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by NICOLAS J S DAVIES

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The Hidden Structure of U.S. Empire

My father was a doctor in the British Royal Navy, and I grew up traveling by troop-ship between the last outposts of the British Empire – Trincomalee, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Malta, Aden, Singapore – and living in and around naval dockyards in England and Scotland.

The British naval bases where I grew up and the fading empire they supported are now part of history. Chatham Dockyard, a working dockyard for over 400 years, is now a museum and tourist attraction. Trincomalee Dockyard, where I was born, has been in the news as a site where the Sri Lankan Navy is accused of torturing and disappearing Tamil prisoners during the Sri Lankan civil war.

Since the late 1970s, I have lived in California and Florida, grappling with the contradictions of U.S. empire like other Americans. The U.S. does not have an internationally recognized territorial empire like the British or Ottoman Empires. American politicians routinely deny that the United States maintains or seeks an empire at all, even as they insist that its interests extend across the entire world, and as its policies impact the lives – and threaten the future – of people everywhere.

So how are we to understand this phenomenon of U.S. empire, which is so central to all our lives and our future, and yet whose structure remains hidden and covert?

Ethnographies of U.S. Empire, co-edited by Carol McGranahan of the University of Colorado and John F. Collins of CUNY, twenty-four anthropologists studied groups of people whose lives are shaped by the U.S. empire and their interactions with it. Their

subjects ranged from indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Hawaii to call center workers in the Philippines to the forcibly exiled people of Diego Garcia.

Many of the ethnographies highlighted the seeming contradiction of an actually existing global empire in a post-colonial world where nearly all countries are internationally recognized as independent and sovereign.

Stratified Sovereignty

The final entry in *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* arrived at the most comprehensive analysis of the stratified and complex patterns of sovereignty through which formally independent states and their citizens nonetheless fall under the overarching sovereignty of the U.S. empire.

This chapter, "From Exception to Empire: Sovereignty, Carceral Circulation and the Global War on Terror," by Darryl Li, an anthropology professor at the University of Chicago, follows a group of men who came to Bosnia Hercegovina from mostly Arab countries to fight on the Bosnian Muslim side in the U.S.-backed proxy war to break up Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

By 2001, most of these 660 men had made new homes in Bosnia. Many had married Bosnian women and had Bosnian families. All had been granted Bosnian citizenship in recognition of their role in their adopted country's independence. But after the crimes of September 11th 2001, the U.S. government saw these former mujahideen as inherently dangerous, and insisted that they must be "denaturalized" and "repatriated."

At first, this was done through an extrajudicial process of "rendition," but after 2005 it was institutionalized in a nine-member State Commission (which included a U.S. Army officer and a British immigration official) to strip people of Bosnian citizenship; a "Reception Center for Irregular Migrants," a prison built at European Union expense on the edge of a refugee camp for Bosnian Serbs in Lukavica on the outskirts of Sarajevo; and a "Service for Foreigners' Affairs" under Bosnia's Ministry of Security, organized, trained and equipped by U.S. advisers at U.S. taxpayer expense, to run the prison and conduct deportations.

Darryl Li visited, studied and stayed in contact with some of these men and their Bosnian families for several years. He observed how, while the U.S. exercised supreme sovereignty over these men and their fate, the U.S. role was carefully hidden behind and operated through the formal sovereignty of Bosnia Hercegovina; and also how the fates of groups of men of different nationalities were governed by U.S. imperial relations with the various countries they came from and to where they could be "repatriated."

Most Egyptian men were sent back to Egypt, a reliable U.S. ally, where they were imprisoned, tortured and, in many cases, disappeared, according to their Bosnian families. By contrast, six men from Algeria were rendered to the U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. They were imprisoned there until they won a landmark case in the U.S. Supreme Court that allowed them to sue for habeas corpus in U.S. courts. They were finally released in 2009, 2010 and 2013.

A Syrian-Bosnian man named Abu Hamza became the de facto leader of resistance to these denaturalizations and deportations. He was imprisoned for 7-1/2 years at the Lukavica prison, during most of which time the U.S. and its allies fought a bloody but failed proxy war to install a more subservient regime in his country of origin. He was finally released in 2016 to rejoin his Bosnian family.

When Darryl Li first visited Abu Hamza at the prison in Lukavica in 2009, he was dressed in an orange jalabiyya and baseball cap, on which he had stenciled the word “BOSNATANAMO.” He had made this uniform for himself to highlight the parallels between the plight of prisoners at Lukavica and Guantanamo.

The flags flying over the guard gate of the prison in Lukavica were those of Bosnia and the European Union, and the U.S. was officially involved in the imprisonment of the men there only through diplomatic channels, generous funding and the assistance of American trainers and advisers. And yet the U.S. empire was the thinly veiled power behind the very existence of the prison and all that happened there.

Darryl Li compared the fates of the men in Bosnia with other cases of post-9/11 U.S. detention, and found a similar pattern throughout the U.S. gulag, in which the fates of people from specific countries were largely determined by the nature of U.S. imperial relations with the countries involved.

For example, four British men detained in Pakistan and sent to Guantanamo were among the first prisoners to be released and repatriated, and returned home to relatively normal lives in the U.K. By contrast, Li met a Palestinian man in Gaza in 2007 who was “repatriated” there despite never having lived there before. He was born in Jordan and grew up in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where he was arrested and handed over to U.S. forces. After several years in U.S. military and CIA prisons, mostly in Afghanistan, he was sent back to Jordan, handed over to Israel and banished to Gaza.

In all these cases, Li observed how the U.S. empire maintained a systematic and overarching sovereignty over the people and countries involved, not by completely ignoring the sovereignty of Bosnia, Egypt, the U.K and other countries, but

by selectively and opportunistically exercising its own power through their nominally independent political and legal systems and the particulars of its relations with each of them.

Darryl Li's research revealed an international system of stratified sovereignty, in which people's lives were subject to the overarching imperial sovereignty of the U.S. empire as well as to the nominally independent sovereignty of their own countries.

Empire, not exception.

The U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo in Cuba is widely viewed as a glaring exception to U.S. and international rules of law. Darryl Li noted that the prisoners are not the only non-Americans and non-Cubans living at Guantanamo, which also has a civilian staff of janitors, cooks and other workers, mostly from Jamaica and the Philippines. Like the prisoners and their American guards, these workers also live under the overarching sovereignty of the U.S. Empire.

“Both third-country national prisoners and workers at GTMO share the predicament of dwelling in a space between the juridical protections of their governments, the local state and the U.S. hegemon,” Li observed.

Darryl Li concluded that this framework of stratified sovereignty, in which people live under the sovereignty of both their own country and that of the U.S. empire, is not an exception, but a norm of life in the U.S. empire. The shared predicament of workers and prisoners at Guantanamo is a striking example of how the U.S. empire works, not an exception to it.

Other seemingly exceptional cases can also be better understood as examples of this actually existing imperial system of stratified sovereignty.

Julian Assange's precarious asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London is a case in point. In Julian's case, U.S. imperial power has worked through a network of four nominally independent but subordinate states – Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Ecuador – to corner him in London for over six years and prevent him from regaining his freedom. And it may soon succeed in rendering him to the U.S. in shackles.

If this is what happens to Julian, his fate will not differ substantially from that of people who dared to defy the formal, territorial empires of the past. The Saudis conquered most of Arabia in the late 18th century, but their leader Abdullah bin Saud was defeated, captured, rendered in chains to Istanbul and beheaded at the order of the Ottoman Sultan in 1818.

Until 1830, the British Royal Navy brought mutineers, smugglers and pirates captured on the high seas around the world back to London to be hung (slowly, in the case of pirates)

at Execution Dock on the Thames. The most notorious pirates' bodies were covered in tar and hung in chains from a gibbet on the riverbank as a warning against piracy to sailors on passing ships.

If anything can save Julian Assange from a 21st century version of their fate at the hands of today's imperial power, it is empire-wide public outrage and the fear of U.S. officials that such a naked display of imperial power will give their game away.

But fear of exposing its brutality and criminality rarely constrains the U.S. empire. Since 2001, the U.S. has been more ready than ever to attack or invade other countries at will, with no regard for U.S. or international law, and to kidnap or extradite people from around the world to face imperial retribution in U.S. prisons and courts.

Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, now detained in Canada, is the latest victim of U.S. imperial power. At least 26 U.S. and foreign banks have paid fines of billions of dollars for violating U.S. sanctions on Iran, but none of their executives have been arrested and threatened with 30 year prison terms. In launching a trade war with China, challenging Chinese sovereignty to trade with Iran and holding Meng Wanzhou as a hostage or bargaining chip in these disputes, the U.S. is displaying a dogged determination to keep expanding its imperial ambitions.

The case of NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden illustrates that there are geographic limits to U.S. imperial power. By escaping first to Hong Kong and then to Russia, Edward evaded capture or extradition. But his narrow escape and the very narrow choices available to him are themselves an illustration of how few places on Earth remain safely beyond the reach of U.S. imperial power.

The End of Empire

The corrosive and debilitating impact of U.S. empire on the sovereignty of other countries has been obvious to its detractors for a long time.

In the introduction to his 1965 book, Neo-Colonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana wrote, "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside."

Darryl Li quoted Nkrumah's verdict that this is, "...the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility, and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress."

Nkrumah was deposed in a military coup orchestrated by the CIA the year after his words were published, but his critique remains, begging serious questions, “How long will the world tolerate this irresponsible form of empire?” Or even, ” Will we allow this ‘last stage of imperialism’ to be the last stage of our civilization?”

The way the U.S. empire exercises power through stratified layers of sovereignty is both a strength and a weakness. For a brief period in history, it has enabled the U.S. to wield imperial power in an otherwise post-colonial world, as Nkrumah described.

But Nkrumah had good reason to call this the last stage of imperialism. Once the U.S. empire’s subject nations decide to claim in full the legal sovereignty they gained in the 20th century, and reject the U.S.’s anachronistic imperial ambitions to dominate and exploit their institutions, their people and their future, this empire cannot permanently hold them back any more than the British or Ottoman Empires could.

This irresponsible empire has squandered the resources of our own and other nations and spawned existential dangers that threaten the whole world, from nuclear war to environmental crisis. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has gradually advanced the hands of its Doomsday Clock from 17 minutes to midnight in 1994 up to 2 minutes to midnight in 2018.

The U.S.’s system of “managed democracy” or “inverted totalitarianism” concentrates ever-growing wealth and power in the hands of a corrupt ruling class, increasingly subjecting the American public to the same “exploitation without redress” as the U.S. empire’s foreign subjects and preventing us from tackling serious or even existential problems.

This self-reinforcing vicious circle endangers us all, not least those of us who live at the heart of this corrupt and ultimately self-destructive empire. So we Americans share the vital interest of the rest of the world in dismantling the U.S. empire and starting to work with all our neighbors to build a peaceful, just and sustainable post-imperial future that we all can share.

This piece first appeared at Antiwar.com.