repetition of one argument put against Gallagher and Robinson more than twenty years ago, namely that they confounded dependence with

²³ M. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, (Cambridge, 1981); B. Elbaum and W. Lazonick, *An Institutional Perspective of British Decline*, in *idem*, eds., *The Decline of the British Economy*, (Oxford, 1986); Davis and Huttenback, *Mammon*.

²⁴ The reception in the serious press seems to indicate this: it crosses the ideological divide. See note 6 above.

²⁵ Marseille, *Empire colonial*.

²⁶ See Cain and Hopkins, *The Political Economy*, and *idem*, *Gentlemanly Capitalism*.

²⁷ W.D. Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750-1990*, (London, 1993). The book's alleged emphasis on British prowess prompted *The Economist* to praise it as a timely morale booster: "Buck up chaps", 17 July 1993, pp. 22-3. A review that links Rubinstein's book with Cain and Hopkins' study is T. Barker, "Rethinking British History", *History Today*, January 1994.

exploitation.²⁸ Such criticism would miss the point now as it did then because of the limits the studies have imposed upon themselves. As different as *British Imperialism* is from "The Imperialism of Free Trade" in its underpinnings, both studies converge in the sense that they do not claim to argue on possible benefits or losses for peripheral economies.²⁹

It is helpful to realize, too, that Cain and Hopkins do not claim to provide an interpretation of Britain's external relations in their totality in the sense perceived by international relations theory, be it in a 'realist', 'neo-realist' or 'structuralist' framework. Their study is focused in a different way. Any analysis that deals with Britain's external relations or foreign policy as its main focus has to give the state considerably greater prominence than *British Imperialism* does with its selective focus on certain institutions. The divide between a study of international relations and one on imperialism acquires more importance in the twentieth century as the role of the state and government increases with the emergence of national economies as consciously managed entities. This fact is recognized by the authors.

On the whole, there exist no large inconsistencies or obvious flaws in the construction of the analytical framework of *British Imperialism*. It bears out, in general terms, the aims the authors have set themselves. Their concepts allow for considerable flexibility, which suits their long haul well. Empire can thus be perceived as a whole, and historical processes properly assessed. When dealing with a narrower subject, however, some conceptual distinctions might not be fine enough. In this connection, the chosen framework exhibits a bias towards the national dimension and may underestimate the relevance of international capital movements in their possible impact on Britain, for example. Similarly, any study with a territorial focus on the periphery, in particular outside British rule, will need a measuring device that goes beyond the incursion upon sovereignty used by *British Imperialism* to define the fine line between expansionism and imperialism.³⁰ For Cain and Hopkins' analysis of metropolitan impulses this crude distinction makes good sense, and the matter seems to be of rather marginal importance for their overall argument. But it is important that future work should begin to explore the nature of the peripheral state in greater detail so that the impact of imperialist forces in shaping local society and the resulting distribution of power within the peripheral state can be more accurately assessed. Finally, a finer distinction between potentially conflicting interests within the City of London might help to clarify the precise strength of imperialist pressures at

²⁸ For a concise criticism by a prominent scholar of international political economy, see B.J. Cohen, *The Question of Imperialism. The Political Economy of Dominance and Dependence*, (London, 1973), pp. 210-211.

²⁹ Cf. some explanations in A.G. Hopkins, *Informal Empire in Argentina: An Alternative View*, *Journal of Latin American Studies* XXVI, 1994 (forthcoming).

³⁰ A.G. Hopkins himself has recently offered some guidance on this elusive subject: Hopkins, *Informal Empire*.

specific times, the particular relationship with government and policy, and the hierarchy of preferences with respect to different parts of the world.

As for the crucial connections between society, economy, and politics which the study's conceptual framework suggests, the link between the first two is importantly a matter of factual and not least statistical evidence bearing on the questions whether the service sector was as strong as Cain and Hopkins suggest it was, and whether the composition of the British establishment bears out their argument. The state of the art suggests that their analysis is most germane. Their social argument is importantly substantiated by Rubinstein's detailed research on the composition of Britain's nineteenth century elites that has been carefully interwoven with the argument of *British Imperialism*.³¹ In assessing regional aspects of service sector growth the study draws upon crucial research by Lee;³² and the propensities of overseas investors in relation to their social origin are judged, among others, not least on the basis of detailed statistical research by Davis and Huttenback.³³

As for the connection between the socio-economic formation and politics, one important point of criticism expressed by Daunton in his debate with Rubinstein on gentlemanly capitalism (and by implication on Cain and Hopkins' articles) would not appear to hold for the books, since, as the authors rightly emphasize (vol. 1, p. 138), *British Imperialism* does not simply argue that wealth confers power.³⁴ Rather, the relationship is mediated via social organisation which circumscribes economic priorities and conveys political influence, and, therefore, defines the interests of a social elite as the national one.

Greater problems might exist with regard to the link between power and specific policies, since these are importantly mediated via the state and its organisation, which was subject to considerable changes during the period under review. But the framework employed by *British Imperialism* still works by providing an indication of probability, even if other constraints are also relevant.

³¹ See notably, W.D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain Since the Industrial Revolution*, (London, 1981).

³² Important insights into this argument can be obtained from C.H. Lee, *The Service Sector, Regional Specialization, and Economic Growth in the Victorian Economy*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, X, 1984.

³³ Davis and Huttenback, *Mammon*.

³⁴ M.J. Daunton, *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Industry, 1820-1914*, *Past and Present*, 122, 1989; and the ensuing exchange with Rubinstein, *Past and Present*, 132, 1991. It must be noted about that this debate was intended as an argument about Britain's decline (albeit a problem that conspicuously lacks a clear definition) and focused on controversial issues of the relationship between landed gentry and finance or industry. As there is sufficient evidence for the strength of the financial sector in overseas relations, and Cain and Hopkins' argument has also an important regional dimension, it seems that qualifications on this issue are unlikely crucially to affect their argument on imperialism.

It would be far too innocent to assume that political decision-makers operate in an environment disconnected from more basic interests and socio-economic impulses and that decisions are determined solely by the state, or by pure economic doctrine.

6. Conclusion

It is to be hoped that established specialists as well as prospective researchers will accept the invitation extended by Cain and Hopkins in their conclusions and take up the various challenges posed by their study (vol. 2, p. 315). As they emphasize, their books are not intended to provide an, albeit rather elusive, definitive history. Significantly, as readers of this journal will easily recognize, the comparative dimension of the study of imperialism has been thrown wide open. The proper delineation of the British case can be used as a comparative device that enables the similarities and singularities of other important cases, such as France and Germany, and the even more recent examples of Japan and the United States to be evaluated. The imperialism of minor European states, such as Italy and Portugal, too, can then be better put in perspective, either as a small scale variation of the imperialism of the rich or as a genuine 'beggars' imperialism'.

Historical research at its best is always concerned with major historical processes and the construction of probable chains of causation for their explanation. This ought to be the very essence of the historian's trade; it is, as Gerschenkron pointedly remarked, the 'arbitrariness of the process of cognition'³⁵. Detailed research needs the big framework and the middle ground of argumentative reasoning on society and politics. By duly reviving this tradition, albeit against, but perhaps also because of, the prevailing *zeitgeist*, Cain and Hopkins offer a compelling new point of reference.

³⁵ A. Gerschenkron, *Continuity in History and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 38.