

Teodoro Tagliaferri, *La nazione, le colonie, il mondo. Saggi sulla cultura imperiale britannica (1861-1947)*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome, 2018.

The paramount lesson of the study of history – especially if we bear in mind the present – is the pressing need to expand our temporal and spatial horizons. What may now seem inevitable and unchangeable is instead the result of a complex process involving many factors, among which culture certainly carries great weight. In this perspective, the paradigms for finding stable ways of coexisting for populations of different culture, nationality and language represent one of the great challenges that have marked historical development.

This is the theme of the eight essays by Teodoro Tagliaferri collected in the book under review. At the centre is the British empire, often taken as a model for its ability to harmonise unity and freedom, superiority and similarities, through explicit imitation and the sharing of sentiments and values. The author clearly states this position in the opening pages, positing that the story of the British empire can serve as a symbol of European supremacy in the framework of a new global history.

From the very first essay, on the American Civil War, the reader is constantly made aware of the British influence as a catalyst of what the future might hold in store for the United States. The abolition of slavery is presented as an aspect of a universal movement of labour emancipation in which the struggles of the English working class played a fundamental role. This was because the “British world system” between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries was based – as we discover in the second essay – on “a system of consensus” underpinned by a “broad agreement on the limits of difference.” The system was flexible enough for an extremely effective shared “rhetoric” that permitted otherwise antagonistic social and economic forces to coexist. This formula condenses Disraeli’s project for a de-nationalised “cosmopolitan military empire” tasked with “extending the Empire to the East” – a

plan which, if achieved, would, however, have represented a degeneration of the classic model of the "British empire."

The third essay focuses on the great challenges that awaited the "British world system" now faced with the advance of the United States, a unified Germany and a watchful Tsarist empire. The author underlines the important contribution of John Robert Seeley (1834-1895) in establishing the intellectual arsenal of the "new imperialism" of the late Victorian age, still valid after the turn of the century when imperial England was portrayed as capable of building the New Jerusalem. In Seeley's thinking, it was essential for England to maintain its connection with the overseas branches, creating ethno-linguistic and religious homogeneity in a federation which could deploy the forces of the Empire in times of war and was endowed with a body for debate and legislation on common issues.

Seeley's contribution was just the start of a broader analysis springing from the profound changes in global equilibria in the 20th century. The shift envisaged was from *Greater Britain to World Society*, a transformation Britain could not avoid, being an integral part of the Old World. As the author points out in the fourth essay, Europe was "the place where national sovereignty was dialectically overcome" (p. 153). This reinforced a vision whereby the British empire could not be likened to any other form of political organization; it was based on self-governing communities of equal status, united by a shared loyalty to the Crown and linked to each other as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. This uniqueness, not a new factor in the analysis of the conceptual development of the British empire, led to the crucial, definitive shift in the 20th century from "country-state" to "world state", which enabled Great Britain "to be a member, alongside the USA and Russia, of the elite club of super-states" (p. 164). The fifth essay pursues these questions further. In the 1900s the monarchy enjoyed great popularity. According to the Whig interpretation, this was due to the sovereign's strict abstention from personally participating in the legislative process and in governing. In this way, the monarch was shielded from any in-

volvement in the inevitable democratization of public activity and found a representative role that guaranteed unquestioned authority over a vast empire. Thus, despite its markedly English nature, the monarchy became an element of cohesion in the sub-system of “self-governed communities,” acting as a keystone for the entire British universe. The three models – democracy, nation and empire – could therefore continue to coexist under a careful division of roles and with checks and balances, accentuating the historical significance of an architecture which, to survive, had to renew itself proactively, with the forms and structures constantly found in the dynamism typical of history.

The sixth essay departs from chronology and highlights the question of language, a crucial one in empires, where, more than elsewhere, it is called upon to ensure a clear orientation for community consciousness. The author’s approach recalls the conservative viewpoint of Sir Lewis Namier, favouring the community as a whole: hence the need to identify a “morphology” of human affairs, where language also plays a key role in encouraging the drive towards “nationalism.” In the compactness of language, a nationality acquires a specificity of its own, which, along with the soil, guarantees citizenship. The limits of this conception were revealed by the American colonies’ demands for representation in the British parliament, with the risk of transforming that institution “into a tribal sovereignty.” The penultimate essay returns to the chronological approach to discuss Arnold Toynbee, the historian of the period following the Great War. The focus is on the valorization of “civilization,” which took on new features “only in Western Europe,” which for Toynbee coincided with the area of Western Christianity. Civilizations are therefore broader forms of human societies, founded upon “spiritual individualities.” If one then compares Western civilization with others, there is no doubt that “greater vitality and effectiveness” distinguish it. Thus, the term “Western” became indispensable in describing the outlook to impress upon relations between civilizations, in the profoundly new era of the 1920s.

BOOK REVIEWS

The final essay in the book examines the geopolitical context in the period following World War II. Decolonization was proceeding and had to be governed to the extent that this was possible. The British empire was once again in a position of strength, because Britain was the only nation-state belonging to the core of Western civilization that was at the same time connected to numerous peripheral areas of the New World and, through India, to Asia. Britain was therefore at the centre of a global process, maintaining relations with the expanding Western-Christian civilizations, but also with the civilizations of the Hindu and Islamic Eurasian East. These processes have reinforced the imperial identity of Great Britain as a focal point in the current phase of globalization.

This brief outline cannot do justice to the wealth of ideas contained in Tagliaferri's book, which constitutes a valid reference point in the quest for a new understanding of historical processes from the perspective of *global history*.

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