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I'm OK, You're OK  
On Niall Ferguson's *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British  
World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*

by  
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*De te fabula narratur?* Ferguson's stated purpose is "to write the history of globalization as it was promoted by Great Britain and her colonies," not to write yet another history of the British Empire (p. xxvi). Thus does he begin to intimate here and in related introductory passages that that Empire was but a factor, albeit a key factor (of a supposedly beneficial type), in a larger, more complex set of global arrangements. As he sees it, something like an empire must function if the complex global system Britain did so much to create is to continue in being. For the attempt since World War Two to run the world without an empire has, he asserts, failed (p. 362). And so who better than the Americans, who happen to embody the most important British attributes, the concern for liberty, both political and economic, to carry on where the British had to leave off? From this perspective Ferguson's explicit attempt to address an American audience is perfectly comprehensible. Ferguson's rather large claims must be examined, however, as must the character as well as the assumptions and the logic of his argument.

Take for example, his presumption, that his chosen people are imperial innocents requiring his instruction and encouragement. Can a historian of his much touted brilliance really be unaware that the nature, scope and depth of American imperialism has long been the subject of scholarly and political critique among Americans themselves? Yet this is something Ferguson does not concern himself with--though I can all too easily imagine some future American Ferguson also exploiting and perhaps also damning with faint praise such critics to prove that American imperialism had its own built-in, liberty-defending, self-corrective mechanism. But an American empire has ceased to be the concern solely of the American left. Recently, such an empire has been receiving acknowledgement and praise on the American right, not only for its contemporary manifestations (see, e.g., Robert Kagan, *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998), but also for its past (see, e.g.,

Thomas Donnelly's review of Max Boot's, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, in *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002). It is these latter Americans with whom Ferguson is, in fact, politically allying himself. But they surely have no great need to be urged on by an outsider in their crusade to create and maintain an "empire of liberty." Nevertheless, every little bit helps, I suppose, in the waging of the propaganda war to generate support for the imperial project among those who must most immediately bear the costs of the endeavour. And who better to help advance the cause, especially among those who experience a frisson of cultural transgressiveness and a confirmation of their superior sensibilities by watching "Masterpiece Theatre" and other British cultural imports than "Britain's brightest young historian," "the *enfant terrible* of the Oxford history establishment" (dust jacket). At the same time, Ferguson does seem to believe that his advice and blessings are very relevant to the debate now being waged within the United States over its post-Cold War, post 9/11 role in the world. But might this not be just one more indication that the British imperial mind-set dies hard—even if it now persists only in its etiolated, politically self-deluding post-WW II form, the "special relationship" with the United States?

As regards the character of Ferguson's argument, it deserves to be noted that he has not relied only on the printed word. His book is rather lavishly illustrated. But more than that, *Empire* was constructed with the aid of a television production team as seeking to address the British and American publics, Ferguson explicitly claims merely to be presenting evidence, leaving it to them to judge the merits and the demerits of the British Empire (p. xxix). But that is a claim I now wish to question.

THIS QUESTIONING MIGHT WELL BEGIN BY ATTENDING to the words Ferguson places at the very beginning of his book—that opening passage from *Heart of Darkness* in which Joseph Conrad evokes the heroic, brilliant history of the Thames from which had floated "the dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires" out "into the mystery of an unknown earth" (p. v). Eventually, Ferguson does get around to noting the horrors of the Belgian Congo which Conrad portrayed in his book. But he does so in an interesting fashion: he juxtaposes to the horrors of the Belgian empire the less oppressive, as he claims it by then to have become, British Empire (pp. 294-296). Conrad himself, however, almost immediately confronts us with Marlow's understanding, that the Thames, London, has

also been “one of the dark places of the earth.” And *Heart of Darkness* concludes with the same less positive vision, the evidence of enlightened Europe’s dark center having been amassed: “the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” It is thus to be doubted that Conrad, whatever the paradoxical complexities of his work and despite the limitations some impute to him, would have been happy with the unqualifiedly celebratory pro-British uses to which Ferguson appears to have put him.

If the elisions in the epigraph raise doubts concerning Ferguson’s purpose and methods, so too, I believe, do the elisions in his definition of his authorial self. For before he leaves it to his audiences to judge the British Empire he deploys a rhetoric of personal openness to preempt their skepticism. His family, he tells us—but not just *his* family!—must be numbered among the beneficiaries of Empire (p. xxiv). So far, so good. But it has to be asked whether his imperial filiations, about which he presents himself as so open, honest and unassuming in recounting some of his family history, are in fact beyond critical consideration, especially given his tendency to make his family and its pro-imperial attitudes the epitome of his nation. Because, as it so happens, my own filiations with that same Empire are both so similar in some respects yet so different in others from Ferguson’s, I hope I will be excused when I follow his example and try to counter his insinuations with familial intimacies of my own.

Like Ferguson—to focus first on a family identification to which he alludes both in *Empire* and in his earlier book, *The Pity of War*—I had a grandfather who laboured in the Fife coalfields. In fact, I had two. These were more than enough to bring home to me, long before I became at all reflective about such things, just how terribly strife torn the politics of empire could be even at the heart of the system. Being rather older than Ferguson—he had the misfortune to come of political age in the Thatcher era when the post-War dream was beginning to be systematically trashed—I have sad memories of bitterly opposed attitudes towards the Empire which antedate when it became the joke of Ferguson’s childhood (cf. p. xx), a joke Thatcher would, in fact, try to undo in the South Atlantic war with Argentina. In my intertwined families of origin, when I was a child, in my hearing, Churchill and the monarchy and what they signified and defended were revered on the one side and despised on the other: for me, the political was always intensely, often painfully personal; for me, unlike it seems for

Ferguson, there can be no unitary, salt of the earth Scot, not even among the working class, to be trundled out in defense of some particular political position.

Ferguson's attempt to ground his analysis of empire in the purportedly irrefutable evidence of his own rather remote experience of a particular empire is, to be sure, a rhetorical move any of us might find tempting. But his seeming openness, his confession that he thinks of himself, his family, his nation, his world as benefitting from Britain's Empire, should not be allowed to afford him any argumentative advantage. In its "I am a camera and here is the technical data on my lens" assertion it smacks, does it not, of the way in which that other medium for which *Empire* was constructed, namely, television, too often purports to be that medium which does not mediate, even while it often frames and edits what it transmits to its audience to some unstated end? That surely is not nowadays a presumption that would be allowed to pass without question, though the innocence of the image remains, I think, a dangerously seductive illusion.

But what, now, of the argument Ferguson's rhetoric is meant to sustain? Here we must first distinguish between his principal hypotheses and the evidence he deploys. His hypotheses, which interweave with one another, are of several kinds: empirical and ethical; retrospective and prospective.

Retrospectively and empirically, Ferguson claims the British had no blueprint for what they sought to achieve, but that from the outset in the late 16th and early 17th centuries they methodically and not at all absent-mindedly brought their Empire into being. His target is thus, as he himself makes clear, that sort of British self-understanding promulgated in the late 19th Century by J. R. Seeley, that the British Empire had not been deliberately constructed, but that they would have to be deliberate in ensuring its continuation (pp. 246-247). (Despite Ferguson's disagreement with Seeley's proposition, that the British had "conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind" (p. 246), he does seem to be admonishing Americans in Seeley-like fashion, to become deliberate about their imperial role in the present global order (p. 368).) The British story Ferguson tells is one much more centered on interest and calculation. Beginning as scavenging pirates, they conducted "a sustained campaign to take over the empires of others," the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French (pp. xxvi-xxvii). Eventually, deliberately employing commercial, financial and military power, and colonization they constructed by the early

19th Century “the largest empire the world had ever seen” (p. 56). Conducting “globalisation with gunboats” that British Empire “proved that empire is a form of international government that can work--and not just for the benefit of the ruling power” (pp. xxvi, 362).

In creating a global system that they dominated, Ferguson continues, the British simultaneously created political entities and an overarching global system embodying or at least not hostile to their own dominant socio-political characteristics and values. Among “the distinctive features . . . they tended to disseminate” into the parts of the world they penetrated was, most important of all “because it remains the most distinctive feature of the Empire--the thing that sets it apart from its continental rivals,” “the idea of liberty” (p. xxv). Moreover, this particular rapist had a saving grace, a conscience? For British despotism, Ferguson tells us, regularly elicited a powerful “liberal critique” within Britain and its Empire (p. xxv). And so once a violently penetrated society gave birth to a new form of itself modelled on its victimizer, “it became very hard for the British to prohibit that political liberty to which they attached so much significance for themselves” (p. xxv). But even were this a fair portrayal of the progress of the Empire, would it really be as praiseworthy as Ferguson takes it to be? Surely it is by no means unusual for those who dominate to convey to those they dominate, “you are free to be like us (but you are not free to be different from us!)?” Further, where it is the security and maintenance of the system that is of primary concern, surely those who had been made over in the image of their British masters were then seen to present neither challenge nor danger to the British global order and British interests? (Is it not in certain circles one of the guiding truisms of our day, that once the Iraqis have been Americanized—“democratized”—they will no longer present a problem to America’s global order?)

There is also the question, whether the tendency to critique domination is somehow inborn among the British and peculiar to themselves and those they have tutored. His just noted distinction between the empires of Britain and its continental rivals (p. xxv) would seem to suggest that Ferguson believes just that: “Would other empires have produced the same effects” as the British one, he asks? “It seems doubtful,” he answers (p. xxv). He presents as grounds for his doubt a dilapidated remnant of the Dutch empire, an archaic remnant of the French one, the remains of the criminal Japanese project to bridge the Kwai. Why, he proposes, New York might still be called “New Amsterdam” and look like Bloemfontein (pp. xxv-xxvi).

Since Ferguson is an acknowledged pioneer of “what if” *Virtual History*, his reflections on these matters are perhaps much more profound than they seem? But what if . . .? Should we really overlook, because it is convenient to his case, his own later account of what the British actually did to help Bloemfontein become Bloemfontein (pp. 277-278)?

More generally, his assumptions about the British and the continentals and their several empires seem to foreclose any consideration of the possibility that it was the interactions among all of these pieces of the world that contributed to the historical development of each as well as of the whole. But it is surely implausible to assume that the British were not shaped and reshaped by their Empire just as much as Britain, especially those who were dominant within Britain, shaped and reshaped the Empire? And it is surely implausible to assume that the Dutch and the other continental empires were not shaped and reshaped by their existence within a global order dominated by Britain and its Empire? In short, in framing his hypotheses in the way that he does, given what appear to be some of his grounding assumptions, is not Ferguson being a rather ahistorical historian?

There are, however, occasions when Ferguson does seem to countenance a complex interactive historical process linking the “homeland” and the Empire, as for example in his substantive commentaries on Jamaica (pp.191-195) and India (pp. 195-203), on the tensions which arose in these places between those British who were trying to live their lives there and those who critically commented from afar on the actions of the former, on the emergence of racism against the non-British people in these places and on the almost simultaneous emergence of racist attitudes and racist ideology in Britain itself (pp. 259-261). Nevertheless, unless I’m missing something, Ferguson’s account of racism’s imperial connections is, I think, just too abbreviated. For while he does note that “emigration from Britain gave way [in the 1950s] to immigration into Britain” (p. 358), he does not mention Enoch Powell or the Notting Hill riots or the anti-immigration or anti-refugee sentiments and laws that the society supposedly so committed to human liberty has become home to.

That Ferguson perceives a dialectical processes shaping both the British “homeland” and the British Empire is also suggested by his observation,

In previous centuries the British had felt no qualms about shooting to kill in defence of the Empire. They had started

to change after [Eyre's brutal suppression of the revolt against white rule in Jamaica in 1865]. By the time of [the killing and wounding of hundreds of demonstrators in Amritsar in 1919], the ruthless determination exhibited by the likes of Clive, Nicholson and Kitchener seemed to have vanished altogether (p. 328).

If so (and surely Amritsar itself casts doubt on his claim), was this because the forces of liberty had become stronger at home--and if so, why? But if the forces of liberty had grown stronger, what are we then to make of Ferguson's observation that the British Prime Minister's speech in the aftermath of 11 September "bears more than a passing resemblance to the Victorians' project to export their 'civilization' to the world" (p. 365)? Is it Ferguson's own vision of how global order is to be achieved and maintained that discourages him from saying much else about Tony Blair's evangelical ruthlessness even where evidence which might justify his actions is lacking? Is the pro-imperial ruthlessness of today's British government some strange anomaly, or is it the old United Kingdom reasserting itself given the opportunity? In sum, however, as regards interactions within the Empire, Ferguson's politically relevant general claims seem to be ill-matched with the details he provides.

Similarly, it is arguable that Ferguson's depiction of the relations between the Empire and the competing empires involved some mutual interactive development. To be sure, when he compares the Belgian treatment of the Congo with the British treatment of their Jamaican slaves and rebels he goes on to aver that "the correct comparison must be between these other empires and the British Empire as it was in the twentieth century" (p.294). But that is surely an awfully self-serving yardstick for those of us who are British; it is surely an especially self-serving yardstick for Ferguson to employ given his larger aims, his support for a new British-like imperial ordering of the globalized world. And what, in this particular context, are we to make of his discussion of Hitler: "There was one man who continued to believe in the British Empire . . ." (pp. 328-332). "What Germany had to do, he [Hitler] argued, was to learn from Britain's example," etc. Was this not learning from the British example with a vengeance? When rebuked for his savagery, might not Hitler have responded, citing chapter and verse from the history of the Empire, "you behaved in the same way when it suited you, and you'd do so again?" And while the British might deny such a

future, they surely could not deny their past—it is a past that Ferguson himself makes crystal clear.

It is to Ferguson's credit, let it be acknowledged, that he provides so much ammunition with which to dispute his ethical and political claims. But it must also be said that if he was seeking to demonstrate that the strain of liberty eventually became dominant within Britain and its Empire, we really have little more to go on than his claim that this was so. The actual evidence he provides does not, I would submit, support him in this. Indeed, his descriptions of the progress of Empire may even contradict that claim. For following the Empire's origins in piracy, as Ferguson tells it, there ensued the "white plague" of colonization and the slave trade (ch. 2, pp. 58-113). This is followed by his troubling account of the role of British christianity in the enlargement and securing of the Empire: Despite some genuinely laudatory attempts to provide what was needed to those who needed it, arrogance—some of it mindless, some of it intellectually elaborated—would seem, from what Ferguson tells us, to have been a dominant feature of "the mission" (ch. 3, pp. 114-161). And when the response of those on the other side of "the clash of civilisations" (pp. 136-154) was less than positive, quick and terrible was the vengeance of those whose best intentions and high ideals had been spurned.

For example, the revenge wreaked upon the Indian people for the Mutiny in 1857 was truly horrible. Ferguson recounts a number of hideously brutal incidents in a hideously brutal campaign which will surely summon to the mind of many a reader images from World War Two. He goes so far, in fact, as to suggest that one particular incident may remind us of the way SS officers treated Jews—but, he quickly reassures us, we have his word for it, but nothing more, it would be inappropriate for us to draw such a parallel (p. 152). Yet just such incidents and campaigns as this may well have been what Hitler found so commendable about Britain's imperial ways. Moreover, Ferguson's conclusion regarding this entire ghastly episode would appear to deny the highly educated, high-minded Victorian gentleman who ordered it and managed it any moral agency—from being the victimizers they become the victims, forced to behave in detestable ways: "The project to modernize and Christianize India had gone disastrously wrong; so wrong it had ended up by barbarizing the British" (p. 152). But, he concludes this chapter, the mission would continue. Only, "Commerce, Civilization and Christianity were to be conferred . . . just as

Livingstone had intended. But they would arrive [in Africa this time] in conjunction with a fourth 'C': Conquest" (p. 161)

But before he tells us about that, Ferguson takes us back to India, to recount how after the Mutiny the British managed, despite some bitter internal wrangling and despite creating a reality, an anglicized, educated Indian elite, that would return to haunt them, to turn India into a bulwark of the Empire (ch. 4, "Heaven's Breed," pp. 162-219). However, by the time India became the jewel in the British imperial crown, high Victorian pomp and circumstance were already coming under challenge by those who wanted Britain to return to imperial basics: new markets, new colonies, new wars (p. 219).

In his fifth chapter, "Maxim Force" (pp. 220-289), set between photographs of dead bodies in a Natal trench and of bright-eyed, militaristic British boy scouts, Ferguson recounts "the Empire's phenomenal expansion in the late Victorian period [thanks to] the combination of financial power and firepower" (p. 223). Abroad—some of this will seem terribly contemporary—the latest in military technology, which rendered the weapons of those to be defeated and dominated relatively harmless: for example, the half-hour battle of Tel-el-Kabir in 1882 (p. 235), or the five hour battle at Omdurman, which saw the transformation of almost the entire opposing 52,000 strong Islamic army into a heap of casualties, almost 10,000 of them being killed outright, while fewer than 400 of the Anglo-Egyptian force and only 48 British soldiers lost their lives (pp. 267-268). (Were Bush, Rumsfeld, et al., to read of this, they might even have to revise their estimations of the place of the recent assault on Iraq in military history!) At home—and this will seem awfully contemporary too—a barrage of media propaganda: books, plays, music hall entertainment, paintings, poetry, newspaper reports, imperial exhibitions, stories directed at the young (pp. 251-259), and the "targeting [of] voters' narrow economic interests" (pp. 250-251) helped maintain sufficient domestic support for the imperial adventure, including the 72 separate military campaigns Britain mounted in defence of its *pax britannica* during Victoria's reign (p. 251).

I emphasize these details at length because Ferguson's account of the reaction of the forces of British liberty against that massive organized violence, and against the political manipulation and the gross financial-political corruption that accompanied that violence, is so singularly slight (pp. 279-282), suggesting the minor place it occupies in his conception of

the grand scheme of things. Neither should Ferguson's own dismissive contempt for the liberal response as unrealistic or worse go unremarked (p. 282). His urging that British liberalism moderated British imperialism would seem to be no more than a rhetorical gesture designed to make his British audience feel good while also placating those among his American audience who might soft-heartedly reject the American imperial project he favors. But to provide a more detailed account of British anti-imperialism might encourage others to draw the wrong sort of lesson from his history?

Just how qualified is Ferguson's admiration for liberty is oddly evident in one of the few sections of his book where he actually explores the subject in some depth, in his discussion of the American War of Independence (pp. 88-102). "It was," he asserts, "the moment when the British ideal of liberty bit back" (p. 88). But while duly noting the significance for liberty of Jefferson's preamble to the Declaration of Independence (p. 94), he emphasizes that it was the New Englanders, "about the wealthiest people in the world" at that time, "not the indentured labourers of Virginia or the slaves of Jamaica, who first threw off the yoke of imperial authority" (p. 89). And he delights, it seems, in remarking that the worst of the violence in the conflict was committed by American rebels on American loyalists (p. 95), and that the self-styled lovers of liberty went on to perpetuate slavery and all but exterminate the native Americans (p. 102). Ferguson's lovers of liberty do tend to come across as hypocrites or woolly minded.

It is, however, only in his final chapter, "Empire for Sale" (pp. 290-355), that Ferguson finally brings liberty to the fore. But it is rather circularly defined: liberty is that for which the British Empire stood as compared with all the other, "evil," empires. Bad as Britain had been, bad as other past empires had been, "all this would pale into insignificance alongside the crimes of the Russian, Japanese, German and Italian empires in the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 296). And so it fell to Britain to defend the less evil against the more evil: "Yet what made it so fine, so authentically noble, was that the Empire's victory could only ever have been Pyrrhic. In the end, the British sacrificed her Empire to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire's other sins" (p. 355)? Only, I would suggest in answer to Ferguson's concluding rhetorical question, from a certain way of looking at things; only from a point of view which was eager to exonerate Britain and which did not wish to explore how the "evil empires" might have emerged out of that

very imperial global system which Britain had played the major role in creating and maintaining.

In chapter after chapter, then, very little evidence, by Ferguson's own telling, either of progress towards a global or "homeland" order marked by liberty or of a clear victory of liberty over despotism.

Similarly with respect to what Ferguson early on urges us to think of as globalization—"Anglobalization,' if you like"—rather than imperialism (pp. xxvi-xxix): While his substantive chapters do indicate how the British way of doing things was imposed and, finally, how the British way of doing things was preserved from immediate destruction through its sacrifice of its capacity to dominate its global order, especially in World War Two, we have only his word for it that some sort of imperially managed global order was necessary and that Britain's was a (more) virtuous global order (than others might have been). What he does lay bare to our view is how Britain's Empire was created and advanced throughout its long history by some extremely predatory Britons supported at home and abroad by others whose predatoriness was qualified to some degree by political and strategic calculation, supported in turn by a people cajoled, driven, manipulated and bribed into doing so—the same sort of hierarchy of moral culpability so evident in the United States and in Blair's Britain today. What seems to have made "Anglobalization" different was simply that it was such an enormously successful imperial venture, that it was so dominant. But as to the character of its accompanying orderliness, it might be salutary to remember what Tom Paine noted of an earlier Conquest: when the Norman gangsters gained control of England in 1066 they did tend to want the conquered to obey their rules, they did become very concerned with civility, respect and obedience, they did prefer policing to waging perpetual war. But the latter is never ruled out. In the case of the Empire, as Ferguson makes quite evident, it again and again generated resistance, resistance that the masters of the Empire and their assistants could only judge to be thoroughly illegitimate and which they punished in brutal, vengeful ways.

What also made "Anglobalization" different was that, quite by historical accident, it, unlike other empires, had a rival-successor whose global-order needs were in so many respects so similar to those of the mother country from which it had broken away in the late 18th Century (pp. 88-102). When "the British ideal of liberty bit back" it resulted in a polity that, as many even in the 'homeland' recognized (p. 98), valued liberty--especially

economic liberty--highly; the United States was, moreover, Anglophone, something Ferguson deems important (p. 364). The similarities between the two did not prevent the United States, a devotee of informal empire but an opponent of formal empire (North America excepted), from exploiting Britain's wartime needs, forcing it to liquidate its Empire (pp.341-346)--a democratic peace does not, it would seem, exclude all predatoriness. While doomed, the Empire would drag on for a few more ignoble years after the War. It is at this point that we encounter Ferguson's prospective hypothesis, which happens to conform to the political and strategic aspirations of some Americans in this post-9/11 world.

"It must be said," claims Ferguson, "that the experiment of running the world without the Empire cannot be adjudged an unqualified success" (p. 362). There are surely those, not necessarily all of them entirely opposed to all forms of imperialism, who would find fault with this assertion--informal empire still has its devotees, as some of the critics of the Bush administration demonstrate. But let that pass. Let us focus simply on the fact that despite all that he has revealed about the way the Empire actually ran the world, Ferguson now urges his audiences, particularly his American audience, to believe that the world needs some form of "international government" to deal with the contradictory tendencies, economic globalization and political fragmentation, and that "the British Empire proved that empire . . . can work" to provide such a government (p. 362). Thus, the United States, which has the economic capacity "to impose [as Britain did] its preferred values on less technologically developed societies" (p. 367), should now pursue formal empire (p. 368). Indeed, according to Ferguson, part of the post-Empire global predicament may be that "the Americans have taken our old role without yet facing the fact that an empire comes with it" (p. 370).

It must again be noted, it cannot be noted enough, that Ferguson pretty much asks us to take his empirical and evaluative claims on faith: We must, it seems, submit to the strength of his beliefs, the power of his words, the seductiveness of his chosen images. For he has not, I think, *demonstrated* by argument or evidence that empire is necessary for some sort of global order to exist; he has not *proved* that Britain's Empire functioned in largely beneficent ways. [If it, as Ferguson approvingly tells us, promoted massive labour migration out of India and China to the benefit of consumers everywhere, did it not also contribute substantially to the reduction of India and China "from being quite possibly the world's most advanced economies

in the sixteenth century to relative poverty by the early twentieth” (pp. 359-360, 361)? Etc.] Certainly, in comparison with the amount of information he provides on the violence of the Empire Ferguson provides very, very little information on the flow of costs and benefits; and what he does provide for the most part concerns the costs and benefits accruing to the “homeland.” Hence, his urging that the United States “take up the white man’s burden” (p. 369) would seem to follow solely from his own penchant for empire.

Since Ferguson is explicitly seeking to influence the American public, what should Americans make of his claims upon them? I am not unmindful of Ferguson’s protestation that he is merely providing information on the Empire and that it is up to his readers to come to their own conclusions concerning it. I have, however, urged that to arrive at a negative judgment of Empire requires one to read against the ideological and emotional grain of his account. Fortunately, Americans are unlikely to take pride in the episodes in British imperial history that Ferguson seems at some level still to relish. Surely, furthermore, much of what Ferguson describes the British doing in previous times already reads eerily like a description of some post-War American projects, especially some post-Cold War American projects. These projects have already excited misgivings, have prompted soul-searching and debate, have brought hundreds of thousands onto American streets and millions onto streets elsewhere. Ferguson’s book must be seen as an attempt to discourage misgivings, to discourage soul-searching, to move the ongoing American debate in a thoroughly pro-imperialistic direction, and to discourage opposition to a violence-based formal empire in the United States, in Britain and elsewhere. I, for one, as will be obvious, hope he fails in his endeavour. Ferguson’s American publisher’s promotional material notes that “it’s very likely that the British past offers the key to the American future.” But those who read *Empire* might well conclude that empire is something to be avoided and opposed root and branch. If those who read *Empire* attend to the violence, the predatoriness, the excesses and the material and moral costs he describes rather than to the course of action he advocates and the universal benefits he so inadequately proves would flow from such a course of action, they will take his publisher’s praise as a warning not dissimilar to the warning Marx once gave his German audience concerning an earlier British example.