Locating Britain's 'empire' in Satia's *Empire of guns*

The unique contribution of *Empire of guns* 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 emphasizing the localized 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 organization, 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 corporatization of the early modern British state. Galton was able to straddle 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 socioeconomic and political control would have ramifications, not just on the emergent state structure in Britain, but also on the polities that this state sought to establish overseas. Consequently, Galton ought to be placed in the company of figures such as William Jardine and James Matheson, with the almost cataclysmic role that these individuals 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 organized by certain individuals, families, conglomerates, and their interlinked 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. *Empire of guns* tells the tale of how this state-driven violence came to be refocused domestically (and globally) within a context which was increasingly capitalist, modernizing, and mercantilist.

Hence, *Empire of guns* 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 are implicated in imperial expansion, warmongering, 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 philanthropic networks, which enabled the rise of an extractive, exploitative, and brutal state structure, both at home and abroad.

Empire of guns is also a commentary on the structure of hierarchy and social organization 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 categorize subalterns who might be co-opted in the imperialist project by being allowed the use of guns. Taking off from Satia's work, which

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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 emphasize certain aspects of monopoly over knowledge production; rather, it is the technique of usage and know-how of repair that embodies power and domination in self-professedly scientistic societies. It is this aspect of imperialist expansion and colonization which embodied the real destructive capabilities of the British gun industry worldwide.

The history of gun production emphasizes 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 internalize this violence in the form of leisure activities focusing 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, and even its air were noxious, dangerous, and 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 drove the colonization of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This 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 is worth considering whether (and to what extent) early globalization generated a sense of what was scientific, and what was not, and therefore was merely 'indigenous' skill and 'native' know-how? More pertinently, can we distinguish between the imperialist sciences and the globalization of science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Issues of ownership, expertise, and truth-making are inextricably tied to an intercultural context, one that is often overlooked, despite its colossal impact on industrialization in Britain and colonization abroad. The story of guns and shipping networks, of wars and trade networks, is really a consequence of the establishment of networks of exploration, monopolization, and transmission of historically cataclysmic commodities – coal and saltpetre – and their rootedness, quite literally, in the empire's colonies.

Insofar as networked histories and global histories, too, remain insufficient for providing a new and different narrative, there is little space for cross-contextualization of archival and material sources within the discipline. *Empire of guns* 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. Although 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, 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 sanitized. As one of the driving forces of gun-based industrialization, the empire hangs overhead more as a spectre than as a historical category.

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Author response

I read these thoughtful reviews of *Empire of guns* with gratitude and excitement. Each puts a finger on one of the book's primary nerves, provoking deeper thought and clarification and indicating fruitful directions for future research by other scholars.

Empire of guns is the first book to argue unequivocally that war drove the Industrial Revolution in the long eighteenth century. Judy Stephenson supports her claim that the argument is not new by citing a single unpublished paper by Patrick O'Brien on the economic impact of the century's final wars – seeming rather to prove the opposite. Indeed, even in that paper, O'Brien confirms that empirical difficulties and theoretical constraints have produced a literature 'not replete with a significant volume of research' on war's role in the Industrial Revolution, and that the work of the few scholars who have made even limited claims about it has been rejected by influential later scholars. *Empire of guns* cites O'Brien repeatedly because he has exhorted us since the 1980s to investigate the impact of state expenditure on industrialization – albeit speaking perspicaciously of its 'likely' or 'possibly significant' role.[1] The book tries to move beyond inherently flawed accounting techniques to argue that, whatever war's varied effects across industries, its cumulative effect on certain key industries produced the generally transformative phenomenon that we call the 'Industrial Revolution'.

Even O'Brien, despite his growing conviction of war's role in the Industrial Revolution, embraced the notion that war was a less than 'optimal environment for development';[2] but this theoretical notion of an 'optimal environment' obscures the reality that war was *the* environment of economic transformation. Economic historians' very language of 'development' – denoting progress – with respect to the Industrial Revolution inevitably requires awkward digressive acknowledgement (like Stephenson's) of the 'exploitation, inequality' that it entailed. I ask us to think instead in terms of 'transformation', so as to reckon freely with the reality of war's role in driving the Industrial Revolution as it actually unfolded.

Certainly, the relationship between economic and military expansion is older than the eighteenth century, as Stephenson notes, but the particular logistical challenges of Britain's eighteenth-century wars – fought abroad on an increasingly mass scale with firearms – triggered the Industrial Revolution. It happened in Britain because everywhere else war was not the thing transpiring abroad that stimulated industrial resourcefulness at home, but a proximate and destructive struggle. The rivalrous dynamics between the corporate partners that made up what we call the British imperial 'state' were also key. By the end of the century, Britain was the global firearms depot, supplying them to its allies against Napoleon in millions. No other European country came close.

But, Kate Smith wisely asks, how representative is gun-making for understanding war's role in the Industrial Revolution? It was important in its own right, as the high-tech industry of its time: innovations and organizational developments in the gun industry had ripple effects because of its

[1]See, for instance, Patrick O'Brien, *Power with profit: the state and the economy, 1688–1815*, London: Institute of Historical Research, 1991, p. 20.

[2]*Ibid*., p. 13.