



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

2013

Defending the Empire: Rational Empires and the study of territorial acquisition

Blanken, Leo

Taylor & Francis

Leo Blanken (2013) Defending the Empire: Rational Empires and the study of territorial acquisition, *Global Discourse*, 3:1, 205-209, DOI: 10.1080/23269995.2013.805614 <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/59415>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

Defending the Empire: *Rational Empires* and the study of territorial acquisition

Leo Blanken

Introduction

I would foremost like to thank Biccum (2013), Foster (2013), and Zagare (2013) for their careful readings and thoughtful critiques of *Rational Empires*. To respond to all three sets of comments, I have organized this essay as follows. First, I will briefly summarize my goals in writing *Rational Empires*, as this exercise will frame the remainder of the essay. Second, I will address the fruitful extensions to the work that are suggested by the reviewers. Third, I will discuss questions regarding the research design offered in the work. Next, I will address the question of the dependent variable. Finally, I will close by noting an enduring impediment in the study of imperialism. More specifically, I will argue that there remain fundamental philosophical divisions within the study of imperialism that must be addressed explicitly to allow the research agenda to progress.

In *Rational Empires*, I attempted to revisit a classic question in the study of international relations and suggest a new explanation for it. My goals in doing so were three-fold. The main goal was to construct a core model of the phenomenon that provided the best predictive and explanatory power weighted against the model's simplicity. My next goal was to provide a structured research design to organize the evidentiary support; this would allow one to assess my model's explanatory power against the appropriate rival accounts as neatly as possible. These rivals include Realism (with its emphasis on systemic rivalry), Liberalism (with its emphasis on the pacifying nature of free market competition and interdependence), Hobson–Leninism (with its predictions of conflict among expanding capitalist states), and Constructivism (with its arguments concerning the constitutive nature of socially constructed norms of behavior). Finally, the actual writing of the book was done with transparency and brevity in mind; this was done in response to the wide range of concepts and disciplinary languages (and sometimes willful obfuscation) that clutters study of the subject. Therefore, it is gratifying to note the ease with which reviewers could apprehend and critique the work.

Theory

Based on the simplicity of the argument, all three reviewers offer suggestions for extending the model through the relaxation of assumptions. This constitutes a healthy and welcome discussion. Biccum (2013) argues for the explicit inclusion of 'communication' as a factor that may yield additional insights. Currently, this factor is folded into the general assumption of power asymmetry between the imperial actor and the target, but Biccum makes the case that future research should seek to isolate its effect more precisely. Foster (2013), similarly, argues for breaking open the 'monolithic entity' (202) of the imperial power and modeling the domestic political dynamics more explicitly, as well as endogenizing the principal–agent slippage that may occur between the political leadership of the imperial power and the 'man on the ground,' who may be executing the policy (203).

The current formal model was designed to be as stark as possible, while still providing new insights and robust explanatory power over the phenomena to be studied. Zagare

(2013) recognizes both the limitations and opportunities of my choice for simplicity: ‘There is ample room for extending the sparse model that drives and informs the theory... and very good reasons for doing so ... Blanken’s powerful theoretical statement demonstrates both the benefits of parsimony and the potential payoff of abandoning it’ (200). Zagare then proceeds to offer the most fully developed suggestions for extensions of the game theoretic tools employed. He proposes three specific modifications: incomplete information, dynamism, and target agency. Adding incomplete information and dynamism, Zagare suggests, would allow a much richer treatment of signaling, bluffing, and reputation-building among imperial actors. This would begin to tie the imperial research agenda into the broader literature on formal bargaining models of international conflict (for a brief summary, see Reiter 2003). Further, he advocates the very logical extension of giving agency to the targets of imperialism. I wholeheartedly agree that fascinating strategic possibilities might emerge once the leaders of potential colonies are allowed to craft responses within the imperial enterprise.

Research design

Biccum takes issue with a number of aspects of the research design. I note three related critiques in Biccum’s review: the logical consistency of the model’s empirical implications, testing against only a ‘reductionist’ version of Marxism, and the ‘neutrality’ of the data provided. On the first point, Biccum (2013) contends that my model ‘provides support’ for the neo-imperial ‘apologist’ case for a return to a ‘more direct form of empire’ (192). This is not the case; her specific argument would only be valid if the cost parameter in the model was toggled while holding the others constant. More generally, one could certainly walk through the parameter space and specify the conditions under which formal imperialism is predicted, and that is precisely the strength of the formal model: transparency.

Second, and related, Biccum (2013) notes in multiple places my considering only ‘reductionist’ Marxism as a rival model as opposed to more current and nuanced variants of that theoretical school. This choice was necessary, however, because of the epistemological framework within which my work exists. The Hobson–Lenin thesis is an appropriate rival because it operates at the suitable level of generality and produces clear and falsifiable empirical implications. More modern descendants of Marxism, such as Hardt and Negri’s celebrated work *Empire* (2001), constitute an intriguing yet problematic body of work. *Empire*, for example, ranges freely among descriptive, interpretivist, post-modern, and normative modes of argumentation; it is an important work but not one that can serve as an appropriate foil to my own within the context of my (essentially logical positivist) enterprise. This has been a long-standing struggle within the Marxist tradition: the tension between generating rigorous social science while contending with the existing methodological toolkit provided by a ‘bourgeois’ academy (Althusser 1969; Althusser and Balibar 1970; Sartre 1974). Smith quotes an interview with Louis Althusser on this problem: ‘May I sum this all up in one sentence? This sentence describes a circle: a philosophical reading of *Capital* is only possible as the application of that which is the very object of our investigation, Marxist philosophy. The circle is only epistemologically possible because of the existence of Marx’s philosophy in the works of Marxism’ (Smith 1984, 80). This quote on the issue of circularity represents a core problem: Marxist approaches are often couched within a self-referential Marxist philosophy of science,

thereby precluding their integration into a broader social scientific enterprise (for a recent discussion on this point, see Veneziani 2008).

Finally, Biccum (2013) criticizes the range of secondary sources used to gather evidence for the empirical chapters: ‘Given the avalanche of new material on empire ... my feeling is that Blanken needs to say a little more about exactly how he arrives at [his historical characterizations] without simply dismissing inconvenient approaches in the literature as “revisionist”.’ She also contends that: ‘there has been a recognition that the perspective from which imperial history is written has political implications and is never, as Blanken wants to maintain for himself, neutral’ (194). These quotes raise two points. My response to the first point is that, yes, there is a vast amount of empirical data available on the history of imperialism and no study can ever hope to survey it all. In *Rational Empires* I did, as Biccum acknowledges, attempt to provide a transparent data collection plan to minimize bias and strive for neutrality (which I never claim to achieve) (2012, 115–116). The deeper point is that, embedded in Biccum’s second quote is the menacing term ‘political implications [of historical sources]’; this raises the specter of the post-modernist unraveling of *all* historical evidence. If one pulls on this Foucaultian thread, all sources and data, as well as historical analyses based on them, become, in Foucault’s word, ‘fictions’ (1980, 193). The implication is that the social and political context in which all seemingly neutral texts are produced determines their meaning, and there is no fixed point to adjudicate among rival interpretations of the external world. I am surely taking Biccum’s brief comment *ad absurdum* (given space limitations), yet, if this line of reasoning is followed to its logical endpoint, then all effort at knowledge accumulation is nullified. Given this choice, one can either be as forthright as possible in acknowledging the range of debate among the sources and produce an evidence gathering strategy (as I have done), or be paralyzed.

Dependent variable

Biccum makes further arguments about the conceptualization of the work’s dependent variable. More specifically, she argues that limiting the definition of the dependent variable to struggles surrounding territorial acquisition ignores other aspects of imperialism, and that the phenomena of ‘empire’ should be considered as distinct from ‘imperialism’. The first point centers on the issue of ‘substitutability,’ or multiple outcomes that all represent the same value on the dependent variable (Palmer and Bhandari 2000). Biccum (2013) argues that free trade, communication regimes, or the activities of ‘media conglomerates’ might be considered aspects of imperialism and, therefore, ‘one cannot offer an explanation for [only] one portion of the behavior ... (territorial annexation)’ (193). This argument is only viable if one were to raise the generality of the study to explain all expression of asymmetric power in the international system; I never claim to do so. I precisely define imperialism as I have done to examine the conditions under which *one* expression of such power (territorial acquisition and attendant conflict) is chosen contra others. I recommend a similar precision to other researchers tackling these related, yet distinct, phenomena.

This flows directly into the second, ontological, point. Biccum (2013) claims that ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ are not interchangeable terms (as I use them in *Rational Empires*). Biccum (2013) argues, ‘if the historical trajectory of “empire” as a category that applies straightforwardly to an empirical entity appears linear and straightforward, it was not ... each resurrection changes its meaning slightly’ (193). Biccum, further, emphasizes that ‘empires’ may constitute a ‘diversity of ... entities’ and that its meaning

and use ‘has itself changed over times’ (192); to understand any manifestation of the term, one must recognize ‘how these entities have been understood and how they understand themselves ... over time’ (193). Given Biccum’s (2013) expansive use of the term, one might ask if there has ever been an *absence* of empire in the international arena? If each era of the global system has powerful actors who pursue their interests by a variety of situation-specific strategies, one might ask whether ‘empire’ ceases to be a subject of study to be explained, and becomes a simple description of the distribution of power inherent in the international system? I side-step this ontological problem and, rather, provide a concise operationalizing principle for the dependent variable ‘imperialism’ (30–31). As a consequence, I can simply label certain actors that engage in said activity as ‘empires’. This allows for a well-defined behavioral outcome to be explained rather than falling into the tautological trap of defining some units as ‘empires’ *a priori* and identifying *whatever* activity they engage in as ‘imperialism’.

Conclusions ... and ways forward

Once again, I thank all three reviewers for their time and effort in critiquing *Rational Empires*. Their comments challenged me to rethink my perspective on imperialism and my approach to research in general. I think it is clear from reading these reviews and my responses that we span distinct intellectual communities that tackle overlapping subjects from differing philosophical and methodological perspectives. I feel I have responded to the reviewer concerns adequately – but only within the context of the research norms that I have chosen to adopt. I relish the diversity of perspective this exchange represents, but I worry about the isolation that has arisen between such academic communities. I firmly believe that progress in social research will come only through fruitful interactions among such differing perspectives. This would include good-faith efforts on all sides to recognize and, to the degree possible, reconcile philosophical and methodological inconsistencies among approaches in a mutual effort at progress. I thank the editorial staff at *Global Discourse* for providing space for this symposium, and hope that its pages will continue to be a nexus for such future cross-community collaboration, debate, and progress.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Jason Lepore and Andrew Ruis for their helpful comments on this essay.

Notes on contributor

Leo Blanken is an assistant professor at the Naval Postgraduate School. His recent work centers on the theoretical bases of military strategy, assessment, and force structure planning. He has published in *Defence and Peace Economics, Intelligence and National Security*, and *Defense and Security Analysis*, as well as the book *Rational Empires* (University of Chicago Press).

References

- Althusser, Louis. 1969. *For Marx*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: Allen Lane.
- Althusser, Louis, and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.
- Biccum, A. R. 2013. “*Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion*, By Leo Blanken. Review.” *Global Discourse* 3 (1): 191–197.

- Foster, R. 2013. "Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion, By Leo Blanken. Review." *Global Discourse*. 3 (1): 201–204.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2001. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Palmer, Glenn, and Archana Bhandari. 2000. "The Investigation of Substitutability in Foreign Policy: Applications and Advances." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44 (1): 3–10.
- Reiter, Dan. 2003. "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War." *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (1): 27–43.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1974. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Translated by John Matthews. London: New Left Books.
- Smith, Steven B. 1984. *Reading Althusser: An Essay on Structural Marxism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Veneziani, Roberto. 2008. "A Future for (Analytical) Marxism?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 38 (3): 388–399.
- Zagare, F. C. 2013. "Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion, By Leo Blanken. Review." *Global Discourse*. 3 (1): 197–201.

Leo Blanken

Naval Postgraduate School, Defense Analysis Department, Monterey, CA, USA

ljblanke@nps.edu

© 2013, Leo Blanken

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2013.805614>