

**John Connell and Robert Aldrich (2020). *The ends of empire: The last colonies revisited*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-981-15-5905-1. Hbk: €74.89; pbk: €53.49.**

John Connell and Robert Aldrich have been key figures in the academic literature on ‘Overseas Territories’ for decades. Their book *The last colonies* (1998) was a significant publication, not only in terms of providing a definitive review of these territories as they stood at that time, but also as an inspiration for other scholars to take up the mantle. As Connell and Aldrich note in their preface to the present volume, they argued back in 1998 that “‘the last colonies’ deserved more attention, not only for their innate historical and cultural interest but for the commercial, political and military stakes they represented” (p. v). If the 52-page bibliography is anything to go by, the authors have been successful in inspiring new scholars from across the globe to consider these territories that have often been described pejoratively as ‘confetti of empire’, ‘the last pink bits’, or ‘remnants and debris’. Through the 500-odd pages of their new book, Connell and Aldrich give, as one might expect, due regard to the territories and how they have developed and been shaped and buffeted by both internal and external events and forces. Indeed, a great deal has happened to them over the last two decades, including constitutional change, significant inward and outward population flows, and internal civil strife; all within the context of notable external events such as 9/11, the global financial crisis, climate change, and most recently Covid-19. But importantly, Connell and Aldrich do not frame the Overseas Territories as victims, but rather as robust and pro-active actors in the global system.

More particularly, the book focuses on two main themes. First, what has changed in the intervening years despite none of the territories gaining independence. And, second, whether the territories should be brought more into the academic fold and not be seen as ‘anomalies on the map’.

Let us first consider what Connell and Aldrich say has changed and what has not. The arguments permeate the entire volume, but they do not find final form until Chapter 9, entitled ‘Plus ça change? From last colonies to overseas territories’. The authors highlight that, although the various political statuses of the territories have remained fundamentally unchanged, “sovereignty games are constantly in play”, creating an active system of “negotiated dependency” (p. 426). This has meant that the territories have won important positive changes to their political and economic systems. However, as Connell and Aldrich note “the metropole always remains the stronger partner” (p. 426), and this means that metropolitan interventions often occur. Many of the most controversial acts of such intervention have been related to social and cultural issues, such as same-sex marriage in several of the UK Caribbean territories and cockfighting in the US territories of Guam and Puerto Rico.

Culture and identity are two of several factors that the authors also argue have defined, shaped, and changed the territories over the last two decades. Others include a further weakening in the demand for independence; an increasingly complex set of regional and international relationships; shifting geopolitical considerations that have altered the value and role of the territories; and declining interest in the territories on the part of metropolitan publics (and, often, their politicians). The consequence has been a two, or possibly three-level game, with significant churn and flux at the lower levels, but an “infinite pause” (p. 446) on the fundamental question of decolonisation. As Connell and Aldrich argue, there is a “value of ‘dependence’ as a shelter against uncertain global geopolitics” (p. 448).

The second main theme of the book is considered predominantly in Chapter 8, ‘Anomalies on the map’. Here, Connell and Aldrich argue strongly – and, in my view, convincingly – that the territories’ perceived oddness and particularity should not be overstated. The authors submit that the territories “exist and thrive in an evolving world of political anomalies, complexities and exceptions, of unusual borders and disputed borderlands, areas of contested sovereignty and microstates fragmented from earlier empires, sometimes with multiple claimants” (p. 371), and so they “emerge as less distinct and different from many other entities, as might first appear” (p. 373). This observation could and perhaps should have some influence on how the territories are perceived in the metropolises. For example, Guadeloupe has been French much longer than Nice, and Bermuda was English before England was part of the United Kingdom. “Imaginative geopolitics” and “imaginative communities” (p. 413) might help to address some of the underlying tensions that remain between the territories and their peoples on the one hand, and the metropolitan powers and their citizens on the other.

What of the volume more generally? Connell and Aldrich have produced an exhaustive overview of the overseas territories, which ranges far and wide geographically across all territories and issues. The book takes care to offer nuance and difference, as well as identifying overarching themes and characteristics as highlighted earlier in the review. This reviewer particularly liked the detail on the territories’ signs and symbols, including flags, anthems and national days, and how they are often “significant in indicating what local authorities consider significant: from distinctive flora and fauna to political status” (p. 179). Similarly insightful is the discussion of sport as “a popular form of regional and global participation embedded in local identity and culture” (p. 357), such as Gibraltar’s membership of UEFA and FIFA, and American Samoa’s recognition by the International Olympic Committee. It is these and similar details that make the volume a very rich read indeed. Occasionally, the level of detail makes the narrative quite dense, and so some re-capping of key observations would have been helpful, particularly in the earlier chapters. In addition, much of the information provided in the volume is not new, although the facts certainly do come together here in an expert fusion.

In conclusion, Connell and Aldrich’s return to ‘The Last Colonies’ is welcome and well-timed. There is a sense in many territories of disgruntlement, drift, and even decline, and from the perspective of the metropolitan powers, only perhaps France retains real pride and interest in the territories, despite the United Kingdom’s present mantra of ‘Global Britain’. Connell and Aldrich help to put things into perspective and actually offers a generally positive view of the future; and, as in 1998, this volume identifies many strands for other scholars to investigate further; as they surely will.

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