



PROJECT MUSE®

Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism ed. by Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman (review)

Erez Manela

Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Volume 47, Number 2, Autumn 2016,
pp. 246-247 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/627742>

United States. As theories of racial classification became discredited, however, scholars shifted their focus to a longer view of human history. New discoveries changed ideas about anthropology both inside and outside museums.

Redman's intent is to provide a context for the history of "bone rooms." He does not enter fully into the current debates surrounding such collections, nor into the ethical issues that surround them. The numbers of Native Americans alone that were in the collections are staggering—about 500,000 in U.S. museums alone and another half-million in European institutions. The early history of these remains was dramatic; their acquisitions were often motivated by ego and intellect and sometimes by an unethical desire to acquire more skeletal material than competitors could. Today, we tend to view the complex moral issues surrounding such procedures as repatriation more in terms of a craving for scientific knowledge than a mere lust for accumulating specimens. Whether such exhibits as *Body Worlds*, or the displays in Las Vegas casinos, are morally acceptable ways to treat deceased humans in the first place is another matter altogether. We have inherited a delicate legacy. How do we show respect, acquire new knowledge from human remains, and also redress past wrongs?

Bone Rooms is a beautifully written, meticulously documented analysis of a complex and little-known history involving scientists, human remains, and museum visitors. Redman provides us with the murky historical background that underlies our ongoing study of humanity. We could not ask for a better introduction to a sometimes shameful chapter in our scientific past, often fueled as much by pride and greed as by scientific inquiry. Both the general reader and any scholar working on human remains will enjoy this important book.

Brian Fagan
University of California, Santa Barbara

Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism. Edited by Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman (New York, New York University Press, 2015) 374 pp. \$89.00 cloth \$35.00 paper

Scholarship about the history of U.S. empire has proliferated of late, but this volume has an innovative contribution to make. As the title suggests, it aims to bring together U.S. labor history and imperial history, centering the experiences of workers across the U.S. empire while bringing a transnational perspective to U.S. labor history, traditionally focused on the domestic realm (or, in this context, the metro-pole). U.S. Empire, as the editors explain in their excellent introduction, is best seen not as a collection of territories but as a far-flung system of labor mobilization and coercive management. Following in the well-trodden footsteps of William Appleman Williams, the editors and contributors

frame U.S. empire primarily in economic terms, as an empire of capitalist expansion.¹ But unlike Williams and his early followers, who focused primarily on the machinations of the capitalists and their enablers in Washington, this volume seeks to recover the perspectives of the millions of workers who labored in U.S. capital's expanding domains.

This volume, it should be noted, does not present the U.S. empire as ubiquitous, all-powerful, or monolithic. Rather, its contributors, a group of scholars working at the cutting edge of this field, trace in fine-grained detail the contours of the racialized regimes of labor recruitment, circulation, and management, that were constructed to harvest the fruits of the tropics or to build an archipelago of U.S. military bases in the Pacific. This focus on imperial labor systems provides a useful framework for rethinking the relationship between labor and immigration histories, as workers circulating into and around the U.S. empire became part of a "multitiered system of labor relations" in which "domestic" and "foreign" spaces and workers were intimately entwined (19). This move also shifts the spotlight away from (usually white) industrial workers on which labor history has traditionally focused and turns it toward the agricultural laborers who predominated in colonial spaces, as well as the military labor (and attendant sexual work) that underlay the United States' growing global military complex. For these workers the empire represented, at different times and places, both opportunity and oppression, and their responses to it ran the gamut from calculated collaboration to outright resistance.

This volume focuses on the circum-Caribbean and Pacific spaces that are the typical historiographical stomping ground of writings on United States empire. Hence it has little to say about such crucial regions as Southeast Asia (besides the Philippines) or the Middle East. (Has there been an industry more central to U.S. power in modern times than petroleum?) Moreover, despite the volume's ambition to dethrone 1898 as the fulcrum of U.S. imperial history, most of the chapters hew to the traditional timeframe of the historiography of U.S. empire, from the end of the Civil War to the 1930s, leaving readers to wonder what happened to those labor regimes, and the power structures that underlay them, in the post-World War II era. Nevertheless, the book succeeds in offering a rich, illuminating view of colonial labor within the U.S. empire. It is recommended to anyone interested in the history of U.S. regimes of labor and migration as well as in the history of the United States in the world more broadly.

Erez Manela
Harvard University

1 See, most notably, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1959).