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Book Review: How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States by Daniel Immerwahr

Author: Joseph Biggerstaff

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Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

*How to Hide an Empire:
A Short History
of the Greater United States*

by Daniel Immerwahr,
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reviewed by

JOSEPH BIGGERSTAFF

In early 1945 “the strategic blunder of the Philippine campaign” unfolded as U.S. forces surrounded Manila and prevented the Japanese from retreating out of the city. Then, to save “American lives,” the U.S. command decided to relentlessly bomb both military and civilian targets until the Japanese surrendered. When the dust settled a few months later, Manila had been nearly completely destroyed and 100,000 of its residents had perished. “Because the loss of a single American life to save a building was unthinkable,” the U.S. command later admitted, “we really went to town.” Oscar Villadolid remembers the during following “Liberation” by U.S. troops he was approached by a GI and asked “How’d ya learn American?” Villadolid answered that English had been compulsory in schools since the United States colonized the Philippines half a century earlier. “Take a moment to let that sink in,” writes Daniel Immerwahr, “This was a soldier who had taken a long journey across the Pacific. He’d been briefed on his mission, shown maps, told where to go and whom to shoot. Yet at no point had it dawned on him that he was preparing to save a U.S. colony and that the people he would encounter there were, just like him, U.S. nationals” (p. 212). This is one episode from the Northwestern University historian’s latest book, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*, 400 pages of informed prose that upends enduring misconceptions about the United States--seen as

the prototypical nation-state—and empire. Written for non-academic audiences, the work has its drawbacks, but the approach to painting the big picture of U.S. history from the perspective of its territories, colonies, and other “points” is impressive.

On a research trip to Manila Immerwahr was struck by a contrast between the imprint U.S. colonization has left on the Philippines and the lack of knowledge most people from the continental United States—Immerwahr calls them “mainlanders”—have about the former colony. U.S. history textbooks portray “territorial empire” as merely “an episode” (p.14) and while historians have interrogated U.S imperialism, “When it comes time to zoom out and tell the story of the country as a whole, the territories tend to fall away” (p. 15). Yes, many U.S-Americans think the United States imperialistic, but few know much about its territories, colonies, let alone about the inhabitants and their histories. To understand this chasm, Immerwahr points to the “logo map” of the United States. Erasures in broad narratives of the United States reflect omissions on its logo map, a “strategically cropped family photo” (p. 13) that leaves out colonies, territories, and overseas military bases. Immerwahr’s response to this preterition “is not archival, bringing to light some never-before-seen document,” but rather “perspectival, seeing a familiar history differently” (p.16). *How to Hide an Empire* surveys U.S. history from the perspective of

the “Greater United States”— the territories, islands, colonies, and military bases left off the logo map.

The first chapters underscore how a continental empire, and settler mythology, emerged alongside the fledgling nation-state. Immerwahr stresses that very early on, the United States was an “amalgam of states and territories.” The concept of territory was adopted so that the federal government could oversee westward expansion. Ironically, the newly ratified constitution did not address one of the country’s most pressing problems; the ceaseless stream of settlers pouring over the nation’s westward borders. Here Immerwahr argues that George Washington in particular was ambivalent, even reticent, to violate treaty agreements with Native polities in order to placate squatters and speculators like Daniel Boone. As the logo map took shape—a process that was underwritten by massive dispossessions, treaty violations, and an imperial war against Mexico—Boone gained legendary status as honorary founding father. It is remarkable that in two brief chapters Immerwahr is able to illustrate the dynamics of settler colonialism. The third chapter, “Everything you wanted to know about guano but were afraid to ask” shifts to a less well-known story of guano islands. The annexation of tiny islands altered the United States which had only three years earlier, with the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, assumed the shape of the logo map. This chapter feels like a detour, but it foreshadows

the second half of the book, “The Pointillist Empire,” in which small points on the map, including some guano islands, resurface as crucial nodes following the Second World War.

Moreover, annexing these islands provided a legal precedent for the later acquisitions of 1898, which figures prominently in this chronicle. For Immerwahr The Spanish-American-Philippine War of 1898 figures is a watershed moment because until this point the United States had “rarely incorporated large nonwhite populations” (p. 77) “Taking land and flooding it with settlers” was different from “conquering subject populations and ruling them” (p.79). Rather than interrogating how this shift came about, Immerwahr juxtaposes two contemporaneous and exclusionary supreme court rulings, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the Insular Cases. The latter, a culmination of debates over the legality of new overseas acquisitions, barred constitutional rights to new colonized subjects. And whereas *Plessy v. Ferguson* was overturned with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Insular Cases remain on the books. But here is a missed opportunity to tease out the dynamic between internal and external colonialism. In the Philippines, for example, land disputes between Filipino landholders and U.S owned corporate speculators were resolved by drawing on precedents from the mid-west. These rulings then were applied in the American West in the following decades. So legal

structures of settler “expansion” and extra-continental imperialism “constituted one another.”¹ Similarly, the following chapters in the first half of the book demonstrates how colonies were treated like island-sized laboratories: Horrifying plans like the sterilization of Puerto Rican women to control population were tried out with few consequences. Yet, to readers unfamiliar with US History these cases may appear episodic because the author does not more forcefully delineate how exclusion at home and exclusion are mutually constitutive.² Accomplishing this on top of what the book already achieves, however, may be a high wire act.

In 1945, if you looked up and saw a U.S. flag, “you were more likely colonized or living in occupied territory” (p. 226). So why did the United States give up its territories? Part two of the book answers this question. Yes, anti-colonial movements were an important factor, but new “empire killing technologies” like synthetics, standardization, logistics, and the English language made it cost-effective for the United States to decolonize. Immerwahr writes that “together with innovations in chemistry and industrial engineering, the U.S. mastery of logistics would diminish the value

of colonies and inaugurate a new pattern of global power, based less on claiming large swaths of land and more on controlling small points” (p. 216). Part two of the book explores what Immerwahr calls the “pointillist empire,” a planetary network of military bases held together by these empire killing technologies.

Drawn to U.S. history after taking classes with Eric Foner while an undergraduate at Columbia, Immerwahr acquired a second B.A. at King’s College in London where he was mentored by the late global historian Christopher Bayly. This training in global history, particularly Christopher Bayly’s tutelage, shows in *How to Hide an Empire*. Like Bayly, Immerwahr is adept at seamlessly navigating a vast geographical expanse. Readers will undoubtedly learn more about the Greater United States and finish reading with a desire to learn more. Immerwahr’s book has also raised much needed debates about applying a global approach to a nation-state. The modern historical profession deeply entangled with the emergence of the nation-state, which raises special considerations about the applicability of doing global or transnational history to address what are problematic national narratives. In his 2013 presidential address to the American Historical Association, William Cronon discussed the importance of story-telling and the danger of “professional boredom”: a “tendency of professionals, when talking mainly to each other, to adopt vocabularies and ways of speaking

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- 1 Rebecca Tinio McKenna, Rebecca “Irogot Squatters and Indian Wards: Toward an Intra-Imperial History of Land Dispossession,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 1 (March 2019): 221-239.
 - 2 Maggie Blackhawk, “Federal Indian Law as Paradigm Within Public Law,” *Harvard Law Review*, 132 no. 7 (May 2019).

that have the effect of excluding outsiders who do not belong to that profession.”³ He added that it is the job of historians to persuade the public of the importance and fascination of the past, with its many “subtleties and contradictions.” Without a doubt, Daniel Immerwahr has answered this call. *How to Hide an Empire* is full of hard-to-believe episodes that fascinate and confound its readers. Yet, *How to Hide an Empire* raises grave concerns about Cronon’s call for historians to tell engage our readers.

3 William Cronon, “Storytelling,” *The American Historical Review*, 118 no. 1 (February 2013): 1-19.