In *American Empire: A Global History*, A. G. Hopkins provides a fresh perspective to American history from the eighteenth century to the present. By embedding three centuries of American history into a global and comparative context, this book challenges the exceptionalist tradition that has long dominated American historiography. Hopkins skillfully integrates the history of the United States with the history of other Western empires and turns our attention to striking similarities and key differences. By doing so, this book helps us reexamine American history from a new angle. This book also challenges the historiographical practice of confining the imperial history of the U.S. to either the studies of the American colonies of the British Empire in the pre-1783 era or the studies of the new “American Empire” that emerged after the Second World War. One of the aims of this book is to show that “the years between 1783 and 1945, which historians identify primarily as the story of the growth of the [American] nation and its quest for liberty and democracy, can also be drawn into the domain of imperial history” (7). *American Empire* is extremely rich not only in terms of the evidence and materials on American “imperial” history but also in terms of theories and themes from various disciplines it is in dialogue with. The integration of theories of development, globalization, social movements, and revolutions into the historical narrative makes this book an indispensable source not only for students of history but of international relations, comparative-historical sociology and international political-economy.

It might be surprising to learn that this book is actually about globalization. The fifteen chapters of the book are organized around three partly overlapping periods of globalization in world history. Hopkins provides the reader with a dialectical understanding of how successive phases of globalization emerge and disappear in world history. As each phase of globalization advances, it prepares the preconditions of its demise and paves the way for the rise of a new phase of globalization with a different character. Each phase of globalization also corresponds to the expansion of a particular form of state in the modern inter-state system. The *proto-globalization* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was led by military-fiscal states of Europe. The *modern globalization* of the late
nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was led by national-industrial states of the West. The *post-colonial globalization* of the late 20th and the early twenty-first century is linked to the diffusion of contemporary post-colonial state structures that emerged after decolonization in the mid-twentieth century. For Hopkins the relationship between globalization and empires is not coincidental. On the contrary, one of the major arguments of the book is that *empires are agents of globalization*, and *imperialism can be defined as globalization by force*.

The book is formally structured as four major parts. Part I (chapters 2–5) of the book deals with the contradictions of the *military-fiscal states* of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these chapters, Hopkins explains that many agricultural, commercial and dynastic states of Europe satisfied their revenue needs by means of military expansion and centralization, and thus became major agents of proto-globalization. In the late eighteenth century, when the wave of proto-globalization reached its peak, it produced a major fiscal crisis arising from military competition and arms race between military-fiscal states which pushed them to search for new and increased taxes. Increased taxes, in return, produced social discontent geared by “relative deprivation” in both sides of the Atlantic. From this perspective, the American Revolution of 1776–83 was not an isolated event but one of many revolts and revolutions of the era that emerged as the “product of a dialectic whereby the success of the military-fiscal state in promoting development generated forces that had the capacity both to challenge the established order in Britain and to resist the imperial presence in the New World (97).”

An interesting section of Part I are Chapters 4–5, where Hopkins narrates American history from 1783 to 1861 from the perspective of “dependent development” and struggles to achieve “effective independence.” In Chapter 4, Hopkins shows that the United States experienced a dilemma which was very similar to many post-colonial states in the twentieth century. After gaining formal independence in 1783, the United States of America remained *effectively dependent* on Great Britain in political, economic and cultural spheres. In the political sphere, different strategies proposed by “Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians aimed to secure effective independence from Britain, but neither succeeded.” (158). In the economic sphere, the United States struggled to counter Britain’s aim to maintain the independent colonies of England as “politically free, commercially slaves” by inventing protectionist strategies that even influenced Friedrich List (159–72). In the cultural sphere, statesmen, intellectuals, and artists (including Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, Webster, etc.) struggled to produce a new national identity, a new national literature and a new national culture that was distinct from the British (172–85). In Chapter 5, Hopkins further elaborates this theme by explaining the westward expansion and the Civil War as a part of ongoing efforts and various
strategies to gain effective independence from Britain. Surprisingly, Hopkins insists that the westward territorial expansion, wars of incorporation and annexations in this period did not turn the United States into a “continental empire” (236–7), but this expansionist movement (what Hopkins calls as “imperialism of intent”) became an important step towards the production of a nation and a nation-state. According to the theoretical framework A.G. Hopkins provides us, imperialism does not always produce formal or informal empires. It can also produce “nation-states.”

In Part II (chapters 6–9), Hopkins focuses on the period of “modern globalization” which was the product of the expansion of the industrialized nation-states and formal/informal imperialisms they produced. In these chapters, Hopkins traces the difficulties of the transition from proto-globalization to modern globalization, “uneven development” in economic and political structures of Western states, and the major structural crisis these developments produced in the late nineteenth century. These chapters aim to debunk the myth that the United States was categorically different from all European great powers in the sense that it did not seek to colonize other nations. Hopkins suggests that the United States was not different at all. Like other European imperial powers of the era which were competing with one another to plunder Asia and Africa, the United States also participated in this race of colonization, and by the late nineteenth century it acquired a territorial empire that contained the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Cuba (as a protectorate) and Hawai‘i. Hopkins claims that the causes of the so-called “Great Aberration” of 1898 (war with Spain) and the imperialist incorporation of these islands were not economic but mainly political. They were linked to the efforts to produce a nation for itself, to gain effective independence from the British Empire, and to join the league of imperialist powers (chapter 8). The book also demonstrates that the type of imperialist colonization the United States practiced in these islands were also similar to the types of imperialisms one would see in Britain and France (chapter 9). After all, “[d]espite its modest size, the insular empire displayed a degree of diversity that made it a microcosm of the much larger British and French empires. It contained white settlers, allowed foreign concessions, and harnessed indigenous enterprise” (385).

Part III (chapters 10–14) examines the contradictions and the crises of modern globalization which prepared the preconditions of the transition to post-colonial globalization from 1914 to 1959. These chapters complement the themes presented in Part II by focusing on the American rule in these islands from 1914 to 1959 as a whole and in comparison to other European colonial empires. Hopkins shows that the American colonial administrators in these islands implemented very similar types of colonial rule used by their British
and French imperial counterparts. They used alternating forms of direct and indirect rule, policies of assimilation and association, and varying levels of coercion and consent. These chapters document that the patterns of anti-imperialist resistance and decolonization in the American Empire also resembled the patterns observed in colonies of European imperial powers. A very interesting theme in this chapter is the author’s claim that the civil rights movements by African Americans and Native Americans in the 1950s and the 1960s must also be seen as a part of the global trend of decolonization because they were self-determination movements that emerged as a reaction to “internal colonization” practiced by the United States (665–69).

Part IV (chapter 15) of the book discusses the joint outcome of all these processes, i.e. the rise of post-colonial globalization since the 1950s. Hopkins asserts that in this new era “the international order changed in ways that altered established patterns of commerce and regional integration, questioned the sovereignty of the nation-state, and turned world opinion against imperial domination” (696). Contrary to much of the literature which discusses the rise of an “American Empire” after the Second World War, Hopkins believes that the history of the “American Empire” actually came to an end in this post-World War II era. Hence, the term “empire” is no longer appropriate and must be replaced with a more suitable term such as “hegemony.”

The way the term “hegemony” is used in this book might be surprising and confusing to scholars who study the rise and fall of world hegemonies in history. While the author does not choose to address the issue directly (see 30), by his definition there could hardly be a British hegemony, let alone a Dutch hegemony in history. “Hegemonies,” as defined in this book, appear to be categorically different from “empires” because they represent almost mutually exclusive forms of governance (26–32). While empires rule other people through territorial incorporation of their lands, hegemons lead them without such territorial incorporation. In contrast to empires, hegemons “possess little territory beyond their own borders” (31). From this perspective, the biggest difference between Britain and the United States was that the former built an empire and the latter sought hegemony during the height of their powers (32).

Interestingly, Hopkins claims that even the United States did not properly become a hegemonic power but remained as a great power which merely “aspired for hegemony” (707–21). This is because in the post-1945 era, the United States could not control the foreign policies of many European or Middle Eastern nations in the way it sought to. One of the areas the book has room for further improvement is the issue of whether or not different strategies of “ruling” vs “leading” other people or nations require the use of different criteria for evaluating success and failure of imperial vs hegemonic forms of
governance. Likewise, the book would greatly benefit from further discussion of the relation between “informal empires” (see 27 and 283) and hegemons as defined and theorized in this book.

From a certain angle, the way Hopkins chooses to end his “American Empire” resembles the way Adam Smith chose to conclude his “Wealth of Nations,” where Smith reflected on the inability of Britain to effectively rule its colonies. As Hopkins also observed in an earlier chapter, for Adam Smith “[t]he colonies were ‘supposed to be provinces of the British Empire.’ In practice, however, they were ‘not an empire, but the project of an empire’ because Britain had yet to establish its claims of sovereignty on the American mainland” (135). By the same token, Hopkins claims that the United States’s efforts did not produce a true hegemony but remained as a project or “an aspiration of hegemony” (707–29) because it could not establish its hegemonic claims in many parts of the world. The similarity is interesting because Adam Smith concluded his analysis by noting that “if the [British imperial] project [on America] cannot be completed [...] it ought to be given up” and Britain should “accommodate her views and designs to the real mediocrity of her circumstances” (136). While Hopkins does not attempt to make predictions about the future (see 727), the historical analysis presented in “American history” tends to agree with Smith’s assessment in the American context. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the end of the “American Empire” turns attention to Donald Trump’s efforts to “make America great again” (still in comparison with its counterpart process in Britain, i.e. BREXIT). In the words of Hopkins: “[n]ostalgia for hegemony” reflected in these efforts is nothing but the “hegemony of nostalgia” (727). While the book does not make this link explicitly, one of the important implications of the book’s conclusion is that efforts to complete/re-establish American hegemony – let alone an American empire – is an unlikely process. Thus it would be wiser for U.S. policy-makers to follow Smith’s advice and to accommodate their views and designs to the new reality of their circumstances.

This almost one thousand page-long book is beautifully written and surprisingly easy to read. The author adds into his rigorous comparative-historical research many elements of wit and wisdom by introducing various comparative observations ranging from Tarzan to Captain America and Avengers on the one hand and Dante to Ibn Khaldun and Oscar Wilde on the other hand. Most importantly, however, “American Empire” is a very provocative book which is likely to open up many new fronts for research and debate on American imperial history as well as the relationship between empires, imperialism, globalization and hegemony as defined and theorized in this book. While readers might disagree with some particular interpretations provided by the author, the broader framework and the research project introduced in this book has the
potential to accommodate various alternate readings of the narrative and analysis A.G. Hopkins has opted to provide. For instance, one can envision bringing other continental empires (such as the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian Empires) more directly into the comparative analysis and problematizing how *continental* formal empires have evolved and transformed over time. Such a perspective might also help us re-evaluate Hopkins’ claim that the westward imperialist expansion, annexations, and incorporations by the United States in the nineteenth century did not produce an “empire” but a “nation-state.” Likewise, the comparative analysis presented in the book can be further extended by giving informal forms of imperialism(s) and informal empires a more prominent role in the comparative-historical framework. Moreover, scholars who do not agree with the main conclusion of the book – that the American Empire ceased to exist in the post-WWII era – can analyze the rich historical material and evidence with a different comparative methodology. From my perspective, Hopkins’ conclusion is not a normative one. This conclusion emerges due to Hopkins’ methodological insistence that (1) for comparisons to be scientifically valid, the social phenomenon under investigation must not be vulnerable to definitional differences (see 12) and (2) there should be a sufficient degree of similarity between cases to make sense of particular differences (735–36). Hopkins does not use the term “empire” to define the United States in the post-WWII era because there is no similar “empire” in history that it can be compared to using orthodox comparative methods. However, a comparative-historical methodology which not only identifies the similarities and differences but also captures the transformations over space and time, might provide analysts with a different conclusion by identifying the recurrent, evolutionary and novel aspects of “American hegemony” as well as the “American Empire.”