

BOOK REVIEW

The language of imperial violence

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They Called it Peace. Worlds of Imperial Violence, by Lauren Benton. Princeton University Press. 285 pp. £35

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was a petty bourgeois Italian futurist. He marinated (pun intended) in a particularly vicious pickle of nationalism and imperialism—that of late-comers. Ever sensitive to the benefits of in-depth sanitation, he famously called war ‘the sole hygiene of the world’. Such infuriating drivel inevitably comes to mind at the end of Lauren Benton’s seminal book, *They Called It Peace*, a title borrowed from the equally seminal phrase by Tacitus (*solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*) usually translated as ‘they make a desert and call it peace’—‘they’ meaning the Romans, of course.

This is a much needed critical study of the juridical chassis of European imperialism, one where Tacitus’s ‘they’ morphed—in today’s parlance—into ‘we, the West’. It provides analytical tools uncovering how the European colonisers gave a rational—and often moral—justification to their practice of plundering, looting, stealing and enslaving, activities all conveniently combined under the name of empire. The Spaniards and Portuguese in Latin America, the British in Africa, the Dutch in Asia: looking at the seamless interweaving of war and peace that characterised European expansion over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Benton focusses on the notions of small war and (armed) peace and investigates what she calls ‘violence at the threshold of war and peace.’

The latter is a particularly illuminating definition able to transcend the traditional view of history as a staccato sequence of war and peace—big battles, clashes, treaties and so on—only to replace it with an *ostinato*: the recurrent administration—and often rationalisation—of the use of violence through raiding, truce making and truce breaking, parleying, and so on. Such use had to be portrayed

in the best possible light. Therefore, it was mostly deployed for the attainment of positive goals, like protection and defence. It was a travesty capable of enduring centuries of modernity and still to haunt the present. Not only have we at our disposal the examples of the Russians in Ukraine or the Israelis in Gaza. The constant flow of endless, asymmetric and humanitarian wars—the latter a notorious oxymoron behind which liberal democracies concealed their ethical cognitive dissonance—hasn’t gone anywhere.

Benton’s book travels freely through time and space, looking at European expansion in Asia and America. She does not study the ‘art’ of war, in the tradition of Clausewitz, but its ‘arc’—that is, ‘the logic and practices that move antagonists with exquisite precision from conflict to conflict and from exercises in containment right up to the edge of atrocity.’ Many similar critical devices are on offer here, from the self-narration of the blood- and gold-thirsty Spanish conquistadores in Latin America, including their hateful stratagem of the *Requerimiento* (the ‘requirement’ of 1513 which asserted that Spain had the divine right to take possession of territories in the Americas) or the Portuguese equivalent in India.

The constant sequence of ‘raiding, captive-taking, truce-making and the brutal punishment of truce-breakers’ made it sure that the interweaving of war and history was total: ‘war raged, paused or threatened: it hardly ever stopped’. A threshold, that of war and peace, continuously crossed inward and outward. At the core of such dynamic was raiding: it would lead to a truce which could develop into more raiding or permanent acquisition. Nothing new here either: raiding as a source of recruitment of booty-driven soldiers was a consolidated practice of the Roman

army (and it was frequent along the Roman Empire borders even during the *Pax Romana*).

Throughout the study, the attention to language and its use remains pivotal. Benton shows the Latin proverb *nomina sunt consequentia rerum* ('words are the consequence of things' as asserted in emperor Justinian's Codex) still sounds dangerously true: in order to bridge what had become an intolerably wide gap between things and their name, war had to be called peace, aggression pacification and so on (Orwell did not invent much, really). Indeed, by 'perpetrating war crimes while claiming the mantle of peacemakers', empire states use nowadays the same jargon, the only difference being that—back then—the antagonists were characterised by Europeans either as subjects or as enemies and sometimes as both, according to the convenience of the moment. As a result, throughout these centuries of expansion, such judicial theorisation helped Europeans' colonial rule and conquest become a project of peace making. Whenever the invaders carved deeper into the territory of the invaded, their lawmaking would adjust itself to 'the precedent', regardless of its moral and ethical slipperiness—a revealing and interesting resemblance to the British constitution. Actually, law 'infused all forms of imperial violence', Benton claims, in order to achieve the legalisation of the space between war and peace.

With regards to their self-representation, Europeans always saw themselves as the main defenders of morality. Their lofty task was disciplining lawless, 'uncivilised' subjects in the colonies. Appropriating all that was theirs in the process almost seemed a necessary evil, a price to pay for the spread of 'civilisation', the good old white man's burden. As a recurring suggestion of the whole work, legal energies were copiously spent in the legitimisation of the unacceptable, like the mafia-style 'protection' of fellow nationals or subjects as an excuse to invade and conquer. Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine inexorably comes to mind again here.

Benton also shows quite clearly how often the purpose of new legal systems was to permit and enable the colonisers' rule via 'private

trade' rather than by a state. Hugo Grotius, one of the various jurists quoted in the book, authored his treaty *Mare Liberum* upon request of the Dutch East India Company after they had seized the Santa Caterina, a Portuguese ship, in the Singapore Strait. This helps to see episodes such as the Opium War fought by the British in China as a clear example of how often war had to be waged beforehand only to trade with the enemy afterwards—trade and conquer rather than divide and conquer. By identifying faraway conflicts as triggers of European legislation of war, Benton upturns the common view that posits war legislation as stemming from Europe outward, a process that gradually turned indigenous fighters from 'savages' into rebels. What the works by Grotius and his peers—such as Emmerich de Vattel, Alberico Gentili, Pierino Belli amongst others—often amounted to was a sort of prêt-à-porter law providing legal coverage to individual interests and whims often pursued via naked, imperial violence. Gentili, for one, theorised the legitimacy of pre-emptive striking—something that would become useful to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 far more than weapons of mass destruction that weren't there in the first place. Equally illuminating is Benton's pinpointing of the role of households as the spearhead of settlers' expansion: another form of 'private', nearly individualistic, form of accepted violence. Families became the main agent by which garrisons turned into colonies—and warmongers into peacemakers. Again, Israeli 'settlers' in the West Bank can be applied here.

All in all, this book is an encouraging turning point in the revision of the whole history of European imperialism, one that will hopefully spur the writing of many others. Benton marched against the Vietnam War in her youth. Even leaving its ground-breaking achievements aside, *They Called It Peace* proves that the author's healthy adversity to war—something we so desperately need now while dancing on the edge of an abyss—has endured time and scholarship.

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