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They Called It Peace: Worlds of Imperial Violence

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ABSTRACT

Lauren Benton's new book, *They Called It Peace*, offers a comprehensive view of the various forms of violence that European empires deployed overseas from the early modern period to the 19th century. These forms of violence—ranging from household abuses and slavery to deliberate killings and mass exterminations—soon became routine mechanisms for maintaining colonial rule. As the author convincingly demonstrates through a solid theoretical framework and rich historical evidence, small wars were far from marginal, despite being represented as such by Europeans. Rather, they had global implications for legal, political, and cultural imaginaries, resonating to this day. This review aims to highlight the book's important contributions to both the history of international law and global history.

Keywords: global history, international law, empires, colonialism, war

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1. Introduction

Lauren Benton's new book, though looking at a very distant past, is extremely relevant for contemporary times as it offers a critical perspective on the thin and often blurred differences that divide what we consider 'peace' and 'war.' Indeed, by enquiring how seemingly negligible forms of political violence that have taken place in the margins of European empires have had global implications, the book is an occasion to reflect on political patterns of the past that still haunt the present. *They Called It Peace*, starting from the poignant title borrowed from Tacitus's *Agricola*, is a rich journey across the ways political violence has been practiced, perceived, and justified throughout early modern empires.

For those interested in the intertwining histories of European imperialism and law, Benton is a renowned and well-known scholar. This book, while standing in continuity with the author's two-decades-long intellectual project of unbundling the imperial legacies that constitute the modern international,[1] adds something significant. In *They called it peace* Benton focuses specifically on political violence, with the aim of enquiring how it acted throughout modernity as a catalyzer of legal, diplomatic, and cultural practices. In particular, the author looks at how minor forms of political violence, the so-called small wars, defined the 'rhythms' and the very logics of imperial administration between the 16th and the 19th Century, having important ramifications beyond the colonies (Benton 2024, xiii). The main goal of the book is to challenge the idea that small acts of violence in distant places, far away from the *Metropole* and from the sight of 'enlightened men', had a minor significance in the emergence of global orders. This conception was a commonplace among Europeans, often corroborated and carried on by Western historiography and Western literature depicting history as a sequence

[1] Just to mention a few of Benton's key contributions on the history of imperialism and law, see Benton 2009 and Benton and Ford 2018.

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of major wars and peace treaties. This exotic approach to imperial violence has prevented an appraisal of the central role that small wars played in defining the political and legal imaginaries of war and peace all over the world.

Benton's question stems exactly from this, namely from the intuition that small wars were not simply small, but they were single parts of a trend to keep imperial dominion in a phase of transition from conquest to power consolidation overseas. Such a consolidation never really happened as a linear and successful endeavor, since European imperialism, as Benton shows, has always been an incoherent struggle of tracing borders between inside and outside, public and private, slave and master, trade and plunder, peace and war. Thus, and this is how the core argument of the book emerges, small wars were not only fundamental in the attempts to conquer, but they were also foundational processes in the definition of empires' waxing powers and in the consolidation of imperial political 'orders.' Small wars became routine practices that extended violence in space and time, sometimes with phenomena of private abuses and brutality, other times with forms of open extermination and mass atrocity. Small wars were most of the time portrayed as minor episodes in utopian projects of world peacemaking, but, beyond this, they acted as karstic boosters for larger wars, paradigm shifting and epochal transitions. In sum, the book reveals that in the last four centuries small wars were truly global events.

To present this argument the author has split the book into two parts, also to offer a chronological sequence to the reader. In the first part the author looks at the early-modern waves of imperial violence which she calls a 'global regime of plunder'; while in the second part she shows how these scattered forms of plunder took a more legal and formalized shape with the 'global regime of armed peace' that characterized European imperial violence across the 18th and 19th Century (Benton 2024, 101). The author relies on the one hand on a solid – and to some extent innovative – theoretical framework, which is the combined by-product of sophisticated epistemological

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considerations, such as the interaction between law and political violence, and a critical perspective on imperialism. On the other hand, Benton relies on rich historical evidence, which is the outcome of a grounded research on colonialism, attentive to local contexts and cultural relativities.

2. Small Wars Between History and Theory

From the theoretical point of view, the book is developed along three argumentative lines, mainly expounded in the first part of the book. The first argumentative line concerns how the term 'small war' entails considerably more intellectual flexibility than the term 'conventional war', both in terms of space and time. Spatially, small war implies a number of places other than the battlefield as well as several different subjects other than soldiers. Imperial agents, households, slave traders, sailors, captains, and even missionaries were actors in small wars. Temporally, small wars could last years or decades as they are characterized by low-intensity clashes, at times interrupted by truces, and then brutally recovered with punishments and massacres. Located into an intermediate sphere between peacemaking, namely the attempt to establish order, and war making, namely the attempt to defeat enemies and subjugate them, small wars' ambiguous spatial and temporal conditions fitted European imperial expansions where the inside and outside were hard to trace. This provides an important explanation for the fact that modern European legal and political categories, as that of enemy, rebel, truce, subject, or jurisdiction, were and still are extremely volatile, dependent on the context and the instrumental purpose of their user. As Benton shows, 'for centuries massacres and slaving were classed as lawful and just treatment of enemies who refused to submit. Aggressors represented their victims as peacebreakers or rebels' (Benton 2024, 3). This allows Benton to demonstrate that the poor theorization of small wars depends on the fact that they were fought on the threshold of war and peace, and they borrowed the languages, legal logics, and strategies of both war and peace.

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This leads to the second argumentative line, namely the importance of language as a fundamental dimension of political violence. Benton explains that political violence historically has always had a linguistic dimension for its justification. Language is a means to make political violence intelligible and eventually to represent it before specific audiences. Especially in imperial violence, where geographically distant events had to be told and reported by direct witnesses, the linguistic dimension played a key role in the *historicization* of political violence (see, for instance, Orford 2021). The author's claim is that despite the fact that their violence took place in distant sites and often fought for low stakes, both Europeans and indigenous strived to provide some basic legitimacy for its exercise. In this respect, law emerged as a key dimension of small wars. Even if logics would suggest that small wars are the opposite of law, they had a substantial legal dimension that historically cannot be disregarded. As Benton shows across the central part of the book, all parties in small wars resorted to legal or quasi-legal arguments as moral, religious or economic discourses. Rarely small wars lacked justifications. In developing this argument Benton adopts a critical view of the laws of war, trying to show that there are no superior sources to international law.[2] International law and the laws of war, following Koskenniemi's (2021, 4–9) definition, are interpreted by the author more as a genre, as a collection of arguments deliberately picked from daily life experience, natural law, history, poetry, science and other domains of knowledge. From this emerges Benton's attempt to use intellectual and social history to challenge the idea of a progressive history in the crafting of the laws of war and to 'expose the myth that law worked to contain violence' (Benton 2024, 198). In imperial lands, where violence was chronic and political order was in the making, justifications and strategies flowed from one side to the other easily: indigenous populations mimicked the vocabulary and arguments of European wars and, sometimes, also the other way around.

[2] Similar arguments are raised, for instance, by Kennedy 2006, Kalmanovitz 2015 and Kingsbury and Straumann 2010.

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The third and last theoretical line concerns the 'smallness' of small wars. Despite conventional wisdom considers small wars as chaotic, improvised, and shapeless, especially if compared to conventional wars fought in early modern Europe, the book does an important work in unpacking this myth. Small wars were rhetorically and instrumentally kept small by their promoters. But reality was that small wars implied in most cases cruel practices as raiding, slaving, raping, and plunder, whose effects were often enduring on social structures and ecosystems. The typical narrative of small wars as asymmetric by definition is partly confuted throughout the book because indigenous populations replicated Europeans' strategies, tactics and weapons in a game of continuous, mimetic actions. This, often, led small wars to escalate to levels of overarching and systematic violence, purposely and indiscriminately directed against children and women (Benton 2024, 10).

From a historical perspective, the book is built around four key points, whose discussion is intended to support the theoretical scaffolding. The first point is the longstanding historiography *topos* of major wars as turning points in history. Benton aims to provide evidence to the reader that the Eurocentric idea of history as nothing but a series of major wars, whose outcome has been the cause of epochal transitions, is not only inaccurate but also blind to the chronic violence undertaken by empires to maintain and expand political power in distant lands. Imperial chronic violence, whose immediate outcome was often not acknowledged, has been both functional to the way of fighting major wars and complementary to their outcome. As the book explains, it has been functional because in distant lands violent methods were tried and experimented with low stakes in order to be exported in Europe later. For what concerns its complementarity, resources, goods, alliances, and even legal excuses used in colonial lands played a fundamental role in the management of empires' power, even in Europe.

The second historical aspect is to demonstrate that European imperialism was far from a large, comprehensive and coherent enterprise. Imperialism was initially played on a small scale and, on a smal scale it remained for a long

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time, so that small-scale violence became a central aspect of colonial management, a sort of administrative practice, undertaken by an array of different subjects. To prove this, Benton focuses on Latin America and the Pacific, two regions that according to her are less discussed by global historians, and through which it is possible to clearly see the chronic character of violent practices and their initial tiny dimension. This allows, for instance, to explain how the household, an apparently non-political institution, played a key role in the political expansion of empires and represented 'the only pathway available' to turn small 'fortified outposts into settled colonies' (Benton 2024, 63–65). In a very interesting excerpt she explains that 'household expansion' was the strategy adopted by the Portuguese in the 16th Century to form enclaves in the Indian Ocean and few later by the British empire in the Caribbean (Benton 2024, 105). The household was used as the primary outpost to penetrate foreign lands. The household had a basic institutional form – made by a chief (a white man) and a hierarchy of different subjects as woman, servants, soldiers, slaves (generally indigenous), children and so on – and could carry on different activities as production, transformation, trade and small war. The household was the embryonic form of imperial order. As a matter of fact, the Portuguese built a sort of garrison empire overseas, constituted by strategically scattered fortified ports and by small in-land fortresses inhabited by few households. This shows the subtle relationship that existed between private violence and public conquest. As Benton claims, first imperial expansion was, among other things, essentially conducted on a small scale, quasi-private level and war of conquest was rarely public, rather it was more often called 'peacemaking' or 'social ordering' against rebels. From a legal and moral perspective, Benton shows how household in overseas territories could act as frontrunners of the *Metropole* and make small wars for the sake of common good.

The third point is to highlight the linkage between small violence, global order, and peacemaking. The book illustrates how the connection between constant episodes of violence and the constitution of political orders became

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a structural element of European empires. Small war was, first of all, undertaken under the 'imperative of maintaining order', especially for the flourishing of commerce and for the survival of traders. Small violence reached such a frequency that it became the ordinary practice for empires to keep control over economic, political and social orders around the world. As Benton notes, 'as imperial small wars multiplied, they gave rise to new institutional gambits and experiments […] Many of the effects carry into the present' (Benton 2024, 13). The imperative of order and its promise of peaceful coexistence were often presented as sufficient reasons to accept violence. Thus, violence could be portrayed as peacemaking, or as a temporary shift towards definitive peace.

The fourth and probably most ambitious historical point is part of Benton's two-decades-long intellectual project and concerns the continuities of imperial logics, rationales, and languages in the history of the so-called international. Indeed, in multiple parts of the book Benton stresses the significant legacies of imperialism in what we conventionally deem international politics. As she states in the introduction, 'the age of empires is in many ways still with us […] many continuities in the mechanism, justifications, and rhythms of war across global and international orders. When twentieth-century empire states packaged their violence, for example, as an inside job – a work of policing, not war – they were drawing on an imperial repertoire' (Benton 2024, xiii). This reconnects to the relevance of the book for the current understanding of international dynamics.

In terms of style, though stimulating and rich, the book is accessible, even to those who have a modest command of early modern history of empires. In fact, only some minor critiques can be raised. The first is a stylistic critique about the argumentative structure of the first part. The theoretical generalizations in the opening chapters could be matched with more historical examples. This would strengthen the intelligibility of the theoretical edifice, guiding the reader to understand the subtleties that emerge from Benton's interpretation of the connections between law and political violence. The

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second one is a conceptual critique. Benton could devote more room to explain the concept of 'small war.' My impression is that Benton too often gives the concept for granted, at least from a semantical point of view. Though the book evidently deals with another theme, the concept of 'small war' could be the object of a deeper and more critical conceptual analysis, aimed at showing the slippery, yet structural, semantics of this concept for Western imaginary of major wars. For example, a digression on some classics on the topic such as Callwell's (2010) *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, could help the reader to frame the emergence of 'small war' in the context of late 19th Century imperialism. The third one is linked to the second critique. The author could further emphasize the conceptual relationship between 'small war' and 'peace' (or 'peacemaking'). There is barely a reference to the fact that the concept of 'peace' is effectively a 19th Century invention, imbued with Eurocentric and parochialist views of the world, loaded with anti-revolutionary intentions, and often waved to cover imperialist aspirations and inhumane policies. 'Peace' could be the object of a larger discussion centered on the derogative and strongly hierarchical semantics that this modern concept implies, especially when deployed in close connection to political violence.

3. Conclusions

Overall, the book is exceptionally valuable in showing how our extremely fragile distinction between war and peace has always been a land of legal discussion, political negotiation, and power assertion from early to late modern times. And, indeed, as a book of global history, *They Called It Peace* does a great job in deconstructing and showing the extent to which the typical dichotomies on which traditional Eurocentric history is based on are contingent; as, for example, the dichotomy private-public, domestic-international, international-imperial, war-peace. Benton, of course, does not cynically dismiss the distinction between peace and war as fiction. Rather,

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she tries to highlight how it created grey and intermediate areas where other forms, such as the small war, proliferated and had systemic effects, comparable to that of major wars and epochal peace agreements.

Especially in a time sparked by uninterrupted cycles of violence as ours – where the distinction between peace and war crumbles, where forms of violence and their justifications, though new, seem frequently to recall episodes from the last four centuries – this book provides the reader with significant tools to decipher from a historical and critical perspective the incessant oscillation between peace and war that made and re-made modern international politics.

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