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Locating Britain's 'Empire' in Satia's *Empire of Guns*

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The unique contribution of *Empire of Guns* (*EOG*) is its ability to straddle multiple contexts, by featuring a milieu which is global precisely because it situates the local within circulatory networks of trade and interaction. By emphasising the localised social and urban setting of Birmingham, and other local nodes of global trade such as the ports and ships which carried British-produced weaponry overseas, Satia's work helps define the larger political economy of Britain in the eighteenth century, highlighting the domestic and imperialist pressures that drove domestic gun manufacture. The reader is thereby encouraged, implicitly, to reconsider historical and analytical concepts such as 'state', 'industry', 'capital', and 'imperialism'. This piece seeks to reconcile processes of state building and social organisation, which were inaugurated in Britain by the gun industry, as demonstrated by Satia, with the historical processes and institutions which came to be unleased in the global imperial context, with the spread of *the empire of the gun*.

Satia's biography of Galton, which places a particular individual and family at the heart of global networks, is a reflection of the lives and careers of his contemporaries, and the role of private capital in the corporatisation of the early modern British State. Galton was able to straddle both the public and private spheres of industry, through the linking-up of interpersonal networks maintained by marriage, family ties, and even mentorship. These deepening networks of socio-economic and political control would have ramifications not just on the emergent state structure in Britain, but on the polities that this State sought to establish overseas as well. Consequently, Galton ought to be placed in the company of figures such as William Jardine and James Matheson, and the almost cataclysmic role that these figures played in extending the global empire beyond the reach of even the British Navy or colonial armies.

In this context, Satia's work shows the value of taking seriously the point that *the personal is political*. Guns, as artefacts and symbols alike, bridge individual and public violence, raising important questions about the legitimacy of violence and the nature of legitimate violence. This, in turn, complicates classificatory terms such as 'private' and 'public', especially in the context of modern societies and their defence of private property. When the State gets organised by certain individuals, families, conglomerates and their inter-linked networks, as demonstrated previously, communitarian property comes to belong to a handful of private holders, in the guise of the largest private holder—the State. In this context, guns become the inevitable defender of a public system of private property and private rights. *EOG* tells the tale of how this state-driven violence comes to be refocussed domestically (and globally) within a context which was increasingly capitalist, modernising and mercantilist.

Hence, *EOG* is the story of British state-building in the era of industrial and economic expansion. Along with the State, the Church, through the Quaker connection, and religion in general get implicated in imperial expansion, war mongering and state politics in this period of British history. Satia's remarkable biography of Galton ought to be regarded as the stepping stone to reassess how studies of imperialism need to look beyond the role played by missionary networks in enabling global imperial domination, and to focus instead on domestic developments within Britain's religious and philanthropy networks, which enabled the rise of an extractive, exploitative and brutal state structure both at home, and abroad.

EOG is also a commentary on the structure of hierarchy and social organisation in eighteenth century Britain, and by inference, its colonies. Domestically, Satia highlights how guns remained an elite weapon-of-choice and their possession, maintenance and use signified position and power. Remarkably, the very same guns also became an instrument of social ordering in the colonies, as

identification-markers were developed to categorise subalterns who might be co-opted in the imperialist project by being allowed the use of guns. Taking off from Satia's work, which regards guns as symbols of power, it might be further surmised that guns were, in fact, also markers of technology and technique. Mechanical instruments hold power not merely because they emphasise certain aspects of monopoly over knowledge production; rather, it is the technique of usage and know-how of repair, which embodies power and domination in self-professedly scientistic societies. It is this aspect of imperialist expansion and colonisation which embodied the real destructive capabilities of the British gun industry worldwide.

History of gun production emphasises the very obvious characteristic of violence—a given in any story on weapons, but also inevitable in discussions of empire-building and expansion. It is worth considering why, and how, the narrative around wars and the commodification of 'the gun' in particular came to be regarded as more violent, brutal and bloody within Western historiography, as compared to the epistemic violence unleashed by Britain's imperialist regime through seemingly-innocuous commodities such as cotton, opium or even tea, which have traditionally remained within the disciplinary purview of studies on imperialism and more recently, global history. While the absolute conquest of the colonial interiors could not have been possible without firearm technology, conquest and consolidation were contingent upon the invasive inroads made by trade, infrastructure, and networks of exchange, starting from as early as the seventeenth century, as seen in the case of South Asia, for instance. The story of the spread of the reign of guns is not the complete story of violence and conquest; the context of this story is very much the historical battlefield and it is high time that historical scholarship stopped viewing histories of colonies as a by-product of metropole-driven impulses.

The acceptability of quotidian violence inscribed by guns on the colonial landscape was to be of immense significance. While elite culture in Britain came to internalise this violence in the form of

leisure activities focussing on hunting for instance, this trope was carried to colonies like India in a savagely obliterative form. The imperialist view was that the subcontinent's geography, its landmass, wildlife and people, even its air was noxious, dangerous, barbaric. The impact of a flourishing gun industry on colonial culture went beyond networks of extraction and control. It came to underpin the racial, medical, environmental and settlement discourse that was driving colonisation of India in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

This also raises the question of the material history of the gun, not merely as a weapon of control or destruction, but also as an artefact—material and archival. This approach helps locate our story within the larger discipline of global histories of science. Can the tale of Birmingham's gun industry almost exclusively be recounted as the story of the march of western science and technology? It's worth considering if (and to what extent) early globalisation generated a sense of what was scientific, and what wasn't, and therefore was merely 'indigenous' skill and 'native' know-how. More pertinently, can we distinguish between the imperialist sciences and the globalisation of science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Issues of ownership, expertise and truth-making are inextricably tied to an inter-cultural context; one, which is often overlooked, despite its colossal impact on industrialisation in Britain and colonisation abroad. The story of guns and shipping networks, of wars and trade networks, is really a consequence of the establishment of networks of exploration, monopolisation and transmission of historically-cataclysmic commodities—coal and saltpetre—and their rootedness, quite literally, in the Empire's colonies.

Insofar, networked histories and global histories too remain insufficient for providing a new and different narrative, as there is little space for cross-contextualisation of archival and material sources within the discipline. *EOG* alludes to some of these challenges and can perhaps serve as a starting point for historians to address these issues, within the bifurcated and predominantly disengaged historiography on the eighteenth century. Even though Satia investigates the gun

industry in the larger context of the Industrial Revolution, which in turn is reviewed against the backdrop of Britain's war industry, nevertheless, the discourse around the inherent violence embodied in Britain's industry, in its search for raw material and wealth abroad, and in its colonial ambitions overseas, somehow gets sanitised. As one of the driving forces of gun-based industrialisation, the Empire hangs overhead more as a spectre than a historical category.

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