

Book Review: Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850 by Lauren Benton & Lisa Ford

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Benton, Lauren, and Lisa Ford. *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. vi + 282 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

Britain's obsession with order is a theme well-established in the pages of its imperial historiography. Yet, in their recent work, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850*, historians Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford offer a nuanced and refreshing interpretation of Britain's imperial ideology in the first half of the nineteenth-century. Charting the often dizzying interplay among a diverse array of metropolitan and peripheral characters from Trinidad to Ceylon, the authors argue that imperial law was at the center of Britain's attempts to shape a world order and, indeed, laid the basis for international norms and standards to come in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, Benton and Ford maintain that Britain's preoccupation with orderliness constituted no less than a "global transformation" and a massive, conscientious undertaking of imperial legal change (p. 3).

Often the catalyst for these undertakings, the authors contend, was the British abhorrence of despotism, which the authors define as "arbitrary justice" in the colonies (p. 7). The British compulsion to eradicate what they viewed as despotism in their empire entailed the abolition—or, early on, the regulation—of slavery, veritable wars on piracy, challenges to corruption, elitist abuses across the empire, as well as many other forays. Here, a predominant theme of the book comes to light: whereas some historians have emphasized the importance of humanitarian movements of the early nineteenth century, such as the effort to abolish the slave trade, Benton and Ford establish that these measures "had less to do with universal principles than with efforts to remake the interface between imperial and municipal structures of authority" (p. 5). As evidence for their contentions, the authors point to the slew of investigative commissions sent out from the metropole during this period.

Expanding on these themes, Benton and Ford also explain their view of some of the prime drivers of British imperial expansion in the post-Napoleonic era. Combined with their desire for order and a self-described loathing of despotism, British imperialists also used the concept of 'protection' to justify annexation or political overthrows of territory at the peripheries of their empire. For example, the authors skillfully describe the importance of British conceptions of jurisdiction in their confrontation with the Kingdom of Kandy. The British used the idea of "protection capaciously, allowing them to treat Kandy as a separate polity while also opening the door to the formal integration of Kandy into British Ceylon" (p. 99).

It should be noted here that the authors commendably demonstrate that British emphasis on protection and dissolving despotism in the empire did not mean the absence of imperial violence. Rightfully, Benton and Ford explain that the overarching quest for order actually often justified imperial violence in the minds of colonial representatives. Changes in the law,

according to the authors, were rarely, if ever, initiated to protect or promote the rights of colonial subjects; instead, control almost always lay at the heart of imperial legal reform.

The unquestionable benefit of this study is found in the authors' willingness to ask important questions of often overlooked sources. The methodological choice to approach topics of international law and imperial policy from the perspective of legal commentaries—including both private and official letters, trial reports, law charters, commission reports, and the like—offers insightful perspectives that provide a fresh take on traditional themes and narratives. Of particular merit is Benton and Ford's acknowledgment of the considerable autonomy of local actors at the colonial level. They demonstrate through various examples how "commissioners ignored instructions, governors made and changed laws without authority, and judges engaged in both profound and petty battles with their fellow bureaucrats" (p. 184). This work provides a keen insight into the immense complexity and often *ad hoc* nature of the British empire, while simultaneously illustrating that key policy changes and reforms were not only instigated by colonial secretaries and powerful governors, but by peripheral agents as well.

While the merits of this study are many, it is somewhat disheartening that the authors engaged so little with the bureaucrats they often heralded to be so integral to their story. Who were these individuals writing the ever-important legal commentaries? Through their general omission of these important characters *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850* befalls the fate of so many other imperial histories. Though they are central to the story of the British Empire, bureaucrats are repeatedly dismissed as nameless and dull, implying an absence of agency or any overarching significance.

While this omission is unfortunate, Benton and Ford are to be applauded for their innovative approach, and it does not distract from the impressive—and no doubt tedious—research that went into this study. The book is an ideal resource for students and scholars of British history and law, and it will undoubtedly inspire future research into the importance of legal reform *and* peripheral actors in imperial history.

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