
As I write this review on 17 August 2008, The Globe and Mail reports that this day is the 150th anniversary of the first trans-Atlantic cable message sent by Queen Victoria to the 15th President of the United States, James Buchanan. Victoria’s screed took some sixteen hours to deliver but all agreed that this “great international work” had tremendous implications for future international relations. As President Buchanan put it, it would be “an instrument destined by Divine Providence to diffuse religion, civilization, liberty and law throughout the world.” For the Globe’s Ian Bailey, this exchange of messages, albeit between two of the elite of contemporary society, “was a milestone in communications as notable, in its own way, as the launch of the Internet” (Bailey, 2008).

Winseck and Pike would agree. Communications and Empire is part of Duke University’s series entitled American Encounters/Global Interactions. This series is concerned with “the imposing presence of the United States” in the context of the dynamic interactions between power and culture, as experienced at different scales. But this particular volume does more. It also sheds light on other empires and their global encounters and, in particular, the British imperial system of world communications. That’s why Queen Victoria was involved. But if India was the “jewel in her crown,” Canada was to be the linchpin and is central to this study.

As befits their disciplinary expertise, Winseck and Pike bring the perspective of “global media studies” to this project. Winseck has published much on the theme of communications and power at the national and global level, while Pike has long been a contributor to the social and political history of postal systems, the telephone, and broadcasting. Accordingly, in Communications and Empire, they deploy a rich array of archival sources and contemporary scholarship in their investigation of the linkages between communications and empires, international relations, and political economy at the global scale. In doing so, provocatively, the authors depart from the hitherto received wisdom on the emergence of the global media system in the 1860-1930 period.

Simply put, they challenge the hegemonic proposition that the development of inter-continental cable connections, wireless telegraph links, communications networks, and global news agencies was determined by, contributed to, and was a reflection of several competing imperial systems. Nor was it the result of the good President Buchanan’s “Divine Providence.” Rather, Winseck and Pike see it differently. One of their basic assumptions is that imperial rivalry was less powerful than assumed in traditional historiographies of global history, and that there is much evidence of inter-national corporate cooperation. Indeed, they demonstrate convincingly that state-powers long relied on corporate provision of communications services.

It follows from such a perspective that the emergence of global capitalism was more powerful than imperial geopolitics in organizing global communications and, tellingly, it was concerned more with flows of finance, trade, people, and information rather than the legerdemain of politics. Thus, rather than networks being implemented to integrate empires, actual linkages and flows were densest between the centres of metropolitan capitalism. As the contemporary quip has it, if you want an explanation, “follow the money!”

Such views are accompanied by a revisionist understanding of the dynamics of empires.
First, rather than national rivalries, evidence suggests that there was considerable “interimperial collaboration.” In fact, there appears to have been a “kind of shared hegemony” in the approach of the “great powers” to establishing and managing systems of global communications. That is, Winseck and Pike critique a realist focus on “territorially bound concepts of imperialism” (xvii) in favour of a structuralist approach to “capitalist imperialism” (p. 8-9).

Finally, shifting from the meta-narratives of global politics and economics, the authors also highlight the role of particular individuals who had an impact on global communications in the context of modernization, liberal internationalism, and social reform. Indeed, the analysis of their roles is accompanied by potted bios, cartooned personas, and photographed likenesses that personalize the complexities of the realpolitik and realeconomic of the story. Canadians will appreciate the role of Sir Sandford Fleming in all of this. For Winseck and Pike, he was a man of “outstanding creative verve” and “the real visionary behind transpacific cable communications” (p. 151-152). For Fleming, while recognizing pervasive military and geopolitical implications, also knew that enhanced communications in all available media was a form of “cultural glue” that bound together the citizens of the British empire (p. 155). From his technologically deterministic perspective, the annihilation of the tyranny of distance was the prerequisite for the democratization and integration of global society.

But where is Sir George Robert Parkin (1846-1922) in all of this? Long an avid proponent of imperial unity, his 1893 wall-map displayed it cartographically with Canada at the centre. And he too favoured a complex “all-red-route” communications system comprised of steamships, postal systems, telegraph, submarine cables, continental railways, and transcontinental canals. And while the role of Laurier’s Postmaster William Mulock is acknowledged in this volume, where is his Christmas 1898 stamp? It rendered a Canadian-centred vision of global links with the accompanying text, “We hold a vaster empire than has been.” Surely, more could have been made of Fleming’s like-minded contemporaries, Parkin and Mulock (Cooke, 1996, pp. 802-805; Brown 1996, p. 374). Certainly, their images would have further enhanced this well illustrated volume.

But carping aside, this study contributes much to our understanding of globalization. Of course, the authors recognize the early roots/routes of other global systems, be they the roads and cities of Rome, or the ships and ports of mercantilism. But they posit that the 1860-1930 period constituted a discrete demonstration of a globalizing world economy and society. The tyranny of distance was overcome by cables and wireless, and railways and steamship-lines. The results were transformative as “networks supported huge flows of capital, technology, people, news, and ideas which, in turn led to a high degree of convergence among markets, merchants, and bankers” (p. 2).

The argument is developed chronologically starting with the establishment, consolidation, and cartelization of the telegraph industry and the international cooperation in long-distance cable connections in the 1850-1870 period. This is followed by a rich discussion of the establishment of market-control in the 1870-1905 period as global communications exploded. This was no simple product of heroic technological discovery. Rather, there were several coterminous developments that served to integrate the world economy: near-instantaneous communication; rapid transportation; rise of futures trading in commodities; symbolic goods; electronic transfers of money; commodification of news.

The study then moves on to address the expansion of telecommunications in Africa and China, the latter being rendered provocatively as the construction of “a new nation-state in the celestial kingdom, (p. 114) with telegraphic communications being the opiate of the leaders of the new China, if not the masses. This is followed by nuanced discussion
of the rise of the demand for popular access to new communications technology and the challenge of corporate monopolies of cable communications by the assertion of the interests of global news agencies. Marconi’s demonstration of the power of “wireless electromagnetic waves” in 1901 introduced a more flexible and accessible medium of communications, and Winseck and Pike provide a thorough analysis of the introduction and expansion of this new technology, with particular attention to its utility for propaganda in World War I. This is followed by a discussion of how the new medium fitted Woodrow Wilson’s “liberal internationalist” posture of a “thick globalism” based on “economic, political, and cultural interdependence” (p. 261). Following chapters address the post-World War I development of South American and Asian communications markets, and the political economy of Euro-American communications.

In conclusion, this is an impressive and thoughtful study in which industrious scholarship is marshaled to present a fresh perspective for our consideration. To be sure, Winseck and Pike build on past assumptions of how technology overcame the tyranny of distance and localisms, and position the efforts of “global actors” in the context of a world of pervasive imperialisms. But they move beyond this to deploy their rich array of sources to demonstrate how the power of expanding global markets, international law, and discourses of social reform and modernity were also involved.

No mere exercise in academic abstraction, the authors conform to the objectives of the American Encounters/Global Interactions series by seeking to identify lessons from past experience that have resonance for “the issues of our own times” (p. 3). Ironically, the current news from Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Georgia, echoes what the authors call the “thin globalism” of a post-Wilson era of U.S. foreign policy: “the supremacy of markets, a minimalist approach to multilateralism, a hard-nosed realist approach to national interests, and a view of culture as a source of misunderstanding rather than the basis for a ‘new world order’” (p. 262). But, as some idealists promised in the early years of global communications, there is hope. Rather than “All Red Lines” of imperial control, the ideal world of “thick globalism” will be nurtured by rainbow-hued nets of fibre optic cables that nurture conversations in our cosmopolitan worlds. And, as Winseck and Pike demonstrate so well, these assumptions were beginning to occupy the air-waves in the 1860-1930 realms of communication.

References

Brian Osborne, Queens University