

## What's at Stake in the Indigenous Empire Debate

Andrew A. Szarejko<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Did the Comanche constitute an empire? Did the Lakota? Is it every appropriate to label Indigenous polities empires? These debates are now circulating in History and Indigenous Studies, but I argue that the International Relations (IR) literature on empire is best situated to move these debates forward. I focus on two key works—Pekka Hämäläinen's *The Comanche Empire* and *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power*—around which these debates have largely revolved. Critics argue that the “empire” label Hämäläinen applies to the Comanche and the Lakota is inappropriate because the groups themselves did not think of them as such, because this overstates the degree of violence or acquisitiveness in their practices, or because doing so would create a dangerous false equivalence between Indigenous and European violence. I argue that these critiques have some validity, but they fail to establish that the Comanche and the Lakota did not constitute empires. Rather, through an engagement with the American empire debate as it played out primarily in IR—and especially through Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright's “What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate” (2007) and Meghan McConaughey, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel H. Nexon's “Beyond Anarchy: Logics of Political Organization, Hierarchy, and International Structure” (2018)—I demonstrate that the Comanche and the Lakota indeed ought not to be considered empires for reasons that Hämäläinen's critics have not yet discussed. However, there is utility in thinking about other Indigenous polities as empires. Ultimately, I conclude that empire as an analytic concept deserves more widespread application in IR, that the burgeoning subfield of Historical IR would be especially conducive to such work, and that the various empire debates across disciplines would be easier to resolve and more productively built upon if scholars would provide clear definitions of key concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a Donald R. Beall Defense Fellow in the Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School and a non-residential Fellow in the Modern War Institute at the U.S. Military Academy. All views here are the author's own and not those of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Army, etc.

## Introduction

The questions of what constitutes an empire, whether the United States is or ever has been an empire, and whether empires act differently from other kinds of polities have long been debated, but these questions gained renewed attention in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Were American reactions—whether directed at Al Qaeda and the Taliban or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—imperial in nature? Either way, would that tell us anything of substance about the United States and the way it wields power? I draw on the literature generated in this American empire debate to address a question that has not yet received much attention in Political Science. Is it ever appropriate to label Indigenous polities empires?

In Political Science’s cognate fields of History and Indigenous Studies, the question of whether it is appropriate to label Indigenous polities “empires” has received new scrutiny in recent years. This debate has circulated most vividly around two widely cited books by historian Pekka Hämäläinen—*The Comanche Empire* and *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power*. The titular groups, he argues, did indeed constitute empires, and this is presented as a way of granting the Comanche and the Lakota their rightful place in borderlands history (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011). While definitional debates on empire continue, work in International Relations (IR) has made clear that there are real analytic stakes involved in how we think about empire as distinct from other modes of governance. In speaking of Indigenous polities—the Comanche, the Lakota, or otherwise—the questions reduce to whether there is any analytic pay-off in describing some of them as empires and whether it is normatively appropriate to do so.

In this paper, I argue that the concept of empire can indeed help us to make sense of some Indigenous polities and their practices, but applying the concept to the Comanche and the Lakota would stretch the concept beyond any analytic utility. Both were powerful and influential polities, but neither of those traits suffices to establish that they were empires. The fact that they did not exercise even informal authority through intermediaries based in peripheral polities means that scholars can reasonably treat the Comanche and the Lakota as powerful but not truly imperial polities. Other Indigenous polities, however, may be appropriately labeled empires insofar as their modes of governance approximate an ideal typical empire.

This debate is more than some minor historiographical or definitional dispute. Empire has been such a prominent way of organizing political life that some go so far as to say that “for most of human history empires and their interactions shaped the context in which people gauged their political possibilities, pursued their ambitions, and envisioned their societies” (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 3-4). Yet, modern IR scholarship has largely elided the presence of empires. We write primarily of states or nation-states, among which the “great powers” typically receive great attention. If, as many argue, an ideal typical empire evinces different traits than other political formations, we are missing an important source of variation in political behavior, one that might unsettle notions of what comprises world politics and how we ought to study it (Barkawi 2010).

In the remainder of this paper, I will engage with some of the key criticisms that others have levied against Hämäläinen’s description of the Comanche and the Lakota as empires. I will then discuss the broader literature on empire and imperialism to explain how we might

productively conceptualize an empire. Drawing especially on work by Nexon and Wright (2007) and McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018), I will argue that neither the Comanche nor the Lakota ought not to be conceptualized as empires even though empire—when handled with care—can remain a helpful concept with which to understand a variety of polities across widely varying contexts, including some Indigenous polities.

### **Comanche and Lakota Empires?**

In arguing that we ought not to think of the Comanche and the Lakota as empires but that some Indigenous polities may be appropriately labeled empires, I am drawing in part on the literature on empire and imperialism and the work of other scholars who have disputed Hämäläinen's characterization. I will first outline the criticisms that others have levied against *The Comanche Empire* and *Lakota America*—some of which I believe to be valid but which, as I will argue, do not ultimately establish that we ought not to call the Comanche and the Lakota empires. I will then explain how the literature on empire and imperialism helps us to more definitively answer the question of whether we should call the Comanche and the Lakota empires.<sup>2</sup>

While Hämäläinen's studies of the Comanche and the Lakota have been widely lauded and frequently cited, many have disputed his characterization of these polities as having constituted empires. Even in otherwise positive reviews, scholars in History, Indigenous Studies, and beyond have questioned the utility of the "empire" label. The arguments as to why this label may not be appropriate generally fall along at least one of three different lines of critique. First, there is the argument that "empire" is a concept that ought not to be applied to Indigenous polities in which modes of governance were not understood by the members of those polities as being imperial. Second, others argue that labeling either the Comanche or the Lakota an empire overstates the degree of violence or acquisitiveness that characterized their relationships with other polities. Third and finally, some contend that labeling these polities empires is inappropriate and perhaps detrimental to the current needs of Indigenous peoples insofar as it creates a false equivalence between Native and European/American empires.

In the first line of critique, the label of "empire" ought not to be ascribed to polities that had entirely different ways of understanding the world and their relationship to it. Wade (2009, 241), for example, suggests that labeling the Comanche an empire is inappropriate because the Comanche themselves did not have imperial aims in mind. To label Comancheria, as Hämäläinen calls it, an empire, "is to give far too much credit solely to the Comanches," she writes. Similarly, for Rivaya-Martínez (2009, 257), "the 'imperial' nature of Comanche ascendancy remains open to debate. After all, 'Comanches were not...self-conscious imperialists' and they 'established their preeminence responding often in an ad hoc fashion to circumstances.'"<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Cashion (2009, 646) contends that "what the Comanches affected could not accurately be called an empire in the conventional sense of the word," though it is not

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<sup>2</sup> I take the position that we can and should treat Indigenous polities as comparable with other polities. The alternative—to position Indigenous polities as *sui generis*—would risk exoticizing Indigenous polities and would be a failure to recognize the fundamental question of how to organize itself and how to relate to others that any polity faces.

<sup>3</sup> Here Rivaya-Martínez is quoting Hämäläinen (2008, 352).

clear what he takes to be the “conventional” meaning of empire. As for the Lakota, Markowitz (2021, 191) argues that the reader loses some understanding of how the Lakota made sense of their world when Hämäläinen “pulls” particular practices “out of their cultural context”.<sup>4</sup>

In the second line of critique, perhaps applying the term “empire” to the Comanche and Lakota polities is mistaken because it overstates the degree of violence or acquisitiveness in their relationships with other polities and with nature. Of the Comanche, for example, Rivaya-Martínez (2009, 257) argues that Hämäläinen’s (2008, 223) depiction of them as having “transformed themselves into large-scale slaveholders” is “debatable”. Lee (2020, 333-334), meanwhile, notes of *Lakota America*, “Because he evaluates Lakotas through non-Indigenous standards that place inordinate value on male military and economic might, Hämäläinen often replicates old chronologies and assumptions about Lakotas and their history.” More specifically, for Lee, Hämäläinen’s depiction of the Lakota as significantly violent and hierarchical in their practices is “irrenconcilable” with the view of the Lakota presented in Estes (2019). Lee notes, for example, that, “Hämäläinen emphasizes dominance and extraction, while Estes stresses that Lakotas value just and proper relationships with human and non-human relatives. Hämäläinen writes of lands that ‘belonged’ to Lakotas and animals they considered resources, but Estes explains Lakota relations with the Black Hills, the Missouri River, and bison as alliances between kin.”

While the first two lines of critique focus on the analytic utility of the term “empire,” the third line of critique—one that I have only encountered in published reactions to *Lakota America*—focuses on the normative propriety and the political consequences of its use. If labeling a polity an “empire” today typically has a negative connotation, then describing the Comanche, the Lakota, or any other Indigenous polities as empires may perpetuate anti-Indigenous policies and attitudes. Mathias (2020, 121) straightforwardly states the concern: “In the past, histories of Lakota violence and westward expansion have been used to justify U.S. conquest and to undermine Lakota land claims.” If narratives of Indigenous violence or other findings about Native histories might be taken to absolve Euro-American settlers of any wrongdoing while impinging on present tribal claims, the stakes are high indeed.<sup>5</sup> Jameson Sweet (2021, 514) sharpens this critique—in describing the Comanche and the Lakota as empires, he argues that Hämäläinen presents “a justification at best, or an outright rejection at worst, of centuries of Euro American policies of genocide, land dispossession, removal, and forced assimilation of Indigenous people by inaccurately equating American Indian nations with Euro American imperial powers like France, Spain, or the United States.”

While these critiques are important in their own right, I do not believe they suffice to establish that neither the Comanche nor the Lakota constituted empires. With respect to the first line of critique, intent and practice do not always align in politics, and ascribing too much importance to intent (or one’s self-conception) can lead us to lose sight of governance as it was

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<sup>4</sup> Markowitz does not explicitly take issue with the “empire” label, but his criticism would seem to extend to it.

<sup>5</sup> For a more general discussion of this point, see Treuer (2019, 28-29). As he notes, “The rhetorical stance that Indians are merely one group of travelers with no greater stake than any other clashes with Indians’ cultural understand that we have always been here and that our control over our place in this world...has been deeply and unjustly eroded” (Ibid., 28).

actually practiced. It is not especially important if Comanche or Lakota individuals did not think of themselves as constituting empires if others experienced consequences of actions consistent with what we would label imperial behavior elsewhere. Indeed, both the United Kingdom and the United States were slow to recognize themselves as imperial, but this has no bearing on whether their practices actually were imperial (Go 2011, 41-45).

Second, as for the concern that Hämäläinen overstates the degree of violence or acquisitiveness in Comanche and Lakota practices to substantiate his imperial claim, this conflates tools of governance—or even everyday practices—with more general modes of governance. Indeed, the ideal empire from the core’s perspective is one that does not require the use of costly violence for its maintenance. Moreover, it is not clear from existing criticisms of Hämäläinen’s works if the Comanche and the Lakota were significantly more pacific than he describes. Intertribal relations before and after 1492 were sometimes violent: “At different points in time, indigenous peoples have warred with and displaced other indigenous peoples, such as the Iroquois moves on the Huron, the Blackfoot intrusions into Cree territory and Kwakwiltl incursions into Coast Salish lands” (Coates 2004, 9). This violence was often about the acquisition of resources or territory; one can hunt a buffalo or see an expanse of land as one’s own even while ascribing a familial or sacred meaning it. Nor is a community’s emphasis on “fulfilling the obligations of good relatives” entirely at odds with the possession of “imperialist and capitalist motives” (Lee 2020, 334). Indeed, differing treatment of in-group and out-group members is quite common across polities (Hammond and Axelrod 2006). As Lee (2019, 19) notes elsewhere in describing the intertribal politics of the Illinois River Valley, “Warfare could be brutal and devastating, but alliances created peace and prompted trade,” and Estes (2019, 67, 71) himself acknowledges that the Lakota “sometimes fought” or came into “conflict” with other Indigenous groups precisely to retain exclusive or privileged access to certain lands or resources.<sup>6</sup> It may be that Hämäläinen, Lee, and Estes would disagree on the frequency, intensity, or justice of Comanche or Lakota violence, or perhaps Lee and Estes would put Comanche and Lakota violence in a different category of violence as opposed to the genocidal and settler colonial violence of Euro-American polities. But it is not clear that any particular kind or amount of violence is distinctly imperial.<sup>7</sup>

Third, as for the concern that calling the Comanche and the Lakota empires is a sort of whitewashing of history, this is perhaps the most important line of critique in that it also appears to underlie the first and second lines of critique.<sup>8</sup> One might argue that it is only inappropriate to call the Comanche and the Lakota empires if doing so obscures more helpful ways of

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<sup>6</sup> Estes has publicly stated that he is writing a review of *Lakota America* that may further clarify their disagreements on factual and interpretive matters.

<sup>7</sup> If we accepted Thomas Jefferson’s framing of the United States as an “empire of liberty,” for example, would the implicit virtue of liberty mean that we ought not to treat the United States as an empire? I would think not. The ends toward which an empire or any polity orients itself do not change its mode of governance.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the first line of critique might be read as a historicist argument against the application of “empire” to Indigenous polities insofar as the term carries a particular meaning—one that arose from the Latin *imperium* that signified the authority of Roman officials (Donnelly 2006, 139)—that thereby contributes to this whitewashing, and the second line of critique seems to be concerned with the depiction of Native violence for similar reasons.

conceptualizing their polities—if the “empire” label does not actually help us make sense of Comanche or Lakota governance, there is no purpose in using it. But analytic utility aside, does Hämäläinen’s depiction of the Comanche and the Lakota as empires serve as “a justification at best, or an outright rejection at worst, of centuries of Euro American policies of genocide” (Sweet 2021, 514)? Such a reading would be at odds with elements of Hämäläinen’s narratives, including his descriptions of “Indian Removal” as “a brutal, sustained campaign of ethnic cleansing” (2019, 209), the Dawes Act as a federal abandonment of “its obligation to protect Indigenous property for a distinctively colonial land policy” (2019, 381), and Euro-American policies more generally as having produced “centuries of dispossession, population loss, and cultural genocide” (2008, 13-14). More broadly, justification of U.S. violence simply does not follow from the observation that the Comanche and the Lakota used violence in their relations with other polities or from the assertion that they constituted empires.<sup>9</sup> As Blackhawk (2006, 7-8) puts it in a study focused primarily on peoples of the Great Basin, “Such attention to violence [between Native peoples]...by no means discredits Ute and other tribal traditions that for strategic reasons emphasize the permanent and immemorial existence of each nation in their homelands.” A description of the ways the Comanche, the Lakota, and Indigenous peoples more governed themselves and related to others—in ways the modern reader might think just or unjust—does not imply a moral equivalence with polities that have governed themselves and related to others similarly, nor does it offer evidence for or against metaphysical claims a tribe may make about its origins.

Unfortunately, I simply cannot evaluate here what effect either of Hämäläinen’s works might have on public attitudes and/or policies vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples or on the beliefs of his average reader. Ultimately, however, while I do think we ought to keep open the option of using “empire” to describe Indigenous polities if that describes their practices of governance better than any alternative concept, I am in agreement with a key aspect of this critique—scholars ought to use the word “empire” carefully.

While I have argued that the lines of critique described above do not suffice to negate the proposition that the Comanche and the Lakota constituted empires, I do not believe that Hämäläinen’s books suffice to corroborate his claim that they were empires. Indeed, even relatively positive accounts of Hämäläinen’s work do not make clear the utility in thinking of the Comanche and the Lakota as empires. Graber (2021), for example, notes that, Hämäläinen “treads carefully in his use of the term ‘empire,’ distinguishing Lakota power over vast territory from European and American imperial practices that demanded cultural transformation of those they colonized”. This suggests a distinction between Indigenous empire and Euro-American empire in which only the latter involved coercive assimilation, though that sort of coercion—and, as I have suggested already, coercion more generally—is not unique to empires. In an effort to bring greater clarity to this debate, I now turn to a broader literature on empire and imperialism.

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Maass (2020, 83) notes, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs acknowledged in 2000 its role in “ethnic cleansing,” “destructive efforts to annihilate Indian Cultures,” and a “legacy of racism and inhumanity” for which it bears “moral responsibility”. That is, if a reader takes a sort of historical whitewashing from Hämäläinen’s works, there is much else that they will need to ignore, including the standards that American political elites set forward for themselves while repeatedly failing to meet them. See also Barder (2021, 71-93).

## Empire and Imperialism

The question of whether any given polity should be described as an empire ultimately turns on our definition of empire, yet definitional debates on this topic have been indeterminate. When dealing with contested concepts, scholars often describe a range of reasonable definitions after proceeding from one frequently invoked definition such as Max Weber's (1946 [1919]) definition of the state—"a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory"—or Barry Posen's (1984) definition of grand strategy—"a political-military, means-ends chain, a state's theory about how it can best 'cause' security for itself". This pattern replicates in discussions of empire, the first point of reference today typically being Doyle (1986, 19), for whom, "Empires are relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies." As with any definition, this one invites questions that generate further attempts to broaden or narrow the scope of the concept. Can a consensual relationship be imperial? How do we know political control when we see it? What constitutes effective sovereignty? Questions such as these have prompted the proliferation of definitions of "empire" that can become as broad as Hardt and Negri's (2000) depiction of a "smooth" world under globalized capitalism as constituting a singular, all-encompassing, capital-E Empire. Narrower definitions are typically close to Doyle's; for Donnelly (2006, 140), for example, an empire is "an extensive polity incorporating diverse, previously independent units, ruled by a dominant central polity". The definition that I find most helpful in differentiating empire from other modes of governance, however, comes from McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018, 194-195). An ideal typical empire, for them, is a hierarchical mode of governance characterized by a highly autonomous core, heterogeneous contracting with peripheral actors, and investment of authority from the center to its peripheral segments.

I will return to McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon's definition of empire to explain why I find it more useful than other definitions, but before doing so, I should address the connotation that "empire" often has. The use of "empire" as a shibboleth may be unproblematic in popular conversation, but for the purposes of discussing whether any given polity constituted an empire, I believe a more analytically neutral starting point is worthwhile. MacDonald (2009, 45) puts it well: "For some authors, empire is an analytical tool that sharpens our understandings of particular policies. For others, empire is a metaphor to discuss general themes of American hegemony or primacy. In many cases, empire is simply a provocative label used to arouse controversy." In focusing on empire as an analytical tool here, the question is whether describing the Comanche and the Lakota as empires sharpens our understanding of their practices or otherwise helps draw a reasonable contrast between them and other polities; it is not whether they were powerful or whether any particular practice of theirs was praiseworthy.

To return to McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon's (2018) understanding of empire, that piece actually builds on Nexon and Wright's 2007 article, "What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate". As Nexon and Wright discuss (2007, 253-254), an ideal typical empire is characterized by a core-periphery model in which dynamics of divide-and-rule prevail (as opposed to balancing), highly salient intersocietal relations (as opposed to interstate relations), and heterogeneous (as opposed to homogeneous) contracting that requires multivocal signaling

for its maintenance. This ideal type—with which no actual historical cases will align perfectly—is a purposefully abstract form that can draw our attention to salient differences between polities that approximate it more or less closely. Indeed, any actual system of governance may share elements of different ideal typical political formations—the United States, perhaps, displaying at once federal and imperial forms of rule—just as Weber (1946 [1919]) argued that rulers of any given political community will likely legitimize their power with reference to some combination of legal, traditional, and charismatic authority.

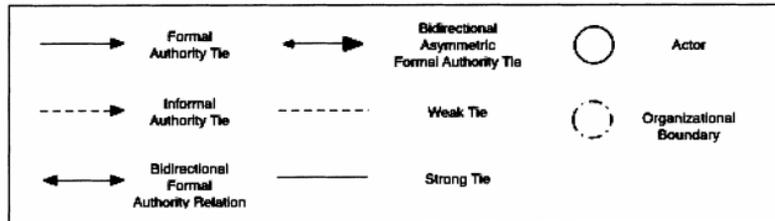
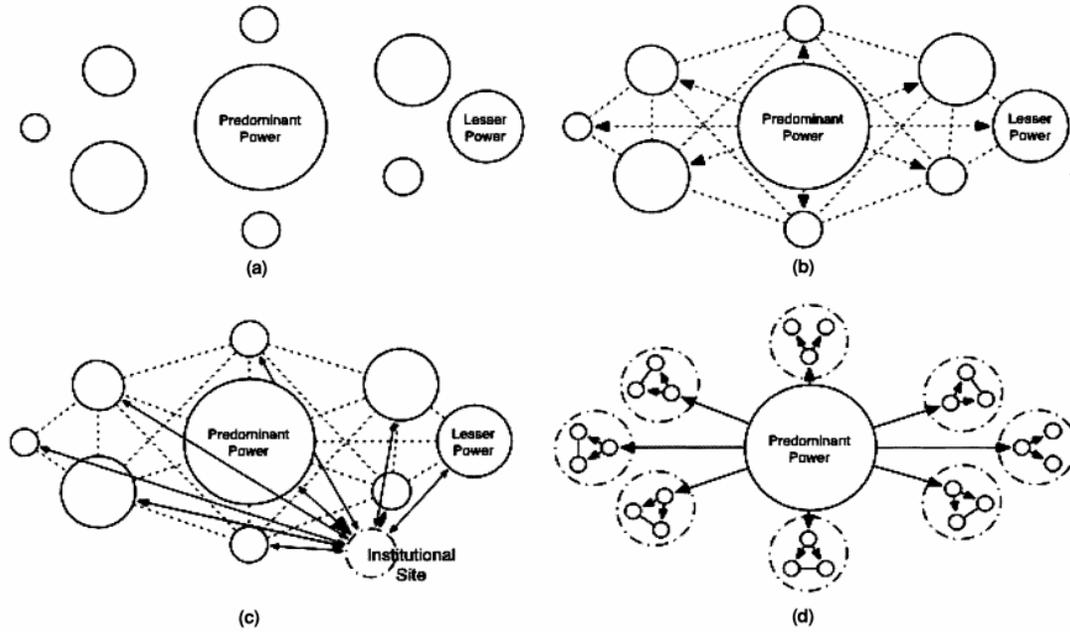
McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018, 193) retain the basic ideal typical framework of Nexon and Wright (2007), but they refine it in part by removing hegemony from their analysis (because, quoting Barder [2015], “hegemony ‘describes the mobilization of leadership’ to order relations among actors, not the forms that this ordering takes”). Furthermore, they add an axis for the direction in which authority flows (from core to periphery in an empire rather than the reverse in, e.g., a confederation). Central to Nexon’s (2009, 304) understanding of empire—which, as the citations above suggest, has shifted somewhat over time—is the notion of a rimless hub-and-spokes system with a core-periphery distinction in which local intermediaries play a major role. It is the capacity to keep peripheral actors entirely isolated from (or at least indifferent to or at odds with) each other that helps empires sustain their rule, and governing through local intermediaries helps to legitimize what might otherwise be seen as invasive foreign governance. Indeed, as Shirk (2017) makes clear through an examination of British anti-piracy practices and relations with its Atlantic colonies, the tightening of imperial control can spur connection—and ultimately rebellion—among peripheral actors.<sup>10</sup> For further reference, see Figure 1 and Figure 2 from Nexon and Wright (2007) and Figure 1 from McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018) below (here labeled as Figures 1, 2, and 3).

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Gailmard (2017) focuses on the local intermediaries in Britain’s American colonies—the colonial governors—to demonstrate the dilemmas the Crown faced in extracting revenue from colonies while allowing colonists to have a say in local administration, dilemmas that the Crown ultimately failed to resolve while providing the United States with a template for the separation of powers.

Figure 1. Nexon and Wright's Ideal Types

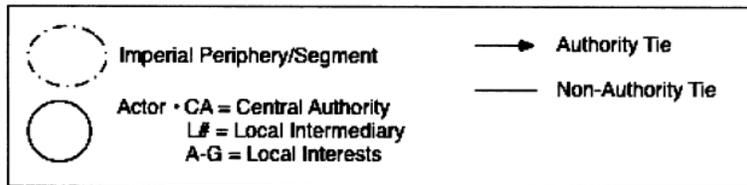
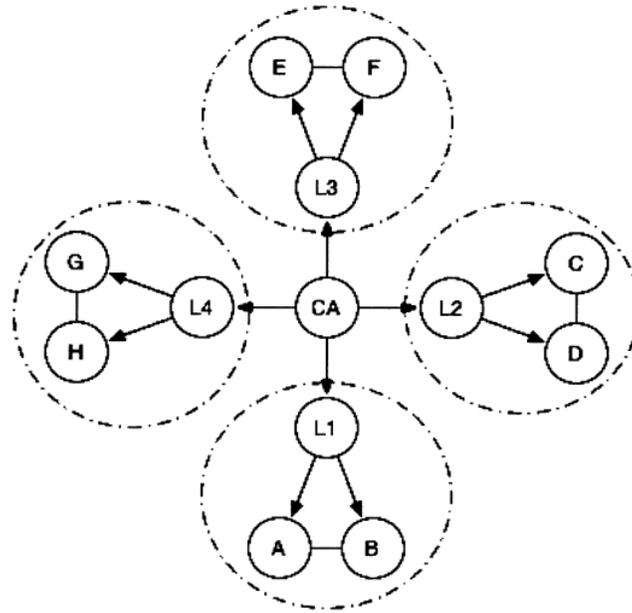
FIGURE 1. (a) Unipolar Anarchy, (b) Hegemonic Order, (c) Constitutional Order, and (d) Imperial Order



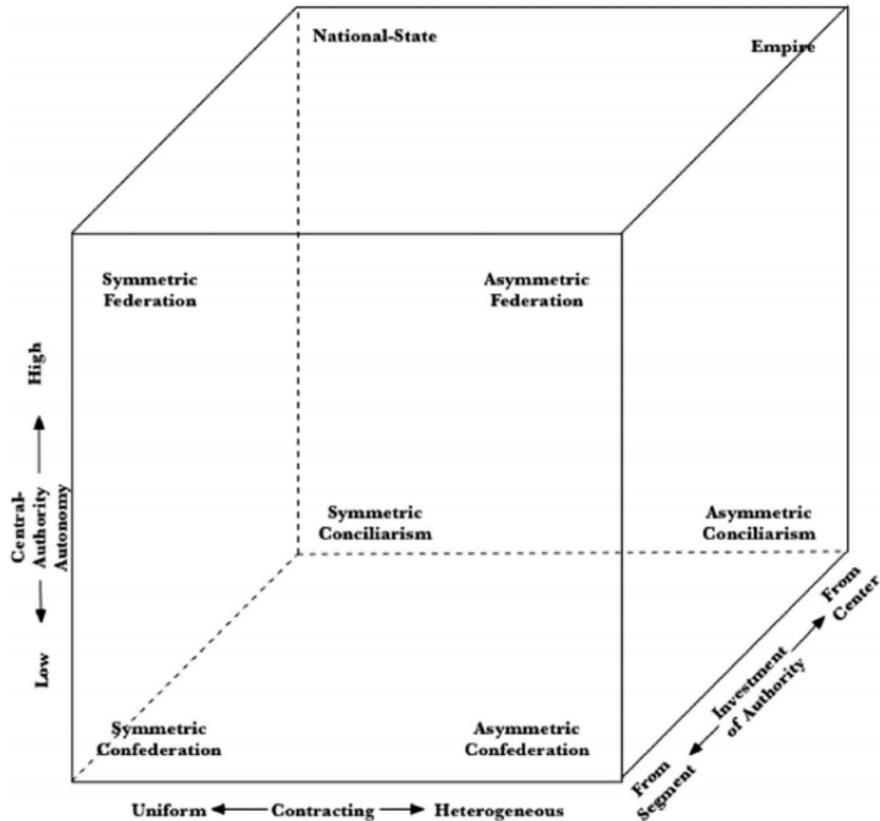
Note: To make figures 1b and 1c more legible, we have excluded some weak ties between minor powers.

Figure 2. Nexon and Wright's Ideal Typical Empire

FIGURE 2. An Empire with Four Peripheries



**Figure 3. McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon’s Ideal Types**



**Figure 1** Major governance forms salient to multiple levels of aggregation.

To elaborate on the utility of McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon’s conception of empire, I will first note that they offer something that captures every element of Doyle’s definition (“relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies”) while also providing greater analytic precision that helps to differentiate between empires and other modes of governance. Whether symmetric or asymmetric, for example, a confederation or federation could surely impose control on another society just as much as an empire, but those ideal typical modes of governance differ from those of empire along the axes noted above even as actual polities can have elements of different modes of governance. Indeed, one might contend that the United States under the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution—as a confederation and a federation, respectively—has also exhibited traits of empire. Thinking of the United States as both confederal or federal *and* imperial would only be helpful, however, if that captured some of the practices that are unique to those modes of governance. In empire’s case, that entails the maintenance of an ideally rimless hub-and-spoke system through local intermediaries, and central to the debate on American empire is the question of to what extent its practices have approximated that ideal type over time (MacKay 2019; Jackson 2020; Pampinella 2021; Yeo and Pettyjohn 2021).

McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon's conception of empire is also more clarifying than definitions of empire that have focused on territorial expansion or the extension of political control. Nugent (2008, xvi, 236), for example, argues that the United States has been comprised of "three successive empires"—one built across the continent, one built overseas, and one built on expanding market penetration—all of which "share an imperialistic outward thrust, a commitment to militarism, and beneath everything, a profound faith in the axiom of America's moral exceptionalism," the latter being what distinguishes American empire from other empires. Similarly, for Conroy-Krutz (2015), "In its most basic definition, empire refers to a state that exerts political power over an external territory and people," and while Frymer (2017, 1-10) offers no precise definition of empire—the word "meant different things to different people" in early American debates about the future of the country—it seems that the American taking of land claimed by others is what warrants calling the United States an empire for him. Likewise, Lutz (2009) argues that U.S. military bases constitute an empire insofar as they are related to "policies [that] aim to assert and maintain dominance over other regions," and Alessio and Renfro (2019) contend that purchasing and leasing territory in the Pacific Ocean has been a central practice in constituting American empire.

Others focus less on territorial acquisitions *per se* and more on power asymmetries in governance. For Watson (1992, 16), for example, empire entails "direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre," a conception that overlaps to an extent with those of Doyle (1986) and Nexon and Wright (2007). Immerwahr (2019, 10, emphasis his own) appears to see the United States as an empire because of the dominion exercised over peripheral polities that are not fully incorporated into the federation: "From the day the treaty securing independence from Britain was ratified, right up to the present, it's been a collection of states *and territories*. It's been a partitioned country, divided into two sections, with different laws applying in each." Similarly, for Burbank and Cooper (2010, 8), "Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over a space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people." Go (2011, 7-9) likewise notes that empires may differ in their internal composition and in how they exercise power, but their commonality manifests in "a sociopolitical formation wherein a central political authority (a king, a metropole, or imperial state) exercises unequal influence and power over the political (and in effect the sociopolitical) processes of a subordinate society, peoples, or space". Such definitions helpfully point to the differentiation between core and periphery in empires, but in many of the definitions of empire provided here, there remains an emphasis on expansion or the use of force more generally that neglects the extent to which other political formations engage in similar practices. Polities of all kinds have expanded or used violence to maintain unequal relationships externally and internally, but not all of these polities have been characterized by a core-periphery structure, rule through intermediaries, and heterogeneous contracting.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Factors such as these appear in many studies of archetypal empires (such as those surveyed by Doyle [1986] but with Rome as probably the most frequent point of reference). Not coincidentally, these archetypes of "empire" are often used as the basis of fictionalized empires. The Galactic Empires in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series and George Lucas's *Star Wars*, for example, represent empire as essentially an exercise in core management of peripheral actors through local intermediaries. These popular representations of empire need not constrain academic debate, but as Immerwahr (2019, 19) notes, the extent to which such narratives have been taken up in U.S. popular culture shows the extent to which the

In short, having power or influence—or trying to take advantage thereof—does not make a polity an empire. “Empire, properly understood, describes a form of political control exercised by such minor powers as Belgium and the Netherlands. The concept enjoys no intrinsic relationship with the distribution of power” (Nexon 2009, 302). Nor does ordering one’s “domestic” politics (especially in the imperial core) in a particular way mean that a polity cannot also be an empire. Republicanism and dictatorship, for example, offer principles of governance that are not mutually exclusive with those of imperial rule (Blachford 2019), and different modes of governance can coexist even if, e.g., the more clearly demarcated borders of modern states are sometimes at odds with more diffuse modes of imperial rule (Shirk 2017). But I must still address the central question: can the Comanche and the Lakota properly be considered empires?

### **Indigenous Empires?**

In both *The Comanche Empire* and *Lakota America*, Hämäläinen claims that the titular polities are empires while never providing a clear definition of empire. In this section, I will first discuss Hämäläinen’s ambiguous conception of empire as presented in these two cases before returning to Musgrave, McConaughey, and Nexon’s definition of empire to consider how well the evidence Hämäläinen provides supports his use of the term.

To begin with *The Comanche Empire*, Hämäläinen there depicts the Comanche as unselfconscious imperialists: “The Comanches depicted in this book were empire-builders who did not possess a grand imperial strategy and conquerors who saw themselves more as guardians than governors of the land and its bounties” (2008, 14). As already noted, I am not opposed to describing a polity as an empire even though members of that polity did not think of themselves that way. But what does empire-building look like for Hämäläinen? “[L]ike most viable empires, it was first and foremost an economic construction” centered on “an extensive commercial network” managed by “a centralized multilevel political system” (ibid., 2). Through a process of adaptation to equestrian life, alliance formation (with Utes most significantly), war for territory (with, among others, the Apaches), trading with European and Native polities alike, and sustained population growth, the Comanches became a central actor in the American Southwest (ibid., 24, 27, 31, 38-39). By the 1840s, Comanchería had “transformed itself into a dynamic, multiethnic imperial core that absorbed large numbers of voluntary immigrants from the weaker societies and radiated cultural influences across the midcontinent” (ibid., 142). The purpose of this power? “Comanche power politics were aimed at expanding the nation’s access to hunting grounds, trading outlets, tributary gifts, and slaves” (ibid.) Ultimately, for Hämäläinen (ibid., 441, n. 8, 9), this produces a picture of the Comanche as a polity akin to the Mongol “shadow empire,” a case that underscores that “imperial powers are better understood as intersecting, often shifting networks of power rather than as rigidly structured polities”.<sup>12</sup>

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American self-image is something other than imperial—the United States, he says, “even fights empires in its dreams”.

<sup>12</sup> Here Hämäläinen borrows from Barfield (2001) and Mann (2002), though recent examinations of this Steppe imperialism suggest that the Mongols were constituted more autonomously than the label of a

As for the Lakota, *Lakota America* similarly presents an empire without self-conscious imperialists. “Lakota America,” for Hämäläinen (2019, 3), was “an expansive, constantly transmuted Indigenous regime that pulled numerous groups into its orbit, marginalized and dispossessed its rivals—both Native and colonial—and commanded the political, social, and economic lift in the North American interior for generations.” In a pattern somewhat similar to that of the Comanche, the Lakota expansion into the North American interior involved pressure from conflict that drove them westward, the adoption of horses, alliance formation, and population growth once relatively secure in the interior (ibid., 6, 51, 56). In Hämäläinen’s telling, probably the most significant departure from the Comanche experience was the significant trade in pelts and firearms with the French and the Lakota’s relative isolation in the 1600s as they were generally the westernmost group of the Sioux (comprised of seven groups divided into three clusters—the Lakota, the Dakota, and the Yanktons-Yanktonais) (ibid., 26, 47).

Does the evidence Hämäläinen provides suffice to establish that the Comanche and the Lakota constituted empires? I have already noted that I do not believe it does, but to elaborate, I will return to McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon’s definition of empire. Again, their ideal typical empire is most notably characterized by a highly autonomous core, heterogeneous contracting with peripheral actors that the core governs through local intermediaries while aiming to keep them disconnected, and investment of authority from the center to its peripheral segments.

Did the Comanche maintain such a system? At least from the evidence Hämäläinen provides, the answer appears to be no. Comanche relations with other polities appear to have been more akin to those of typical international relations. There were reasonably clear distinctions between the Comanche and Native and European polities even as territorial boundaries remained unsettled and cultural boundaries remained permeable to other Indigenous peoples. Moreover, to the extent that the Comanche used their power to influence other polities or establish favorable terms in trade or treaties, this ultimately did not entail formal or even informal understandings of Comanche authority over those other polities. Indeed, Hämäläinen (ibid., 352) notes that the Comanche “did not seek to absorb other polities into a single imperial framework,” a trait he analogizes to the Mongols “and other nonsedentary imperial powers”. But absent any recognized ties of authority between Comanchería and local intermediaries in other polities or any clear divide-and-rule dynamics emanating from the core, the “empire” label clarifies little about Comanche behavior. A more appropriate label that Hämäläinen occasionally uses to characterize Comanche rule is “hegemony” (ibid., 90). The Comanches may have treated other Native and non-Native polities as “exchange partners, political allies, and metaphorical kin” while monopolizing the horse trade and thereby keeping others dependent on access to Comanche markets (Hämäläinen 2008, 168, 170), but that does not establish that they constituted an empire.

What is clear is that the Comanche kept themselves relatively secure and influenced others with their advantage in relative power. Hämäläinen notes, for example, that the Comanche language came to be the standard “language of exchange” in their sphere of influence: “When

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“shadow empire” suggests, which undermines the analogy to the Comanche. See MacKay (2020, 946-947) for a discussion of this revisionist literature.

people and societies meet and intermingle on frontiers, their choice of language is often an accurate gauge of relative power dynamics between them” (2008, 171). The relative wealth and security of Comanchería also attracted immigrants such that the polity became multiethnic in the way that many archetypical empires are, but even the closest relationships with other polities—with the Kiowas, Naishans, Wichitas, and Shoshones in particular (Ibid., 172; DeLay 2008, 47-48)—were non-binding alliances of convenience and cultural affinity more than hierarchical relations of authority.

Likewise, with respect to the Lakota, Hämäläinen provides much evidence that the Lakota were a powerful group that significantly influenced other polities in North America. But there is no evidence that other polities understood the Lakota to have formal or informal authority over them, nor do local intermediaries or divide-and-rule tactics feature in the analysis. Rather, the Lakota successfully combined equestrianism and firearms to take and maintain access to lands that allowed them to flourish, they thereby became more influential over time, and other polities adjusted their behavior accordingly. By the late 1700s, “Their enemies avoided them, their allies gravitated toward them, and those still outside their sphere cajoled them” (Hämäläinen 2019, 110). Recognition that another polity is stronger and therefore worth avoiding or due deference, however, does not suffice to establish that the polity is an empire.

Yet, Hämäläinen does maintain that the Lakota, like the Comanche, were an empire (ibid., 10). As with the Comanche, this understanding of the Lakota appears to hang on “expansionist ambitions” and the realization thereof (ibid., 77). An empire could plausibly have the sort of decentralized decision-making that Hämäläinen describes—the Sioux “had no overarching governing structure or leaders who could speak for all members of the alliance,” and they were “a headless polity—there was no institution for overall governance” (ibid., 16, 57). But in their alliances and enmities alike (the latter often characterized by raiding and/or coercive economic diplomacy), the Lakota exercised their power in ways that individuals on both sides appear to have understood as something other than the exercise of authority (ibid., 113). As with the Comanche, there were no clear local intermediaries through which the Lakota governed peripheral actors. Rather, of all the polities described in *Lakota America*, it is the United States—especially in its efforts to identify leaders among the Sioux with which it could bargain while assuming the Sioux to be its rightful subordinates (ibid., 216-219, 226-232)—that looks most imperial.

## Discussion

I have argued that existing criticisms of Hämäläinen’s work have failed to establish that the Comanche and the Lakota were not empires. Yet, I have also argued that the evidence Hämäläinen provides does not suffice to establish that they *were* empires. This leaves us, as I will delineate below, with two broader implications and two potential counter-arguments that I will address in this section.

First, while it may be the case that neither the Comanche nor the Lakota constituted empires, we ought not to dismiss the possibility that other Indigenous polities have constituted empires. Another definitional debate—on the contours of “Indigeneity”—would determine the number of polities that encompasses, but at the least, most definitions of Indigeneity would

include groups that made their homes in the Americas before 1492.<sup>13</sup> And even if neither the Comanche nor the Lakota were really empires, it would likely be defensible to label other Indigenous polities empires, the most likely cases probably being the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan polities. As Doyle (1986, 115) puts it, “The patrimonial societies of Aztec Mexico and Inca Peru, in which the sovereign owned the land and the people on it, had themselves established quasi-empires over the tribal peoples surrounding the Valley of Mexico and the Andean highlands.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the short-lived Aztec empire expanded through conquest that often left local elites in place after their losses on the battlefield so long as they paid tribute (Jones 2007, 183; Berdan 2017, 21), and so too the Inca (or Inka) and Maya varied in their means of incorporating new lands and peoples. This sometimes involved the wholesale incorporation of the new territory into the existing polity while, on the other hand, rule through local intermediaries continued elsewhere (Jones 2007, 184-185; LeCount and Yaeger 2010, 24-25, 37). Regardless of whether individuals in those polities used a word equivalent to “empire” to describe their modes of governance, the concept helps us to make sense of their practices and to distinguish them from other kinds of polities.<sup>15</sup> There may well be other Indigenous polities we might label empires, and doing so implies no vice or virtue, nor any judgment of current political aims sought by their descendants.

Second, the past decade has seen the coalescence of a community of Historical IR scholars that seeks to “broaden the historical imagination of IR” to help better explain the international political phenomena generally by going beyond the widely-studied twentieth-century Euro-American experience (de Carvalho, Costa Lopez, and Leira 2021; Lemke and Szarejko forthcoming). Much of the recent IR work on empire has come from scholars with an affinity for this sort of work, yet there is still much work to be done on empire. Some empires of the ancient world such as those based in Rome and China (Fettweis 2018; Hui 2005; Phillips 2011), more recent Eurasian steppe empires such as the Russians and the Ottomans (Neumann and Wigen 2018), and modern maritime empires such as Britain and the (perpetually debated) United States (Go 2011) have received much attention, but there remains less work in IR on polities that might be labeled empires in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, to say nothing of other Indigenous polities of the Americas and polities of the ancient world such as the Assyrians and Persians. Discussions of “regime type” in political science today largely focus on shades of democracy and autocracy, but there are broader modes of governance, empire included, into which further inquiry might help us to better understand how and why patterns of relations in world politics have varied across time and space (Ruggie 1993; Costa Lopez 2020). Indeed, for as much as the “rise and fall” of empires is a trope of academic and popular discourse alike, we still have little agreement as to whether there are any generalizable statements to be made on this topic. As Neumann and Wigen (2018, 252) put it, “A science of politics that does not consider how politics and polities may take a variety of forms, a historical sociology that

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<sup>13</sup> See Coates (2004, 1-15) for a discussion of this definitional debate.

<sup>14</sup> It is not entirely clear why these polities constituted only “quasi-empires” rather than “empires” to Doyle—perhaps it is, as he describes, the fact that those quasi-imperial cores “appear to have engendered no significant loyalties to themselves, or, more importantly, to their states” (Doyle 1986, 116).

<sup>15</sup> Hämäläinen (2008, 3) briefly compares the Comanche to the Aztecs, Incas, Powhatans, Iroquois, and Lakotas in highlighting a broader set of “imperialistic or quasi-imperialistic Native American polities,” though as I have argued throughout this piece, he is on firmer ground with some of those polities than others.

does not take into account an entire historical tradition or a science of International Relations that does not factor in all known types of relations between polities is simply not taking their *raison d'être* seriously.”

As for potential counterarguments to my own contentions here, one might argue that I have used an overly narrow definition of empire. To judge Hämäläinen’s work by his own standards, however, the reader would first need his own definition of empire. Moreover, as I have argued, other plausible definitions of empire that focus on power, asymmetrical relationships, or expansionism ultimately offer less analytic pay-off than the definition derived from McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018). If there is a definition of empire that could encompass the Comanche and the Lakota while also allowing for relatively sharp analytic distinctions between different kinds of polities such that we can better make sense of different political practices, I have not yet seen it.

Alternatively, perhaps I have missed Hämäläinen’s point. That is, his case for calling the Comanche and the Lakota is more than a descriptive or analytic move. Rather, it is also about staking a normative claim. By describing them as empires—as powerful polities that significantly shaped their respective social and natural environments—Hämäläinen suggests that he is performing an act of historiographical empowerment (2008, 2-7; 2019, 2-8). To call these polities empires is to give them their rightful place in the historical narrative; to do otherwise would be to deprive them of it. While I concur that Native nations—the Comanche and the Lakota in particular and such peoples more generally—as important political agents have indeed long been lacking from some of the most influential scholarship across disciplines, I would maintain that one need not stretch potentially useful concepts to accurately relay the power and experiences of such peoples.

## **Conclusion**

Empire can remain a useful concept with which to understand dynamics of governance across a broad array of contexts. It may not apply to the Comanche and the Lakota, but that does not mean that the term could not properly be applied to other Indigenous polities. However, it would remain most useful if academics would handle the term with more care. To apply “empire” to any polity deemed unsavory, powerful, influential, or deserving of more scholarly attention will ultimately strip the concept of any analytic purchase. If empire is to retain any utility in distinguishing between different modes of governance, authors of scholarly and public-facing work alike ought to seriously consider whether the term “empire” is helping them communicate anything of importance or whether it is simply a charged word that happens to sell books and generate citation-inducing controversy. A straightforward starting point would be for any academic authors talking about “empire” to ensure they define the term—even if they do not agree with my own privileging of McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon’s (2018) definition. This would go a long way toward clarifying the various empire debates across disciplines. Providing greater clarity and precision in our respective definitions of empire and other such contested concepts would allow scholars to spend less time on definitional debates and more time on the shared vocation of making sense of the world.

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