# Empire Before Nationhood

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Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Harvard Univ. Press 2012).

One of the challenges of reviewing Eliga Gould's international history of the American Revolution, *Among the Powers of the Earth*, is that the book makes you feel like you're looking at history through a 360-degree lens. A legal, diplomatic, and intellectual history spanning from the mid-18th century to the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the book situates the Revolution in the context of the evolving law of nations in a strikingly rich and detailed account. Everything, it seems, is in there.

Partly it's Gould's writing style. Rich in narrative and streamlined in argument, its movements back and forth between the two are unlabored.

Partly it's Gould's obvious love of the stories he tells. He writes as if he had been there and remembers it all, and having seen it firsthand, wants to sit down with you and tell you all about it. When he gets going, you feel like the historical actors are his neighbors and the plotlines are the latest gossip in town.

And partly it's Gould's ideas, which are as capacious as his narrative. But before I turn to the one that I found most intriguing, I should say that if I overstate the case, I will do a disservice to the book, which among its many strengths boasts that of not overstating its case. So let me catch my breath and say, first, that Gould's book makes an important contribution to the literature on the international legal history of the American Revolution and Founding era, and second, that there's one thing about the book I confess I don't "like lots," and that is the phrase "treaty-worthy." As in, Gould argues that in order truly to achieve the status of an independent nation, Americans had to prove that they were "treaty-worthy." Apart from being slightly too clunky to do justice to the rest of Gould's writing, the phrase feels to me as if it fails to capture—just barely, but still—one of Gould's own most compelling insights: namely, that to be treaty-worthy, a nation had to be more than treaty-worthy. To be treaty-worthy, that is, a nation had to be an empire.

Gould alludes early on to Americans' "drive to be accepted as a treaty-worthy nation in Europe." (P. 11.) What he then shows is that Americans' drive for acceptance succeeded only when it was no longer up to Europe whether to accept or not accept. It would be a mistake, that is, to believe that Americans became a treaty-worthy nation when European powers finally "accepted" them as such. Not only would formal recognition, while itself a crucial step toward independence, not suffice; neither would outside acceptance of the United States' "treaty-worthiness." This is because, as Gould shows, treaty-worthiness is ultimately accomplished not by acceptance but by imposition: upon external powers and upon internal minorities. Gould ably sheds light on the subjugation of Native Americans and blacks by showing how it was essential to the United States' ascent into treaty-worthiness. The United States increasingly gained control over its own extended domain and, eventually, made clear that it was willing and able to project its power beyond its boundaries as well as within them. Ultimately, this was what it took to make it a treaty-worthy nation, in Gould's persuasive account. But if that is the case, then the difference between a treaty-worthy nation and an empire would seem to be no difference at all.

With this insight into the imperial preconditions of nationhood comes a curious twist in periodization. It is true, as one reviewer puts it, that Gould "extend[s] the founding moment beyond the 1770s and 1780s in both directions," showing "a real continuity between the new nation and its imperial antecedent."[1] But does Gould do more? If one takes seriously the idea that it took an empire to make a treaty-worthy nation, then one is left wondering whether the "imperial antecedent" to the "new nation" that Gould is writing about isn't really the newly formed United States itself: at first a weak and overextended federation tenuously asserting its sovereignty over core and peripheral territories alike (what's not imperial about that?), and only later, as a result of its gradually amassing, consolidating, and demonstrating its power, a nation with a credible claim to treaty-worthiness.

1. James E. Lewis Jr., H-Diplo Roundtable Book Review, H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, Apr. 01, 2013.

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