“FROM THE EMPIRE TO GOD” TO “COMMUNITIES LIVING TOGETHER IN AN EMPIRE”
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“From the Empire to God”
to “Communities Living Together in an Empire”

The Evolution of the Studies on Empires in Spain
A Crossroad Between Empires and International History

María Dolores ELIZALDE

After many years devoted to the study of issues related to international history in colonial areas, and also to the analysis of relations between different societies in imperial frameworks, I am especially interested on considering the interaction between the history of international relations and colonial and postcolonial history. From that perspective, I will review the studies on empires in Spain, contrasting them with what happened in the international historiography, the development of global history, and the influence of this on the discipline of history of international relations.¹

It is a personal reflection, raised from the Spanish historiography, and linked to the development of a career devoted to the study of the Spanish empire, at a time – the nineteenth century – and a space – Asia and the Pacific. I would like to start by clearing away possible misconceptions regarding the perspective adopted. When one speaks of the Spanish Empire, it is easy to image that great empire on which the sun did not set, spreading to the four corners of the world, that “world that could walk through the lands of Philip”, as quoted by Serge

¹ This essay is part of the research project “Imperios, Naciones y Ciudadanos en Asia y el Pacífico II”, HAR2012-39352-CO2-02.
Gruzinski. However, I’m not going to talk about the time of the Spanish monarchy, the era of Spanish Empire at its fullest, or the Empire’s central role in America. My work sticks to the 19th century, a time that while representing the zenith of European imperialism was for Spain, on the contrary, a period that the Spanish historian Josep M. Fradera has called a time of “colonies for after an empire”. In other words, a time in which the territories of the American continent had already declared their independence, with Spain holding sovereignty over just Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, a few islands in Micronesia, and a few small African enclaves. Spain was an island empire, small, vulnerable, conflictive, and in full retreat in the face of the drive of the great empires of that era. But Spain was, nevertheless, still an empire, full of plans for the future, plans for which it had fought for an entire century. These were plans, however, which both the internal realities of Spain’s remaining colonial archipelagos, as well as international circumstances, would lay bear as unfeasible.

From that perspective, and in order to tie my presentation together, I will first describe how I began my professional career around the question of empires. Secondly, I will move to the development of the studies on the 19th century’s empire in the Spanish historiography. Thirdly, I will offer a few considerations regarding global history and imperial history. And finally, I will raise some conclusions.

A Road Towards the Study of Empires

When I was studying History at the Complutense University of Madrid, now some thirty years ago, in the final years of my degree, I had to choose between Spanish History or Universal History. For me at least, there was no question: between Spain and the universe, taken as a whole, I clearly went with the latter option. However, this was still that old-fashioned universal history, whose actors were national histories that interacted with each other, and narrated from a clearly Eurocentric

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point of view. After I had started studying Universal History, I met José María Jover, first as a professor in the 4th and 5th years of university, and later as my thesis adviser, and one of the great scholars of the History of International Relations that Spain has produced. He was a contemporary of Duroselle, Renouvin, and Chabod, and was attendee at the congress in Rome in 1950, which in many respects marked the foundation of the discipline.4

As a possible subject for my thesis, José María Jover suggested an analysis and explanation of the colony that Spain created in the Carolina and Palaos islands, in Micronesia, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, in 1885, the year of the Berlin Conference. This was the moment when the great powers redefined the distribution of colonial lands and prepared the way for further expansion and redistribution in the Pacific. But it was also the moment when Spain no longer had the capacity to expand an empire that had started to break apart with the independence of the Spanish colonies in the continental Americas. Why then, did Spain establish a colony in the Pacific, at a time of serious internal problems, minimal economic, military, and naval power, and very limited international influence? What were the motives behind that colony? It was while trying to respond to these questions that I encountered empires as agents of global history for the first time.

José María Jover proposed that thesis subject because he had come across unpublished documentation: the papers that had been returned to Spain in 1899 following the sale of the islands to Germany, when Spain, as a result of the war with the United States and the loss of the Philippines, had been forced to give up its empire in Asia and the Pacific. What José María Jover suggested I do was to explain that Spanish colony within the framework of the Spanish empire, analyzing its structure, institutions, and organizational schema, articulating the relations maintained by the top authorities of each organizational branch and with the metropolis. I was to analyze how it functioned and describe the elements that made it up – native-born Carolinians, Spaniards and

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foreigners –; the interests that justified its creation, the logic behind it, and its role in the Spanish empire.

However, I soon realized that while all that questions were necessary, they were not enough on their own. It was essential to look in at least three other directions. On the one hand, I turned towards Asia and the Pacific, trying to understand what was taking place in those spaces, what the major powers in the area were, and what the dynamics of that area were the foundations of everything else. Secondly, I was drawn to study the international context into which the colony fit: the process of the expansion of the great powers throughout the world, and specifically throughout Asia and the Pacific; the political, economic and strategic change that was taking place at that time in that region of the world; the long-awaited opening of China; the extraversion of Japan; the definition of spheres of influence. That is, I had to bring that colony into international history, into a global history, in which it was necessary to consider multiple variables: the commercial dynamics in Asia and the Pacific; the desire to control protected markets against an earlier free trade; the impact of the second industrial revolution; the technical advances that had revolutionized communications; the development of navies and steamships; the tracing of new navigation routes; the opening of the Suez Canal, and the wait for the Panama Canal; the laying of new transoceanic telegraph cables; the use of force in international relations as opposed to the approach taken by an earlier concert of nations; the growing rivalries of the great powers; the drive of empires; the requirement of “effective occupation” of a territory to claim international sovereignty over it. And thus, in responding to these questions, we now had cast empires, necessarily, as the leading players behind the dynamics that were transforming the world. Since then I stood in the interplay between imperial history and international relations, in which I have continued to develop most of my research career. And all of this, at the same time, while continuing to study, thirdly, the very space and society in which that colonial experience was being implanted, which for me is an indispensable factor in the study of any colonial process.5

To find the proper approach for my thesis, after consulting and analyzing the available Spanish documentation, by sheer chance and for unrelated family reasons, I went to live in Great Britain for two years. There I found the marvelous that is a library of a British university, all of

open access and filled with books on empires, many of them empires in Asia and the Pacific, which was what I was interested in then – and now. It was the time of William Langer, Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher, David Fieldhouse, René Girault, Jacques Marseille, Jean-Louis Miège, Winfried Baumgart, Henri Brunschwig, Wolfgang Mommsen, William Roger Louis, Paul Kennedy, or Walter LaFeber, and I found all of them and many more in that university library.⁶

This allowed me to anchor my small Spanish colony in the world of empires, although at that time the historiography on empires was in a different stage than it is today, still concerned, as it then was, with explaining the reasons behind expansion, and focused on political and economic explanations, much more than on the effects of those empires on global history, let alone alternative perspectives on imperial experiences, which would begin much later. Several more years would still have to pass for that. In the meantime, my return to Spain and to Spanish historiography awaited me.

### Development of the Study of Empires in Spanish Historiography

I returned full of empires and colonies, and I arrived in Spain, in the mid-1980s, to a world where the study of those questions seemed to be extremely outdated. Spanish historiography at that time was at a full boil in its recovery from the Franco era, which had kept our historical studies at a great distance from international historiography, and on its horizon

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was then the renewal of L’École des Annales, social history, and economic history. In that panorama, international studies were still a little far removed from us, and, although the renewal of the discipline had already begun, it was still associated with the old diplomatic history. Spain had not yet joined the European Community, which was what triggered the boom in international studies in our country, as a way of facilitating Spain’s reappearance on the international stage. In this context, empires smelled of mothballs, of antiquarianism, of the past.

To understand that initial rejection of a historiography fully engaged in the process of modernization, it must be remembered that in Franco’s time, we were up to here with the image of “for the empire unto God” that is, with the justification of Spain’s greatness thanks to its empire that once stretched around the world, and supported, it was claimed, upon a series of values that Spain had been wise enough bring to the territories that it had governed, creating in turn a grand community articulated around the idea of hispanidad. In other words, a great Spain, in the terminology of the time, open to the world thanks to the empire, and to its later derivation into Hispanic societies, in which the Catholic Church played a highly significant role. These were completely archaic approaches to the Spanish empire that had no place in what today we call imperial histories, and were not at all integrated into what we understand as global history today. In these approaches, the center, and virtually the horizon, of everything was Spain, and Spain alone. As it will be understood, those imperial ideas were not widely preached in Post-Franco Spain, which was looking to democratize itself and to open to the world.

On the other hand, Spanish historiography had little practical experience of thinking about empire as part of a global history, and of imagining the history of the world through empires. Spanish historians have not engaged these themes even when it is possible to the Spanish empire playing a large role in any linear imperial history. Our historiography, on the contrary, had developed powerful groups of...
modernists who study the Spanish monarchy, or Latin American studies scholars, or Arabic studies scholars. All of these groups remained strong, but there was little permeability among them, and until very recently, they were unused to thinking of the world as a whole.

Only in the mid-1980s did different Spanish scholars begin to revisit the study of the Spanish empire, and with it, the study of empires in general, and they did so from renewed approaches and from different scholarly disciplines, as historians of economics, politics, science, or the discipline that really were placed, but rarely as historians of empire.

In a quick review of these different approaches, and always referring to the empire of the nineteenth century, I would point out that scholars approaching these questions from the perspective of economic history have highlighted the fact that an empire could not exist without financing to sustain it and without a search for profits; they have analyzed the relationship between the costs and benefits of empires, especially in regard to the question of whether colonial ventures had indeed proven to be profitable ventures. They have wondered whether there was an economic logic and motivation behind imperial projects, and identified the repercussions they had had on the economies of metropolitan and colonial societies alike. Research was also done on trade, trade routes, and their impact on world history. Studies were focused on tropical products, specially sugar and tobacco; on mines, plantations, and processing facilities; on monopolies, free trade, and protectionism; on finance and taxes. These researches on the economy of empires were done in some cases from a microeconomic perspective, analyzing the functioning of a very specific economic factor or sector, or even of a very concrete local space. But at other times such data was taken as key indicators for understanding the evolution of whole countries and their societies, or tracing international economic dynamics and trends, framed within a broader world history.

From the perspective of political history new studies were also undertaken, analyzing institutions, policies and agents linked to the empire, but no longer merely to sing the praises of Spain’s heroic feats, or to explain the actions of Spaniards and their effects, but rather to understand the development of political processes, the importance of the colonial factor in Spanish politics, the influence of pressure groups with overseas interests, or the struggle between reformists and anti-reformists. They were inquired into the shared histories and the creation of national identities, and questions such as the emergence of new
overseas aspirations, the lack of suitable answer from metropolitan part, the constraints on the extent of the inherent rights of the liberal state, the deliberate choice of exclusionary policies in Overseas, or the emergence of secessionist processes and new nations in the former colonial territories, have been raised. In this line, recent studies are questioning issues related to nationality, immigration and naturalization, matters of public order in the colonies, or the role of the religious orders as an intermediate body between the State and civil society.

It was undoubtedly incumbent upon these scholars to incorporate new approaches based on the Edward Said’s notion of “orientalism”, together with the theoretical interventions of Subaltern Studies and progress made by the postcolonial history. It has been necessary to look not only at what resulted from the metropolis, but at the colonized territories own dynamics, change the consideration of the different societies involved in colonial and postcolonial processes, start hearing voices not heard before. Were rethought as well, the relationships within the empires, the interactions between colonizers and colonized, the meetings and interactions and not only the tensions and conflicts-between societies, the role and influence of local societies on changes that took place in territories that were part of an empire, and the creation of post-imperial communities. And in a very related way, much of this new work analyzed the construction of identities, discourses, images, and perceptions.

In terms of international history, efforts have been made to articulate the reasons behind expansion, approached first from a metropolitan perspective, and later in relation to international dynamics of different origin. These studies have focused on relations between empires, rivalries, conflicts, alliances, and exchanges; on processes of change in empires and the transitions between empires; on transnational problems that have affected one or more empires...

From social history, sometimes allied with political history or cultural history, work was done on labor and slavery; on elites and social groups; on the creation of different types of networks; on the construction of inequality; on racial discrimination; on cultural mixing and the richness

that it brings; on cities, daily life, leisure and social spaces... From the history of science, work has been done on expeditions, science and empire, on medicine and medical practices, on the circulation and spread of knowledge. However, there has been little development within Spanish historiography of perspectives on empire driven from the history of mentalities or cultural trends. We also have little research based on language, literature, philosophy, or trans-disciplinary work.

It can be seen that we are talking about partial perspectives related to the Spanish empire, but very little on works thinking the empire as a whole. That has long been a major flaw in Spanish historiography. And although international historiography is rich in comparative studies of imperial phenomena, however, the Spanish empire is largely absent from that discussion.9

Conscious of this, and in parallel to other research efforts around the study of empires, a team of researchers from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the National Center for Academic Research (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, CSIC) and other universities, in which I join, have undertaken to “internationalize” the interpretations of the Spanish Empire and make a proper space for the Spanish experience within the current paradigms on the subject. Their goal is to study the Spanish overseas empire in greater depth, over the long term, from the 15th to the 20th century, and throughout its entire extension, American, Asian, and African. They are working to highlight its contribution to world history, and are using other imperial experiences as a comparative framework. To do this, there is a large group of researchers, each occupied with different times, spaces, and questions, but which, when

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combined, can more easily present a composite image of the Spanish Empire as a whole. It is easy to understand that the work of this team of researchers is directly influenced by the international historiography that explains the development and influence of the empires within world history, and considers imperial experiences as a fundamental factor of change in the evolution of cultures and societies.\textsuperscript{10}

Sailing through World History and Imperial History

From these approaches, this team of researchers agrees with the proposals of the world history\textsuperscript{11} on several assumptions. First, the long-term focus. Second, the desire to break away from older narratives of national histories placing instead emphasis on the study of the connections between different societies in the world, and the evolution of those connections over time. Third, the interest in the study of the interrelations between different cultures and civilizations. Fourth, the analysis of the processes of change and transition accompanying those interactions. Fifth, an interest in the observation of large spaces, to the extent that they formed part, during a period in their history, of political structures and trans-oceanic economic networks, and shared institutional, legal, and cultural systems that conditioned their respective trajectories once those structures were dismantled. Sixth, the desire to analyze the results obtained by the research from a comparative perspective. And finally, the intention to build a clear and didactic history, aimed at the maximum comprehension by interested students and readers, as well as their effort to write a clear narration, achieve a

\textsuperscript{10} \texttt{http://www.upf.edu/grimse/es/grup/ and http://humanidades.chs.csic.es/asiapacifico}

logical and comprehensible structure, and define a series of primary themes, flows, or dynamics.12

However, this group of scholars takes its distance from world history in some methodological aspects, and also in terms of its final objectives. First, as historians, because of the importance given to the use of primary archival sources, compared to the use of secondary bibliography. Second, because the objectives they are pursuing deviate from the major issues analyzed by the world history, to focus specifically on the analysis of the Spanish empire and their contribution to world history, even if a comparative approach to other empires is adopted.

In regard to comprehensive imperial histories, I have to say that I am indebted to this historiographical tradition. From David Fieldhouse’s history of colonial empires and Robinson and Gallangher’s informal empires, who helped us to understand that we should consider both metropolitan and peripheral factors to analyze any colonial process – even using still a terminology, center and periphery, that today do not seem right to us; to René Girault’s imperialisms; continuing along the imperial meridians of Christopher Bayly, and the empires and colonies of Michael Doyle Jonathan Hart, Bernard Porter, Nicholas Tarling, Philip Curtin o Stephen Howe;13 the innovative work of Catherine Hall, John MacKenzie and Philippa Levine;14 all the way up to Frederick Cooper’s interpretations and the latest collective works driven by Alfred McCoy.15

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The international literature in this area is immense, and some of them highly innovative and suggestive, but impossible to compress in these few lines. I just want to underline, then, that in recent years is observed a growing trend towards a global explanation of empires, noting its significance in world history from a diachronic and comparative approach, and incorporating more issues and perspectives. The aforementioned works, of great authors all of them, but that certainly could be supplemented by other references, provide important clues that can help us in that step of joining imperial histories and international history.

**Interactions within an Empire**

I would like to recognize the lessons that these types of history -world History or imperial history- have taught me. And, just to conclude, and in order to close the circle that I started at the beginning of this presentation, in my last point I would like to refer again briefly to my current research, in light of the above historiographical reflections, and then end with a general conclusion concerning our discipline, the history of international relations.

Right now, I’m interested in the Philippines. The Philippines in and of itself. The Philippines in the Spanish Empire. The Philippines within Asia. The Philippines in relation to the Pacific and the Americas. And the Philippines in the history of the world. On that line, I would like to get to meet the maximum exposed by Bayly in the sense that every history is part of the global history. We have seen that empires can be observed in terms of structures of dominion, mechanisms of economic exploitation, agents of great geo-political changes, creators of borders and zones of influence, porters of tremendous impacts on local societies, and

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protagonists of conflicts and rivalries between powers - this last issue has concerned those of us in the field the history of international relations to no small degree. But I would like to think now on empires as agents and pathways of relations, exchanges, contact, interaction, encounter, and intermixing between societies.

This is why I am currently occupied with three questions. First among these is an attempt to explain the role of the Philippines and the Pacific Islands within the Spanish Empire, trying to accentuate the significance and contribution of that Asian variant, so little known, and to revisit the true conditions of those territories in the 19th century. Second is to analyze the consolidation of Philippine society during that same century, considering its many elements, which included a complex mosaic of local societies, each very different from the other, peninsular Spaniards, and a variety of foreigners. I am studying how all of those groups dreamed of and fought for a different future for the country, in a process of constant collaboration, conflict, and negotiation between the parties. In this sense, I’m interested in examining how different communities lived together within a single empire, and within a colonial framework, analyzing their cohabitation, conflict, collaboration and interactions. At this point, I am not so much interested in the mechanisms designed to force the union of empire, nor even the governing policies of an empire, or the reactions of the governments, but rather in the different formulas that the different communities found to live together in that empire, despite imperial coercion and policies that were decided from the top. I am interested in how they forged ties, interactions, and mixtures amongst themselves, because the Philippines can really only be understood as the sum total plus the overlapping of all of those societies and communities that at one time were part of an empire. And finally, my last interest is to frame the Philippines in the international context of the time, both studying the impact of different external dynamics in the archipelago as the Philippine incorporation into the international scene and the influence that the foreigners had in the evolution of the Philippines.

And in that sense, I think that what I do is, above all, international history in a colonial context, and also history of relations between different societies in an imperial framework. And so, I am interested, then, necessarily, in the interaction between international history and colonial and postcolonial history, and from that perspective in my work influence both postulates of imperial history and world history. Actually,
what I want to emphasize is that I understand all that work only from the crossing between the international history and colonial and postcolonial history, in a space in which, to me, are increasingly blurring the boundaries between disciplines.

That said, and just to conclude, I consider that from the history of international relations we cannot ignore the methodological proposals of the world history, or the imperial history, because they are ways of thinking about the history of the world as a whole, and they have a bearing on the dynamics that have encouraged globalization. Perhaps world history will emphasize the vectors through which a unified history of the world might be articulated, or those paths that have promoted globalization over time and through space. Perhaps imperial history will underline the importance of empires as basic political structures within that world history, and will study the formation, functioning, characteristics, and components of the various empires. It will also study the processes of change, the conflicts and encounters between societies inhabiting the interior or the immediate surroundings of a particular imperial system. But both disciplines are now essential to thinking about the evolution of the world and of the societies that make it up, and therefore very directly involve to historians of international relations.