

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Cox, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022, 204 pp.

With an unprecedented position in the history of international relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States and its power preoccupied pundits and historians alike. In the last 30 years, they tried to analyse the sources of American power, its limits, and even its possible decline. The multiple crises that put American hegemony to the test after the Cold War created an ongoing debate between those with a declinist position, who foresee the inevitability demise of American power, and those with an optimistic view, who continue to believe in the dominance of U.S. global leadership.

In his latest book, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Michael Cox traces America's actions and behaviour in the international arena from the end of the Cold War to the dawn of Joe Biden's presidency. Emeritus Professor of International Relations Michael Cox spent his entire academic career writing about the most pressing issues facing the world scene, from the relations between the superpowers during the final years of the Cold War to U.S. foreign policy and the Troubles from Northern Ireland. Cox is the author and editor of several books, including *Superpowers at the Crossroads* (1990); *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: superpower without a mission* (1995); *A Farewell to Arms: from long*

war to long peace in Northern Ireland (2000); *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives* (2009). In *the Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Cox proceeded with his tradition of studying the current foreign policy challenges and put together a collection of essays that explore American foreign policy as it is searching for purpose in increasingly uncertain times.

Trying to explain why, despite the United States' great power, successive presidents since Bill Clinton have found the world so difficult to manage, Michael Cox examines the major turning points from the post-Cold War history that questioned the invincibility of American power. Divided into five parts, the book analyses how presidents such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden addressed the many challenges that emerged during their presidential tenures.

Concisely, the author investigates the critical junctures that had an impact on the United States' position in the world: America's unipolar moment after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, the emergence of revisionist powers like China and Russia and their "axis of convenience," the crisis of globalization and the rise of populism. Using various sources to assess the strategies and miscalculations that the U.S. leaders made, Cox underlines the role of the individual in foreign policy decision-making, the ideological thinking of every U.S. President making a difference in how American power was projected around the world.

Beginning the historical narrative with the Wilsonian liberal Bill Clinton, the author places the reader into the post-communist era when the U.S. had to rethink its grand strategy. Elected President at a moment of both triumph and

uncertainty for America and the world, Bill Clinton acknowledged that his mission was to renew the U.S. leadership. In a more globalized world, Washington needed a policy that would lead to international stability and global prosperity. Therefore, he started to expand the U.S. economy in world trade, promote democracy, and facilitate a Western-style transition in post-communist Russia. However, as Michael Cox shows in his book, Clinton's strategies raised some problems. His "geo-economics" caused a trade deficit and an uncritical attitude towards globalization. The democracy promotion revealed the limits of U.S. influence and collided with other American interests, and his approach toward Russia failed to secure a liberal democracy there.

Despite these missteps, America had never felt so secure. However, this sense of security faded away with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bringing the concepts of empire and imperialism to his analysis, Cox argues why the U.S. is an empire and how President George W. Bush adopted an imperialist doctrine after 9/11. The "war on terror" transformed America into a more assertive power, with a propensity to take unilateral action when it considers necessary.

In 2008, Washington struggled with a reputational crisis and a financial crash. Debates about a possible post-American world began to show up as a power distribution unfolded on the international scene. The rise of China began to challenge American global leadership increasingly. Assuming office in this context, Barack Obama put forward a strategy of engagement with both allies and adversaries. He understood that American power was limited and could no longer act as the "world's policeman." Instead, the U.S. had to rely on "smart power" to reassert its global influence. His internationalist view yielded several achievements during his administration, including the New START Treaty, the

Iran nuclear agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Nevertheless, his setbacks in Libya and Syria, the weakening of the transatlantic partnership, and the resurgence of an aggressive Russia after he sought to reset the relations between Washington and Moscow left a mixed legacy.

Trying to discover what brought Donald Trump to the White House, Michael Cox reviews the wave of populism that swept Europe and the U.S. in 2016 and the narratives behind this concept. He suggests that “populism was and is very much an expression in the West of a sense of powerlessness of ordinary citizens and the Western leaders”¹. Promising to restore control to the people and to make “America great again,” Donald Trump won the presidential elections and triggered a “political earthquake” worldwide. By exploiting the many divisions in American society and creating a sense of chaos, Trump accelerated the academic and policy debates about the U.S. decline.

The book's last part also shows President Joe Biden's first foreign policy decisions after he took office. Biden re-engaged with global organizations and allies, willing to show that the U.S. is prepared to lead again. Although the apparent return to liberal internationalism was a relief for America's traditional allies after the more isolationist turn during the Trump administration, the continuing domestic deep divide put U.S. power in danger.

More of an optimist regarding the future of the U.S. position in the world, Michael Cox argues in his book that for all the crises that faced the American power in the last decades, Washington remained the only titan on the international scene because of its economic, military, and diplomatic advantages.

¹ Michael Cox, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022, p. 133

Nonetheless, the profound polarization within the U.S. could imperil its grand strategy.

Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden is a valuable contribution to U.S. foreign policy studies. Highlighting the intersection between domestic and foreign policy and how American power evolved with every presidential administration, Michael Cox provides the readers with a balanced assessment of the United States' role in the world.

Ștefania-Teodora Cocor

Mihai Manea, *Consiliul Europei. Politică și predarea istoriei în Europa*, București, Editura Nomina, 2018, pp.176

Since its creation in 1949, the Council of Europe has promoted human rights and freedoms, consolidated democracy, political dialogue, and cooperation between states in the social, economic, and cultural sectors. Intending to have a united Europe, in which the inclusion and acceptance of diversity are some of the critical elements in the growth of the individual, the Council of Europe has been involved throughout the second half of the 20th century, continuing until now in the development of different levels of education in Europe, especially in teaching history. The importance that the Council of Europe has given to history as a subject in European schools is motivated by history's ability to influence the masses. Depending on its nuances, history can be a tool for division or unity among nations and peoples. Considering this feature of history, the Council of Europe understood that having a society that knows the European identity and finds itself in it, history becomes a mandatory discipline within the education systems and fundamental for developing European citizens.

Mihai Manea, professor of history, PhD in the history of International Relations and European studies, member of the National History Commission, and president of the Romanian History Teachers Association (APIR - Clio), is the author of scientific, systematic works and articles in periodicals dealing with various aspects of history.

His work, "*Consiliul Europei. Politică și predarea istoriei în Europa*", aims to identify and highlight the Council of Europe's notable efforts in teaching history at the European level. Reiterating the need for history, a field that has

become vast following its constant research, to be studied for people to acquire knowledge and understanding about themselves and others, the author appeals to all the meetings, seminars, projects, and symposiums supported by the Council of Europe during the 20th century and until now.

The paper investigates the evolution of the requirements of history teaching according to time and social, political, economic, etc. circumstances, observing the adaptability to which the discipline of history has been subjected during seven decades. Thus, starting from history's transnational and international character, it becomes a priority factor in developing young people who get historical and civic education through it.

In the book's first part, the author analyzes the connection between history and political science, demonstrating that, in its interdisciplinarity, history defines political science. At the same time, in an interdependent relationship, history takes shape and meaning thanks to political sciences. History creates a broad palette of study, and through its connection with the other social sciences, there is an interest in researching fields such as economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. The author continues by presenting the constant concern of the Council of Europe about the way history is taught in schools, stemming from history teachers' propensity for subjectivism. Until 1989, the Council of Europe was concerned with transforming history into the discipline taught to unite people, develop inclusive mindsets, and be open to diversity and understanding. By creating joint working groups between pre-university and university education teachers, researchers, and specialists, the Council of Europe led to the rapprochement of different cultures and ways of seeing history to reduce subjectivism, capable of arousing animosity among young people. With

the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the Council of Europe saw the need to teach history in favor of spreading and consolidating democracy in the states now on this path.

The 1990s are described as focusing on the concept of national and European identity, aiming to make a connection between the two. That is why, during this period, through its meetings, the Council of Europe seeks to treat sensitive or controversial topics of history and popularise the idea of European history and the role of the history teacher to preserve truthfulness and objectivity in reporting facts. At the same time, in understanding historical events, it is proposed to use a multiperspective approach, a method by which students are familiar with multiple perspectives by analyzing historical sources and including them in the historical narrative. History teaching is divided in these years by strictly chronological themes, such as the Bolshevik Revolution or the Holocaust, to align these events' information and teaching methods without being radicalized by subjective factors. Also, the Council of Europe facilitates the transformation and integration of former communist states into the democratic vision. It regulates the study of history (especially in textbooks) - from a deeply ideologized discipline to one of multiple perspectives.

In the last part of the work, the author, Mihai Manea, reviews the documents issued by the Council of Europe due to its projects, including the views on education and history teaching in the 21st century. The 3rd millennium brings new challenges to the topic under discussion - the intensification of globalization and interdependence, terrorism and radicalism, and migrations or digitalization. All this leads to the need to readjust the history teaching process according to the need for intercultural dialogue, moving towards studying

history from a social and cultural point of view. The history teacher is thus seen as an "agent of the formation of the young generation," people with an analytical spirit and critical thinking, inclusive and open to diversity. In the 21st century, such training becomes possible thanks to new technologies and the multiplication of sources of analysis, a broadening of the spectrum of history, interest is developing in the study of the role of women in history, the history of diversity in which cultural differences are also promoted. After 2010, the Council of Europe focused on history, which was taught as a sum of changes and interactions between people and cultures. History is seen as a discipline of thinking rather than memorization.

Even though the evolution of history in European schools has been transformative and adapted to the requirements, the author mentions that, in some respects, the Council of Europe has maintained its position on some ideas. National history can only be studied within European and universal history. The discipline must present events from all points of view (even social, economic, and cultural). Moreover, history is also essential in direct relation to democratic citizenship, with the development of an inclusive mentality, and promotes, above all, the debate and the exchange of ideas between peoples.

Maria-Corina Preda

Emilio Gentile, *E subito fu regime. Il fascismo e la Marcia su Roma*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2012, pp. 319

The "March on Rome" historiography has been marked by deeply conflicting interpretations, reflecting this major historical event's complexity and antagonistic nature. In the book *Le origini del fascismo in Italia. Lezioni di Harvard*, the historian Gaetano Salvemini had shown in the 1940s that the event was little more than an "opera buffa," an absurd display without a revolutionary substance. This perspective portrays the March as a mere theatrical staging, a calculated spectacle orchestrated to create the illusion of a grassroots uprising.²

Over the decades, the interpretation of the March on Rome has undergone a fascinating evolution. Early interpretations, particularly from the 1960s, focused on the political negotiations that paved the way for Fascism's rise. Many scholars viewed this event as Mussolini's masterpiece, portraying him as the central figure and mastermind behind it. This perspective not only suggested that his strategic skills were crucial to the event's outcome but also that the military actions of the Fascists were considered somewhat secondary—being a decorative element rather than a primary force, as argued by Renzo De Felice.³

In the 1970s, Adrian Lyttelton, in his work "The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919–1929," distanced himself from De Felice's political interpretation and established a new direction for analysis. He described the events of October 1922 as a classic example of *psychological warfare*. The fascists seized control of provincial centers by targeting key locations such as prefectures, police

² Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo. Lezioni di Harvard*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1961, p. 611.

³ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista I. La conquista del potere, 1921-1925*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966.

headquarters, railway stations, communication hubs, and anti-Fascist institutions. Their strategy combined military and political tactics, including the calculated threat of violence and the display of popular support, to intimidate the government and persuade it to take power.⁴

An expert on Italian fascism, Emilio Gentile emphasizes in his work *E fu subito regime. Il fascismo e la Marcia su Roma* that the violence associated with the strategic negotiations surrounding the March on Rome was not incidental but a crucial aspect of the Fascists' broader political strategy. Emilio Gentile downplays the significance of the negotiating faction and Mussolini as the sole architect behind the success of the March on Rome. Instead, he highlights the crucial role played by the *squadristi* (members of the Fascist squads) and their leaders, such as Italo Balbo and especially Michele Bianchi, the secretary of the National Fascist Party (PNF), in driving the decision to undertake this insurgent action. He asserts that the squadrist element of fascism was 'the dominant force of fascism'; without it, maneuvering, negotiation, or individual talent for seizing opportunities would not have enabled fascism to come to power (p.133). Gentile notes, "Historically, the militia party instigated the March on Rome; the leader and the secretary merely interpreted its will". (p.134)

The "March" on the capital was, in fact, only the concluding act of a prolonged assault on state power conducted by the fascists starting in 1921. The fascists always followed the same script: they would move en masse into a provincial capital, often mobilizing men from surrounding regions, occupy public offices and government headquarters, railway stations, telephone

⁴ Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919–1929*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 71.

exchanges, and post offices; they would storm military barracks, seize weapons, order prefects and military commanders to hand over power to the leaders of the fascist squads, destroy the offices of rival parties, and dismiss local administrators. During the "biennio rosso" (the "two red years") of 1919-20, the violent surge of political fanaticism and class struggle made Italy appear to be a country on the brink of civil war.

The fascists recognized the military limitations of their militia. However, the "March on Rome" was not just a rhetorical gesture. To influence political negotiations, the insurrection relied on the squadristi mobilizing in cities under Fascist control. They occupied public offices and created widespread confusion, disrupting the government's response. This strategy aimed to facilitate the advance of Fascism toward the capital indirectly, as a direct military confrontation was deemed unfeasible. Furthermore, ongoing negotiations helped strengthen the movement's position, ensuring its success without needing a forceful takeover of Rome.

The violence associated with the fascist movement and the capitulation of the Italian state played significant roles in its success. The violent attacks by fascists against political opponents, along with the authorities' tolerance of such actions, created the impression that fascism was a force for order capable of restoring stability amid social chaos. Gentile's work highlights the importance of examining the interplay between political forces, societal dynamics, and the authoritarian aspirations that defined the fascist movement during its formative years. By focusing on this crucial period, we can gain deeper insights into how fascism transformed from a fringe movement into a dominant political force, reshaping Italy's future and influencing other authoritarian regimes across

Europe. Considered a temporary phenomenon born out of the war, Italian fascism quickly evolved into a mass movement with its ideological goals and structure. It gained influence beyond mere reactionary violence, establishing itself as a force capable of reshaping Italian political and social systems. Its rise captured attention across Europe, becoming an attractive model for other authoritarian movements and spreading its influence beyond Italy's borders.

Gentile said that the novelty of fascism led most opponents and observers to view it as a fleeting movement, lacking its ideology, program, social base, unity, or cohesion—merely a contingent result of provincial groups united by armed struggle against proletarian parties and organizations. Once its role as a reactionary militia serving the bourgeoisie ended, the fascist movement expected to wither due to a lack of inherent vitality or disintegrate from internal conflicts. Few recognized that fascism was not a temporary phenomenon, nor just a mercenary militia against the proletariat, but a mass movement with its own autonomy and ambitious goals. The "March on Rome"—a carefully orchestrated event during which the fascists paraded for over five hours through the streets of the capital in front of Mussolini—was essentially a confirmation of a completed fact: the capitulation of the liberal state to fascist control.

The central thesis of Gentile's book is that the ascent of fascism to power was not the product of compromise, but it was the profound capitulation of the liberal state to the insurrectional coercion of an armed faction, which proffered nothing more than nebulous and ambiguous assurances of reinstating constitutional legality in exchange for its ascendancy. The triumph of the "March on Rome" crystallized the fascists' conviction that they were the exclusive bearers of the national will, thus endowing them with the audacity to govern the nation

beyond the confines of the law, the constitutional order, and the parliamentary system.

Moreover, the offensive launched against the liberal state by fascism from peripheral territories was already present in the work of Angelo Tasca, who insightfully noted that the "idea of a "March on Rome" represented "the natural outlet of the fascist 'offensives' that, increasingly extensive, started from already conquered territories for new annexations." He highlighted how the blackshirts effectively occupied the entire Po Valley and much of Central Italy—Tuscany, Umbria, and the Roman countryside. While Tasca ultimately perceived the "March on Rome" as a mere "parade," his analysis sheds light on constructing a counter-state, alternative fascist sovereignty that emerged primarily in provincial areas.

More recently, Giulia Albanese has emphasized the importance of connecting the events in Rome with the simultaneous actions occurring in numerous cities across Italy. She argues that these various "acts of force" significantly influenced "the geography and impact of the march itself," which challenges the traditional narrative about this pivotal historical moment. This perspective encourages a broader understanding of how fascism consolidated power by considering local and national contexts. Albanese also stated that Mussolini's first government marked the inception of dictatorship in Italy, signifying the decline of liberal institutions.⁵

Gentile argues that the transfer of power to fascism was an unprecedented event, not just a simple change of government. For the first time

⁵ Giulia Albanese, *La marcia su Roma*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2014.

in the history of parliamentary states, a newly appointed prime minister announced that his rise to power represented an irreversible moment, marking the beginning of a revolution intended to last for decades. Furthermore, it was unprecedented for a prime minister of a parliamentary government to lead a state-funded party militia prepared to suppress anyone opposing the fascist regime and its "inevitable developments."

To understand why the political outsiders known as fascists—whom Mussolini called the "gypsies of politics"—were able to seize power in 1922 and establish a twenty-year single-party regime, we need to broaden our perspective. Instead of focusing solely on the event of the "March on Rome," we should examine the underlying dynamics of how they acquired power. This includes shifting our attention from the capital city to the country's periphery. By doing so, we can gain a clearer understanding of the military aspects of the "March on Rome" and the political maneuvers that supported it.

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