

## Empires, Corporations and the Second Scramble for Africa

At the start of the twenty-first century some state and corporate actors sought to acquire large chunks of territory for a variety of purposes including the pursuit of additional arable land to help with food production. This was of special concern for nation-states, such as Saudi Arabia, which were dependent on food imports.<sup>1</sup> Corporations also initiated such endeavours, either to develop reliable future investment returns or in response to new political directives, such as European Union policies requiring that ten percent of all fuel for transport be derived from biofuel crops.<sup>2</sup> In addition to food and energy security, territorial acquisitions were initiated “for exploitation of land-based resources of timber and minerals.”<sup>3</sup> Whilst some of the states involved, namely Bahrain, China, Egypt, India, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and the UAE saw this development “as an innovative long-term strategy to feed their people at a good price,”<sup>4</sup> and as not being “socially controversial,”<sup>5</sup> not everyone agreed. Many of the proposed transactions were African-centred and in regions with their own food shortages, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Consequently, a number of critics derided the deals as “land grabs” or “modern enclosures.”<sup>6</sup>

These practices were not confined to Africa, however. Intriguingly, a few of the states involved in land leasing, specifically India and Malaysia, were themselves also “target countries of large-scale acquisitions.”<sup>7</sup> There were agendas for land purchases and leases beyond just food or energy security too. The tiny Kiribati Islands in Oceania achieved headlines over plans by a Russian millionaire to lease a number of atolls to establish a base for a new Romanov Empire.<sup>8</sup> Kiribati in turn had purchased in 2014 some twenty-four square kilometres of land on the island of Vanua Levu in Fiji to secure a future home for its peoples as sea levels rise in the wake of global warming. The United States had also secured a few years earlier a new lease over Kwajaleen Atoll in the Marshall Islands as a forward military base.<sup>9</sup> Nor were developed regions exempt from such initiatives, with a Chinese business venture attempting to purchase and/or lease a large chunk of northern Iceland for the creation of an up-scale tourist development. Critics of the Icelandic deal suggested that

this “might only be phase one of a burgeoning strategic Chinese presence in the region” given “the economic potential of the Arctic as global warming makes the region more accessible.”<sup>10</sup> As the land being purchased or leased in all of these various territories was generally less costly than in more heavily urbanised nations, and as the peoples living in these rural locales were envisioned as offering a cheaper supply of labour, much ink was spilled on what were sometimes being described as the new “banana republics”<sup>11</sup> and/or as “a high-stakes game of real-life Monopoly.”<sup>12</sup>

While these deals range in size and scope and have many seemingly disparate features, they are all part of a long tradition of states and their corporate allies leasing land to acquire resources and build empires. Although each deal merits investigation and a full accounting of the economic and other details would bolster the literature, this work focuses on one outcome—that is, the attempted acquisition of land—in the context of empire and in one specific case. Recognising that “[s]cholars, policy practitioners and activists rarely agree on how to describe” such developments, this analysis thus contributes to the debate by exploring such a development in the context of discussions surrounding definitions of empire.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, this study argues that theories of empire must move away from the notion of large states expanding by force and needs a big tent approach that includes all permutations of empire. This work specially addresses the possibility of state and corporate collusion that leads to empire. By taking this tack, the paper argues that such processes are reminiscent of the ways by which European states and their corporate subsidiaries and/or proxies carved out “concessions” or charters in nineteenth century China and Africa. The interaction of states and their corporate allies is certainly not new, but it does spotlight how capitalistic arrangements sometimes buttress imperial projects. However, the interplay between states and corporations produces a type of opacity that can make it less clear that this is an imperial process. With so much of the literature skeptical of the idea of modern empires any work that demonstrates that imperial processes, especially more hidden ones like those involving corporations, is noteworthy. This work, in addition to employing an array of published secondary literature addressing the history of specific empires and some of the theoretical debates surrounding the subject matter, takes as its cue media, political, academic and non-governmental organisation (NGO) commentators deriding land-buying practices as “colonialist,”<sup>14</sup> accusing the companies and states involved as “behaving like an imperial power,”<sup>15</sup> and as undertaking “ecological imperialism.”<sup>16</sup> Given the size, nature and consequences of some of these agreements the Head of the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organisation not surprisingly warned of “neo-colonialism.”<sup>17</sup>

## Non-State Empire Builders?

It is sometimes tempting to frame these land deals as “regular” economic transactions. In an era where there is less incentive for states to trumpet their empire and there is pressure to

disavow imperialism, framing these processes as everyday/normal transactions can be very attractive. Nonetheless, empires formed by economic processes—for example, collusion with corporations to purchase or lease lands—are not automatically benign or somehow less violent than easier to recognize imperiums. Wolf notes that and taking of land can also be seen as an act of genocidal dispossession resulting in death and violence.<sup>18</sup> This analysis suggests, then, that such land deals might also reflect a long-standing, significant and potentially fatal characteristic of empire building by way of purchase and/or lease, albeit one which has been too frequently overlooked in the theoretical literature. Such a practice is known as “monopoly imperialism”<sup>19</sup> as it resembles the way by which individuals obtain property—by way of purchase or lease—when playing the board game *Monopoly*.<sup>20</sup> In doing so this work argues that although studies of empire often focus on “the control of other peoples, usually through conquest,” military takeover is not the only means by which territorial expansion can be achieved.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, expanding empire via purchase and lease, with or without corporate allies, and in legalistic ways that do not involve conquest and annexation, still produces empire. While the methods of formation and maintenance differ, both are imperial. However, empires forged in battle are more widely recognized, while empires formed in other ways sometimes remain hidden, at least to external audiences. This work cannot address all the myriad ways other than conquest that empires form. It does, nevertheless, spotlight one particular and less obvious interaction—that is, the collusion between states and corporate allies, that is sometimes responsible for empire. Therefore, this work also challenges many dominant, state-centric and conquest heavy theoretical definitions of empire by demonstrating that non-state actors are sometimes responsible for the creation or maintenance of a formal empire. Indeed, a central argument of this paper is that states sometimes partner with corporate allies to produce empire and that the literature on empire does not sufficiently contend with this process. While understudied, empires formed by these sorts of partnerships are not automatically fundamentally different from empires rooted in war and more conventional territorial expansion. As Thomson asserts, “[s]tates did not monopolize violence.”<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, whilst recognising that the literature on the role of economic actors in empire is substantial, this work contends that *theories of formal empire* should also recognise more the importance of “corporate communities” and include this element in their definitions.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, historians Streets-Salter and Getz suggest that a great deal of early modern English and French colonial settlement “was initially established by private enterprise.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, we argue that the academic literature on empire, *and not just the history books which focus on particular trading companies or national histories*, should also recognise the pivotal role of non-state actors, including corporations, in empire building.

What is principally of note in this re-examination of empire by corporate players is the immense power and influence that some wield, both historically and in the present-day. At times their contemporary workforces can dwarf those of state actors. Take the 2.1

million employees who work for Walmart, the 1.65 million who work for China National Petroleum,<sup>25</sup> and the million employed by Taiwan's Hon Hai Precision Industry/Foxconn, for example.<sup>26</sup> These numbers stand in sharp contrast to Luxembourg's entire national population of just over half a million, Iceland's 334,000 inhabitants and the Republic of the Marshall Islands' mere 53,000 souls. The relevancy of state-corporate analogies is further underscored considering that a study of the world's one hundred largest entities found that fifty-one were corporations and only forty-nine were states.<sup>27</sup> Even in calculations which take into account the fact that multinational corporation (MNC) revenue is not comparable to a nation's GDP (as payments to suppliers must be taken into account), twenty-nine of the world's largest hundred economies are still companies.<sup>28</sup> For example, the \$228 billion held in reserve by the oil company ExxonMobil, "the largest corporation of any kind headquartered in the United States," when combined with its annual revenue, makes it the twenty-first largest nation state in the world if measured by GDP.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, Bill Gates, co-founder of the Microsoft Corporation, "possessed more money than 135 of the UN member states" put together at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, this work does not claim that large corporations have all the same powers and capabilities as states. After all, corporations do not generally have extractive, i.e., taxation, powers. Nevertheless, some corporations, such as Facebook, are now even proposing their own cryptocurrencies, interfering in another demesne traditionally associated with the modern state. Furthermore, a number of current MNCs, defined as "a firm that owns and operates subsidiaries in more than one country,"<sup>31</sup> can actually also wield direct "control of physical territory," and to protect these geographical assets utilise either private security forces or contract out their defence to another state's military forces.<sup>32</sup> To safeguard its gas and oil interests ExxonMobil: employed Indonesia's own military in Aceh province; in southern Chad retained circa 2500 unarmed security guards; and in Nigeria had at their disposal an intelligence team of 800 "spy police," as well as the so-called "Mobil Police," who "carried automatic rifles and wore black shirts emblazoned with a white arm patch that displayed the Mobil red Pegasus flying horse symbol."<sup>33</sup> It is remarkable to contrast this level of militarisation with the defensive capabilities of some contemporary states with no standing forces whatsoever, namely Costa Rica, Iceland and Tuvalu. Raising and maintaining armed forces is a signature of nation-states. These examples, however, illustrate that non-state actors, including corporations, can sometimes also muster military force as well as control territory directly. On occasion, MNCs, in defending their economic interests, can even support rebel forces over a state's legitimate government. For example, during the civil war in Liberia in the 1990s the Firestone tyre corporation defended its 354 square kilometre rubber plantation, the largest of its kind in the world, by paying "taxes" to Charles Taylor's rebel government. This payment not only gave credibility to that warlord's regime, but also ensured that Taylor's forces had regular capital, fuel and food to keep the insurrection going.<sup>34</sup> The preceding examples illustrate that functionally

the division between states and corporates is not always as distinct as they may appear at first glance and that some corporations are growing increasingly powerful *vis-a-vis* many nation-states. The sometimes overlapping capabilities of states and their corporate allies is a key facet of the collusion described in this paper.

As a result of this martial ability, economic clout, and territorial control, some modern MNCs are not too far removed from older historical variants, such as the East India Company or Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie*, or *VOC*), both of which also directly controlled remarkable amounts of territory, employed large numbers of workers, and who had at their disposal their own, albeit much larger, private armies. There are significant parallels, too, with a number of late-nineteenth century European chartered companies operating in Africa during what is known as the first “Scramble for Africa,” wherein various imperial state powers roughly between 1884–85 (the dates of the Berlin Conference wherein European powers and the United States agreed to carve up Africa) and 1890, occupied most of the continent.<sup>35</sup> These imperial powers were often assisted in their takeover of Africa by the services of chartered companies, such as the Royal Niger Company, the Imperial British Africa Company, and the British South Africa Company. The charters given by imperial governments to these companies allowed them a great deal of leeway to occupy and govern a number of African territories, either by treaty or by conquest. Cecil Rhodes’ (1853–1902) British South African Company “Pioneer Column,” for instance, employed 200 volunteers and another 180 colonists, as well as advanced fire-power such as the maxim machine gun, to help them secure Mashonaland in what is now northern Zimbabwe. Such annexations by companies often served as a pre-emptive step in later state-led control. According to Trivedi:

It is well known that trading Companies played an important role in the acquisition of colonies for the British Empire, during the Partition of Africa. It has been suggested that the authorities deliberately used the Chartered Company for building the Empire. The Chartered Company submitted every treaty to the Foreign office. It acted ‘with the continued knowledge of Her Majesty’s Government’.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, Thomas Villiers Lister (1832–1902), the assistant under-secretary at the Foreign Office who was responsible for Africa and who expressed concern about the need for Britain to proactively protect its trade, stated overtly how significant the Royal Niger Company was in British strategic thinking:

. . . unless it should be considered necessary that this country should go to the great expense of setting up the machinery of Government . . . where the Company now rules supreme, there seems to be no other course open, and certainly no better one, than that of legitimizing and affirming the position of the Company and placing the business of administration into its hands.<sup>37</sup>

With the exception of Rhodes' South Africa Company, these African-centric charters were, however, generally wound up by 1900, partly as a result of the companies over-extending themselves but also perhaps due to changing public attitudes to the relationship between monied interests and imperial actions over the course of the Boer War.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, as Shoemaker suggests, colonialism needs to be differentiated and other actors, *including private companies*, still have to be scrutinized.<sup>39</sup> As the historian M. E. Chamberlain concluded following the creation of the Royal Niger Company in 1886, "so was born the first of the great African chartered companies by which Britain ruled vast tracts of Africa in the late nineteenth century."<sup>40</sup> Fully understanding the role that modern corporations, and asymmetrical economic relationships more generally, play in empire is absolutely critical to a fully developed theory of empire.

### Corporations and Control: Daewoo in Madagascar

As the literature on dependency theory and neocolonialism make plain, corporations are very often at the heart of empire as they are pivotal in asserting and maintaining control. One mechanism for this control is that a less powerful state accepts a foreign corporation because the state wants or needs investment, but in this relationship this exchange is fundamentally unequal and produces a kind of dependency.<sup>41</sup> This work highlights that more conventional assessments of empire stress the role which the military might have in establishing control, while dependency theorists document the ways in which economics, and often corporate actors, establish more indirect/informal control, most notably in parts of the developing world. As Smith notes:

Such an emphasis [on the economic aspects of the international system] is not only the distinguishing mark of dependency literature, of course: it tends to put more weight on the interaction of political and economic forces than does its developmentalist rival, and it often identifies itself as being unambiguously on the side of the South in order to benefit the poorest and most oppressed members of society there.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, the use of military mechanisms versus corporate mechanisms varies by region. Boswell argues that many colonial analyses are overly "Eurocentric" and fail to account for economic relationships between Europeans and weaker actors on the periphery.<sup>43</sup> Although this research focuses on a Korean company and a weak state in Africa, the comparison holds. While much of this literature focuses on corporations, some newer scholarship also examines a similar process that spotlights the role that "Big Tech" might play in fostering empire.<sup>44</sup>

This work takes as its prime case-study the attempt by Daewoo Logistics Corporation, a South Korean MNC, to negotiate a ninety-nine-year lease for a portion of Madagascar "half the size of Belgium."<sup>45</sup> The leased territory, comprising some 13,000 square kilometres,



was to be used for growing maize (South Korea is the world's largest importer of the crop), as well as for providing biofuel supplements. Accounts vary as to what Madagascar was to get in return. Critics suggest this uncertainty was because the government negotiating the deals was "fearful of a political backlash."<sup>46</sup> Consequently, there is little public detail available about the precise nature of Daewoo's legal claims and its potential legal hold over Madagascar, which in turn can only make some of the theoretical assumptions in this piece partial. According to Obeng-Odoom, such shadowy practices are all too common across Africa since "a substantial number of land deals go unreported, are shrouded in secrecy, and do make it as far as collation by any central body."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, what has been reported concerning Daewoo and Madagascar does allow for a degree of historical and theoretical analysis. Some sources suggested that the African island nation was to receive \$6 billion in rent.<sup>48</sup> Others reported payment in kind, including a promise that Daewoo would provide 70,000 jobs following some \$6 billion (US) investment in infrastructure (namely, the provision of 1170 schools, 170 hospitals, 60 power plants and 8 ports).<sup>49</sup> Regardless of the accuracy of the economic specifics, the promises of technological and educational improvement that were supposedly to follow in the wake of such land deals resemble late-nineteenth-century arguments during the first Scramble phase about imperial powers bringing the benefits of civilisation to a supposedly "backward" or "dark" continent. Domestically, however, much of the local population in Madagascar was opposed to the proposal, so much so that the agreement eventually resulted in a coup that helped oust Marc Ravalomanana, the then-president of the country, and which in turn ended the scheme.<sup>50</sup> A similar problem identifying the political and economic specifics about particular land deals surrounds some nineteenth century chartered companies, too. Sir George Goldie, who founded the Royal Niger Company, deliberately destroyed all his personal papers and forced employees "to enter into a bond of £1000 contracting not to divulge to outsiders or newspapers any facts about the Company, or to write a book or pamphlet concerning the activities of the Company."<sup>51</sup>

Murky financial dealings aside, Daewoo's venture is especially noteworthy because of its sheer scale, its audacity, and the fact that it set off a chain of events that toppled a democratically-elected government.<sup>52</sup> Yet it is not a historical curiosity. Other similar modern large land deals have been proposed, namely China's attempt to secure 28,000 square kilometres of land in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>53</sup> Daewoo's interest in Madagascar, however, is of additional special interest as it also helps to balance a deficit in Anglophone academic study on Africa, especially concerning the former French colonies. As Dahir notes, "studies around sub-Saharan Africa cluster heavily on a small number of wealthier, more populous, and English-speaking nations."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, even within a small French pool of research, Madagascar is frequently overlooked. As historian M. Brown observes, "events in Madagascar receive virtually no coverage in the British or American press, and indeed very little in France."<sup>55</sup> In Carmody's *The New Scramble for Africa* (2011), for example, there

is little mention of the country.<sup>56</sup> It is a similar story with Chamberlain's third edition of *The Scramble for Africa* (2013). Finally, Madagascar is of note for its special relationship with the history of European colonialist projects. Both the Polish government in the early twentieth century and then Nazi Germany in the early pre-Final Solution 1940s pursued the idea of deporting the continent's entire Eastern European Jewish population there.<sup>57</sup>

The role of a South Korean company in a project of this kind is also of curiosity and relevance given that, after Denmark, South Korea is the country with the most MNC headquarters,<sup>58</sup> and that "Korea's modern history was profoundly influenced by its thirty-five years (1910–45) as a colony of Japan."<sup>59</sup> Leaders at Daewoo recognised the geo-strategic implications of their proposal; Hong Jong-wan, a Daewoo manager, stated, "Food can be a weapon."<sup>60</sup> The role of a South Korean firm in monopoly imperialism is intriguing too, given the fact that personnel in Daewoo saw no issue with the company purchasing land which was described as being "undeveloped" and "left untouched."<sup>61</sup> Such a blinkered perspective is analogous to nineteenth century European visions of Australia as *terra nullius*. Ironically, many Japanese at the start of the twentieth century had not viewed Korea's own land use and infrastructure too dissimilarly when they invaded the country. Mention of the latter suggests that to some extent modern scholars sometimes automatically associate empire with a specifically European or Western experience, whereas the phenomenon is much more far-ranging, both geographically and temporally.

## Rethinking Empire

Many historians of formal empire tend to view it as a state-centric phenomenon. Doyle conceives of it as "a relationship . . . in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another."<sup>62</sup> For Peers, empire refers "to the control and influence exercised by a strong state over a weaker state."<sup>63</sup> According to Bush, empire implies the "expansion of states outside their territory."<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, Robins in his history of the East India Company finds this focus too simplistic: "It remains an oddity that although companies are among the most powerful institutions of the modern age, our histories still focus on the actions of states . . . rather than on corporations."<sup>65</sup> Darwin maintains a similar viewpoint, opining that "Far from being the mere handiwork of kings and conquistadors," the British Empire "was largely a private-enterprise empire."<sup>66</sup> It is too often the case that observers of empire fail to account for the fact that states and their corporation allies are often actively colluding on imperial projects that benefit both the state and corporation. Their actions are not divisible in practice and are mutually beneficial and reinforcing. Hymer, in particular, demonstrates that states and corporations often act together. He stresses how these relationships can create "hierarchies of decision-making" that underscore the power of weak states.<sup>67</sup> Summing up the various kind of interactions between MNCs and weak states, he concludes, "In a word, the multinational corporation reveals the power of size and the danger of leaving it uncontrolled."<sup>68</sup>



Although corporations are the central crux of this study, they are not the only non-state actors to imitate imperial powers by taking direct control of territory. Religious organisations ranging from the Hospitallers in the Mediaeval period to Islamic State could also wield force, colonise, and/or aspire to control land in ways that mimic states. The latter at its highpoint not only had a territory the size of the United Kingdom, but an army comprising 100,000 fighters.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Hospitaller military forces took control of Rhodes initially as a result of a *lease* secured with the island's local Genoese ruler Vignolo de' Vignoli.<sup>70</sup> The fact that Rhodes is a small island calls into question yet another fixation of historians of empire: size. Howe defines an empire as "a large political body,"<sup>71</sup> whilst Lieven describes an empire as ruling "over wide territories."<sup>72</sup> Young states, without giving a suggested land area, that "for an empire to be worthy of its name, its boundaries must be far-reaching."<sup>73</sup> He does, nevertheless, point out the role of non-state actors, namely "individuals, corporations, joint stock companies, or other organizations," as pursuing expansive colonial projects.<sup>74</sup>

By contrast, and in addition to stressing the role of commercial actors in imperial processes and other methods by which empires can be ascertained, this study suggests that when it comes to empires, size does not always matter and that there can be *multum in parvo*. Immerwahr says that the United States no longer seeks "the large annexations of the nineteenth century," preferring overseas bases which "don't add up to much" territorially, but "nevertheless are . . . staging grounds for . . . economic, military, and cultural interventions."<sup>75</sup> Some historians of foreign intervention in China even use the expression "micro-colony" to describe the extra-territorial treaty ports forced upon the Qing government at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, size cannot always be conflated with global power. Small polities like the 264-square kilometre Cayman Islands, reputedly "the world's fifth largest financial centre,"<sup>77</sup> can be far more influential than polities such as Algeria, Africa's biggest country.

After considering empire by purchase and lease, the role of corporations in the imperial story and the question of size, this study also acknowledges that some of the states selling or leasing land "are readily allowing themselves" to be taken over by inviting and/or welcoming foreign intrusion.<sup>78</sup> This is a conclusion Edelman asserts when pointing out that the peoples in these locales sometimes "sell their holdings with little or no coercion."<sup>79</sup> What is intriguing about many of these developments is the level of complicity which oftentimes unites elements within the states where the territory is being purchased and the "companies closely tied to them."<sup>80</sup> Thus, in addition to re-thinking how empires can be formed (by purchase and lease), who the empire-makers might be (state and non-state actors) and notions of size, this study builds upon other work recognising the role of *compradors* (individuals who act as local agents for foreign powers) in imperial processes.<sup>81</sup> As the administrator Fredrick D. Lugard noted in 1893 in relation to British control in Africa, "It has ever been the key-note of British colonial method to rule through and by the native."<sup>82</sup> Such was the intention of George Goldie, too, when he was granted a charter to establish

the Royal Niger Company in 1886. He wanted to “leave the actual control of native affairs to the native chiefs, so avoiding any disturbance of local law and custom.”<sup>83</sup> Neveling’s work on EPZs and SEZs similarly considers the role of what he calls Third World “capitalist elites” in promulgating these developments for their own self-interest.<sup>84</sup>

Historically empire by invitation to outside forces had occurred on numerous occasions. According to Thucydides (1.75), ancient Athens emerged as an imperial power because many Greek *poleis* in the face of a Persian invasion had “attached themselves to us and spontaneously asked us to assume the command.” Colás similarly discusses the notion that post-war NATO was an empire by invitation whereby Europeans “eagerly sought military and socio-economic cover” from Soviet communism.<sup>85</sup> In the 1980s, the tiny Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean “sent a serious offer to Canada to discuss joining” in order to benefit from that nation’s better financed healthcare system.<sup>86</sup> More recently, Mali, a former French colony, invited France to send military support to help restore its sovereignty after an Islamist group made significant territorial gains in 2012. In this instance, the United Nations Security Council legitimated the intervention via a resolution.<sup>87</sup> The latter suggests a further interesting future focus for theoreticians of empire, namely that other non-state/supra-national actors can be empire makers, too. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that it was Pope Sixtus IV in 1481 who awarded the Canaries to Castille and all further acquisitions in Africa to Portugal. The treaties of Tordesillas (1493) and Zaragoza (1529) then divided the globe amongst Spain and Portugal. Somewhat similarly, in the modern period it was the League of Nations after World War I which conferred islands like Samoa to New Zealand; and it was the United Nations which virtually endorsed the occupation of Papua by Indonesian forces in 1969.

Such collusion between periphery and metropole, or between empires and various types of non-state actors, suggests that imperial core-periphery relationships are not always one-sided or metropole/core-driven. As Thomas opines:

. . . it is widely assumed that colonialism was pervasively efficacious: natives were extirpated, the impact was fatal, the colonized were dominated and assimilated . . . such perceptions frequently exaggerate colonial power, diminishing the extent to which colonial histories were shaped by indigenous resistance and accommodation.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, whilst it is overall true to say that big state-led powers with vast and complex military forces bent on conquering other sovereign states are the most readily discernible of imperial powers, “this is often an ideal type,” and there remains considerable nuance and variation in imperial enterprises.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, as many commentators have recognised, during the period of decolonisation from the 1960s onwards formal colonies were frequently merely replaced by informal ones, resulting in a “façade of formal independence, defended and extended . . . [by] the strategic and economic interests of the metropole, often in alliance with multinational companies.”<sup>90</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, former

Prime Minister of Ghana, labelled this “neo-colonialism,” and wrote about how imperial flags and officials were merely being replaced by other more devious colonialist devices, all in order to maintain metropolitan-led political and economic leverage.<sup>91</sup> A number of economists agreed, drawing attention “to the survival of imperial domination in the form of new global economic systems and institutions spearheaded by Western powers.”<sup>92</sup> The latter was underpinned theoretically by modern variants of the doctrine of free trade, namely neoliberalism, which preached a mantra of privatisation with a view to encouraging foreign investment and national economic growth. The danger, however, was that:

. . . the nation-state is no longer sovereign with respect to its own economy, but rather locked into a global network of which it is merely a minor component. The winners are, inevitably, less individual states than the transnational and international financiers and corporations who drive the whole process.<sup>93</sup>

Newly independent peripheral states were left vulnerable, therefore, to economic structures led by former imperial cores or their non-state offspring that resulted in these new states remaining open to resource exploitation, whether it be mineral, plant or human. Immanuel Wallerstein took this a step further with his “world systems analysis,” seeing “capitalism rather than imperialism as the crucial dynamic in globalization and deepening inequalities” and arguing that capitalism might lead to new power relationships.<sup>94</sup>

At present, there is a near consensus in the literature that empire via conquest is no longer in the realm of acceptable international politics; this work highlights how various imperial actors can turn instead to other more subtle means beyond conquest to achieve or maintain control. These methods can be the likes of the informal economic ones identified by Nkrumah and company, but also by more formal methods, namely the tried and tested historical process of purchase and lease or “monopoly imperialism.” What is more, this practice of monopoly imperialism is not just restricted to corporate powers. Alessio and Renfro argue that it was a major contributor to the evolution of the United States, exemplified by its purchases of Alaska, Louisiana, and Gadsden as well as its leases of Guantanamo, Panama, Diego Garcia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.<sup>95</sup> As so few speak about this particular type of expansion *vis-a-vis* the United States, it is ironically referred to as the “Voldemort of imperial powers.”<sup>96</sup> Canada’s “purchase” of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s territories in 1870 muddies the definitional nation state-empire division even further by suggesting that colonies can simultaneously be empire-makers, too.

Many studies of empire have frequently underscored a military and state-led element of imperial acquisition while ignoring state and corporate collusion. Boswell, commenting on the decline of overt forms of colonialism after World War II, writes: “Colonial data after 1960 are increasingly misleading because they do not include the more important and subtler forms of *neocolonialism*.”<sup>97</sup> This omission impoverishes our understanding of empire and further neglects the role of corporations in empire building. But as Howe and numerous

others still contend, “In most cases, the periphery has been acquired by conquest.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Young argues that “[f]or the most part, they grew by conquest, though sometimes by dynastic marriage.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, as the theory of monopoly imperialism advocates, purchase and lease are other significant means by which empires can expand. Such is a position that Ferguson takes, too, when he points out that empires do not have to be imposed by force.<sup>100</sup> Fernandez-Armesto similarly argues that imperial history has “over-emphasized conquest.”<sup>101</sup> Expansion by purchase or lease also mirrors Blanken’s analysis of empire formation wherein he differentiates between “pugnacious imperialism,” involving conflict over territorial acquisition, and its non-violent counterpart, which he terms “courteous imperialism.”<sup>102</sup> Fuchs, in her analysis of modern land grabbing in Africa, also says that martial power is not a pre-requisite for take-over but rather that “agenda-setting power” is—namely, the threat of withdrawing investments and jobs if states do not acquiesce.<sup>103</sup> She argues that such practices are imperialistic as they are not neutral, lack the consent of the land users, employ financial and technological advantages, facilitate “mass eviction,” and are utilised by “private actors.”<sup>104</sup> Hence, once again contemporary examples of land grabbing do not appear dissimilar from the earlier actions of the East India Company.

This work is not the first to address the definitional problems that bedevil empire. Steinmetz surmised that “there is little agreement in the academic literature on what exactly an empire is.”<sup>105</sup> Colley stated that there is “an insufficiently comprehensive approach to empire.”<sup>106</sup> According to Münkler, “the question of what an empire is and how it differs from the political order of the territorial state . . . has remained virtually unexamined.”<sup>107</sup> For Streets-Salter and Getz, “historians often disagree about . . . what the term ‘empire’ even means.”<sup>108</sup> Biccum similarly states that the lack of consensus has resulted in “a profound sense of confusion and a dearth of systematic theorization.”<sup>109</sup> Such a messy or more complicated approach may not be to everyone’s liking, but chaotic is the new norm and empire, consequently, should not be seen as “a single blueprint.”<sup>110</sup> Nor is this uncertainty unique to empire studies. Madagascar, the central case study in this work, is an island; yet specialists of island studies also find it hard to fashion “a coherent theory of islandness.”<sup>111</sup> Browning likewise says that “there are as many divisions between global theorists as there are between the proponents and opponents of globalisation.”<sup>112</sup> As Gerring posits, whilst scholars should remove ambiguity whenever possible “a certain degree of ambiguity is *inherent*.”<sup>113</sup> In the end, it is the struggle at obtaining a definition of empire that is perhaps more important than the definition itself; for the very nature of the debate often leads to new and intriguing research routes.

## The Business of Empire

Whilst the East India Company might be one of the best-known of the early modern imperial corporations it was neither the first nor the biggest. The “honour” for the latter belonged to

the Hudson's Bay Company, whose 1670 British North American royal charter granted it "absolute right to administer law and judge all . . . employ its own armies and navies [and] . . . erect forts."<sup>114</sup> At the height of its power, the Hudson's Bay Company's possessions had made it "the fourth largest 'kingdom' in the world,"<sup>115</sup> comprising some fifteen per cent of the North American continent's landmass. Nonetheless, the title of the "world's first multinational corporation" belongs to the Dutch East India Company.<sup>116</sup> It, too, was formed by royal charter and was granted "the rights to wage war, make peace, and sign treaties with foreign entities as well as exercising juridico-political sovereignty over its overseas 'factories'."<sup>117</sup> By the late seventeenth century, it had become so powerful that its "impressive military force" of warships and troops made it look "more like a state."<sup>118</sup> According to Hayton, "At its peak . . . the fleet was larger than the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Scottish and German fleets combined."<sup>119</sup> From its base in Batavia (now Jakarta), and covering a geographical expanse ranging from South Africa to the Spice Islands, it sent fleets to attack local and European rivals alike, commissioned surveys of unknown lands (their explorer Abel Tasman was the first known European to sail to Australia and New Zealand), and brutally defended its monopoly control of the nutmeg spice trade in the Banda Islands by executing anyone attempting to undercut the company or sell to other buyers.<sup>120</sup>

The VOC came to an end in 1795 following Napoleon's conquest of the Netherlands. Its decline, however, began earlier following growing competition from its East India Company rival across the English Channel. Established by royal charter in 1600 under Queen Elizabeth I, the British East India Company's monopoly control of pepper, silks, and spice imports, followed later by tea and coffee, left it ruling a "land empire"<sup>121</sup> comprising India as well as a great deal of Asia, including Penang, Singapore, and parts of China. To secure its position it employed "one of the largest standing armies in the world,"<sup>122</sup> some 250,000 of whom were local Indian *compradors* functioning very much like ancient Rome's non-Italic *Auxilia*.<sup>123</sup> Like the VOC, not only was the East India Company in direct control of much of this conquered territory, but it used its operatives to collect taxes (*diwani*) on behalf of the nominal Mughal rulers, keeping the profits for itself. The East India Company was also critical in terms of bank-rolling various British governments. Ten percent of the British state's revenue in the early nineteenth century came from its tax on imported East India Company tea alone.<sup>124</sup> The Company further provided "sizeable loans"<sup>125</sup> direct to the government and its representatives. According to Lawson, in the 1760s some twenty-eight percent of British MPs held East India Company stock.<sup>126</sup> Not surprisingly there "was strong and decisive backing for the Company's monopoly privileges at Westminster."<sup>127</sup> Lastly, the East India Company is of significance in terms of its duration. Although a retail element of the HBC continues to exist, 1868 really marks the expiration date of that organisation as a territorial demesne as its land was bought by the newly emerging Canadian confederation. By contrast, the East India Company only came to an end in 1858 following the Indian Mutiny,

having survived for more than two hundred and fifty years. Numerous modern nation states today, such as New Zealand or Italy, have been around for shorter periods of time.

As the Canadian purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company lands suggests, these corporate-imperial players did not always obtain territory by conquest. Bombay became an East India Company presidency in 1668 after Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese wife of Charles II, *granted* it to him as a wedding gift. Charles II then *leased* Bombay to the East India Company in return for a sizable rent. Similarly, the VOC obtained Run Island in the Banda Islands as a result of a *trade* with the British for Manhattan Island; the latter in turn had previously been *bought* by the Dutch from First Nation peoples.

Such negotiations for land by non-state organisations are not unique to the history of the early modern world. Belgium's King Leopold II took Congo as a "personal colony" and gave authority to "private companies to establish monopoly control" to secure access to rubber resources.<sup>128</sup> So important was Leopold's private commercial venture that a number of historians have even contended that it actually "set off the 'Scramble'" for Africa.<sup>129</sup> Other European-controlled charter companies also established territorial empires for themselves during this first scramble phase for Africa, sometimes by treaty, sometimes by trade, and sometimes by war. Cecil Rhodes' infamous Jameson Raid of 1895–96 against the Boer South African Republic (or Transvaal) stands out amongst them all as it had devastating long-term consequences, including an eventual war with the Boers, the creation of concentration camps, and the architecture of the apartheid state. As the Duke of Fife, husband to the daughter of the Prince of Wales and the former vice-chairman of the British South Africa Company, lamented in 1898, after calling for an end to the latitude granted to his former Company, the Jameson Raid was, "an invasion deliberately planned and carried out by the Company's agents without their knowledge."<sup>130</sup>

Across the Atlantic at the start of the twentieth century Henry Ford also obtained "Fordlandia" in Brazil, a 10,000-square kilometre semi-autonomous concession, through monopoly imperialism. This now largely abandoned jungle city was intended to function as a semi-independent private fiefdom replete with many of the features of an actual state, including its own transportation and commercial infrastructure, schools, hospital, police, and workers' houses; all of this was intended to facilitate a regular supply of rubber for the United States' automobile industry. Such expansions by purchase, lease, treaty, or exchange contradict more traditional assumptions by the likes of Trotsky or Weber who proclaim that "force" and "violence" are always the basis of state legitimisation.<sup>131</sup> The role of MNCs in this process also offers a critique, consequently, of state-centric narratives by demonstrating the agency of non-state actors in the story of empire.

According to Streets-Salter and Getz, the creation of a state-like apparatus "to control the local populace," namely "police, churches, and sometimes schools," are all indicators of imperial practices.<sup>132</sup> Howe proposes that when commercial companies operate in this manner by taking direct control of territory and employing their own civil and/or military



forces, they are functioning like their own separate states.<sup>133</sup> Such an interpretation is in keeping with schools of thought suggesting that modern transnational players could conceivably “replace states as the key actors in security affairs.”<sup>134</sup> Taylor implies something similar is going on in Africa today, as Chinese corporations dominate “enclave territories” or “quasi-states,” wherein a “real” African state, because of internal political conflict, does not have full authority.<sup>135</sup> Likewise, Fuchs argues that as these land investments “go beyond the mere acquisition of natural resources, but are rather associated with a change of control over social, cultural as well as economic resources,”<sup>136</sup> and that there is a subsequent danger of “creating a state within a state.”<sup>137</sup> To be sure, the theme of Coll’s history of ExxonMobil is that given its wealth, size and influence “it functioned as a corporate state within the American state” with its “own political division, foreign policy and private armies.”<sup>138</sup>

Furthermore, if some sources are to be believed, Chinese business ventures in certain African locales today appear to be encouraging their own people’s direct colonialist ventures in new versions of their very own concession states. A reported 10,000 farmers were purportedly being brought over to farm land in Mozambique,<sup>139</sup> and up to a million Chinese are described as moving to Africa in search of better opportunities.<sup>140</sup> So corporate colonisation, specifically referring to “the settlement of territory”<sup>141</sup> and not just control through intermediaries or economic leverage, appears to be occurring also. Given that some of the Chinese leases are long term and also modelled on a ninety-nine-year agreement tellingly similar to western models utilised in China a century ago, they do not appear a world away from earlier East India Company “factories,” where “factors” (corporate representatives) lived and worked in enclaves separate from surrounding peoples. Accordingly, there appears a direct link between the earlier imperialism of organizations like the VOC, Hudson’s Bay Company and East India Company, international concession territories in China and government-chartered companies in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, the corporate-colonial entanglements that impacted the politics of United States-Central American relationships in the early twentieth century, and now twenty-first century versions of what Nwoke and others refer to as a second or “new scramble for Africa” by the likes of China or South Korea.<sup>142</sup>

Unlike Exxon in the US, in the case of more recent Chinese examples the corporate actor may in fact be a direct agent of the state itself, as was often the case with many of the chartered companies in the first African scramble. According to Brown, the Chinese Communist Party “controls one of the prime sources of wealth creation in China, the SOEs, which still occupy much of the commanding heights of the national economy.”<sup>143</sup> This suggests a need for a typology of corporate-state relationships that captures the nuances manifest in the imperial collusions between states and corporations. In particular, this typology needs to grapple with the fact that states and the corporations that they house are often deeply intertwined in legal, financial, cultural, and other ways. Furthermore, this typology should chronicle the specific ways in which states and their corporations evolved mutually

beneficial and durable relationships that can be marshalled for imperial purposes. Such a typology might include, therefore: MNCs which are fully independent of state control but which can influence governments through lobbying and political donations (Exxon Mobil) or by way of bribery and corruption (the “state capture” scandals engulfing South African politics); those which owe their origins and powers to a state but which, despite working with state authorities, put their own economic interests first (East India Company) or, sometimes, on a par with those of the empire in question (Cecil Rhodes’ famous maxim of “philanthropy plus five percent”);<sup>144</sup> and those that in reality are directly funded, organised, and answerable to state power. As Go argues, empire is complicated and so our understandings must be interdisciplinary and nuanced.<sup>145</sup> Dependency theorists and critics of neo-liberalism assist in this understanding by providing a partial remedy to this lacuna by drawing attention to the power of corporations.

As Streets-Salter and Getz note, the VOC’s charter tied it to the state, “Since the same wealthy merchants who invested in them tended also to control Dutch political affairs.”<sup>146</sup> The aforementioned Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), such as the oil companies CNPC or SINOPEC, are another case of the latter, as “many believe that Chinese companies will not simply invest in a search for profit but will act primarily to advance Beijing’s national security goals.”<sup>147</sup> To be sure, according to Mitter, “the state and the CCP are still heavily entwined with business. Party officials have frequently switched from taking a political role to an entrepreneurial one, and good relations with the CCP are often essential to win licences to do business.”<sup>148</sup> It was indubitably China’s national intelligence law of 2017 which required Chinese organisations to “support and cooperate in national intelligence work” which in fact resulted in attempts by the US, UK, and Australia to keep Huawei out of their mobile phone networks.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, the utilisation of corporate proxies has been a topic of significant debate in the UK concerning China’s motivation for recent investments in the energy education and science sectors. In 2006, Dubai Ports World, a company controlled by Dubai, attempted to purchase six major American ports. Dubai Ports World eventually withdrew its bid in the face of public and Congressional unease that the sale might compromise national security.<sup>150</sup> In the case of Daewoo’s attempted lease of a significant percentage of Madagascar’s land, however, Korean sources suggest that this was an entirely market-driven phenomenon and not a political initiative.<sup>151</sup>

Such divisions are further complicated by the evolving histories of some of the corporations themselves. The East India Company, for example, although at first largely independent of the Crown and an ordinary trading company, gradually evolved into the “world’s first aggressive multinational corporation,”<sup>152</sup> then in turn became subsumed by the state as Britain grew in power. Eventually, the government took direct control of the company and its territories after the Indian Mutiny. Similarly, relatively independent private settlements along the eastern seaboard of the United States, such as Jamestown or Plymouth, and which had been founded originally by wealthy and charismatic merchant entrepreneurs, were

eventually brought under Crown control once the English Civil War had run its course back home.<sup>153</sup> A similar story seems to have occurred with early private French merchant companies operating in the Americas, but which were later absorbed by Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) in the 1620s when Paris was trying to centralise control of the state in order to check the power of other European empires.<sup>154</sup> And in China, under the premiership of Xi Jinping and for possibly similar geo-strategic reasons, where once entrepreneurship drove the economy, “private, market-driven growth has given way to a resurgence of the role of the state.”<sup>155</sup>

Whilst in many cases states build and maintain empire without a corporate proxy or partner, in others, corporations can collude with states to further national agendas. The latter appears to be the case with the formation in 1888 of the Imperial British Africa Company. Ostensibly founded by Scottish businessman William Mackinnon as a trading company, its London charter allowed it to maintain a task force to protect what is now Uganda from foreign encroachment. “The Company,” Trivendi concludes, “was thus from the beginning chartered as a political instrument.”<sup>156</sup> What is more, some contemporary MNCs enjoy trading privileges which allow them to actually override a country’s own domestic laws, a factor not limited to developing world countries. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, allowed a US-based corporation to successfully sue the Canadian government for \$13 million in 1996 for trying to prevent the sale of a known human neurotoxin as a gasoline additive.<sup>157</sup> This typology begs some interesting questions: could corporations amass an empire without state assistance and could they grow so big that they no longer require state support? While the answer to both queries is probably no, since states have powers that corporations do not, and historically a number of these older corporations relied on government charters, there are undoubtedly cases where corporations (e.g., Ford in Fordlandia), have sought to create organizations that at least resembled states. Sometimes, company executives are so influential that they can even negotiate in diplomatic circles on behalf of a nation state and/or empire. George Goldie of the Royal Niger Company, for example, attended the 1884 Berlin Conference which helped launch the Scramble for Africa, and thus personally helped to secure for Great Britain a large chunk of territory in West Africa.<sup>158</sup> The Canadian historian Margaret Conrad similarly warns that modern CEOs today seem “to wield more power than elected officials.”<sup>159</sup> Some scholars of ultra-nationalism thus argue that it is the growing power of MNCs and their seeming independence from government which is partly the cause of the growth of the contemporary far right. As historian M. Gardell has noted, “Corporate power is further underscored by the free trade zones on territory set aside and exempted not only from regular taxation but also from the jurisdiction a state would otherwise exert over its territory.”<sup>160</sup> Facebook is both a sprawling social media company and an MNC. Although its domain is virtual and not territorial, the company and its users have begun to play an important role in national and international politics, including perhaps influencing elections. This raises important

questions about how tech and social media giants may collude or conspire with others to forge or maintain asymmetrical power relationships. Indeed, the rise of cryptocurrencies is another example of non-state actors assuming privileges ordinarily associated with nation-states. Given the growing threat of MNC control it is not surprising that popular culture has begun to address this theme, evident in the pages of science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson whose *Mars Trilogy* (1992–1996) focuses upon the role of “metanats,” extremely powerful transnational corporations that replace national governments.

## The Role of Compradors

In addition to re-thinking control by states and conquest, the notion that empires always emerge in the core needs to be re-considered. Actors in the periphery have sometimes invited imperial powers to their region. Indeed, the Lodi governor of the Punjab first invited the Mughals into India. Some half a millennia earlier, Charles the Simple, king of West Francia, invited the Norse ruler Rollo to settle on his lands in exchange for Rollo’s pledge to defend the kingdom. Thus Belich states that colonial contact history is more complicated than the dominant “victim ideology” which tends to “portray the indigenous encounter with Europe as one long undifferentiated tragedy inflicted on innocent—and passive—victims.”<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Colás argues that “empires have historically relied heavily on local collaborators, intermediaries, delegates, clients and assimilated elites.”<sup>162</sup> Farrington’s discussion of the early East India Company’s territorial acquisitions in Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta likewise declares that “[a]ll owed their existence to Indian permission, partnership and complicity.”<sup>163</sup> In Kolkata, local Indian commercial allies even had a special designation: *banians*. Hayton argues that the history of the VOC was not dissimilar, and “always depended on local allies, such as the Sultan of Johor.”<sup>164</sup> Recent research on Africa has made a similar case, urging that local actors are not lacking agency, but have “negotiated, shaped, and even driven” MNC agreements.<sup>165</sup> Commentators on current land purchasing and leasing have thus argued that it is too crude to present MNCs as the only rapacious organizations, since “smallholders may be agents of complicity with land grabbers.”<sup>166</sup> Indeed, without local support many land deals could not take place. According to Cotula, “well-structured deals could guarantee employment, better infrastructures and better crop yields.”<sup>167</sup> In relation to Japan’s early twentieth century occupation of Korea, Seth states that the occupation “provided high standards of government efficiency, established much of the infrastructure . . . and laid the foundations for a modern school system.”<sup>168</sup> It has been suggested consequently that land acquisitions in Africa today “can bring new technology, create jobs, reduce poverty, increase food production, and diversify the economies of developing countries.”<sup>169</sup>

Nevertheless, some critics of the Madagascar deal pointed out that local elites were in favour of these agribusiness ventures with the motivation “to extend their territory at the expense of other communities.”<sup>170</sup> Indeed, during the leasing discussions Madagascar’s

own government was accused by poor farmers and women living on marginal lands with lack of title of reproducing “pre-colonial and colonial practices.”<sup>171</sup> By claiming that any untitled land was un-owned, the government argued that the Madagascar state was the “legal landowner” and could do with the land what it pleased.<sup>172</sup> Such an interpretation overlooked the fact that for many of Madagascar’s peoples land was more than just an economic resource but had religious, sentimental, and cultural associations. Not surprisingly, critics of mega land deals have warned that local “state officials use agribusiness projects as a means to recentralize or monopolize formal land management.”<sup>173</sup> According to Chiweshe and Mutopo, other African states have also witnessed similar betrayals by their own, whereby a few black elites get involved in the acquisition “of large tracts of land at the expense of the other poor blacks.”<sup>174</sup>

Ironically, a similar controversy had occurred between 1910 and 1918 in Korea when the Japanese colonial government-general carried out a land survey. As a result of their inability to produce formal ownership documents, “many Korean farmers lost their lands” to both the Japanese *and* to members of the previously dominant Korean *yangban* ruling class.<sup>175</sup> However, Seth’s study of the Japanese-Korean imperial relationship concludes that eventually “it was . . . designed to benefit the colonizer.”<sup>176</sup> In the framework of the British East India Company, a similar self-serving narrative appears to have dictated the rules. Although there was domestic enthusiasm for the company as it “gave employment to hundreds of thousands of highly skilled weavers, dyers and washers,” they “were always subject to varying degrees of pressure and exploitation.”<sup>177</sup> Indeed, with regards to the East India Company, when there was indigenous and/or local backing, it often came from Indian landholders (hoping to increase their own prestige and power locally), individual soldiers (looking for employment opportunities, improved status, and regular pay), and/or from European officers and/or merchants stationed in the Subcontinent yearning for glory and gold. According to Streets-Salter and Getz, this type of collusion is “[o]ne of the troubling issues in the establishment of . . . colonies.”<sup>178</sup> Therefore, when it comes to indigenous support for MNCs purchasing or leasing land it should come as no surprise to see that there is sometimes a thin line between *comprador* and *quisling*. In New Zealand/Aotearoa today, the term *kūpapa* (which had been traditionally associated as a positive descriptor for Māori allies loyal to British colonial forces during the New Zealand wars of the nineteenth century), now “has been revived to mean Māori who act against the interests of Māori in general.”<sup>179</sup>

Some scholarly traditions, including various forms of Marxism and dependency theory, make plain that economics and empire are often indivisible. In the British Museum, one can see direct evidence of this in the seventh century BC sculpted reliefs of Assyrian emperors shown receiving tribute from conquered enemies. Robins, too, suggests that East India Company actions were always “best-calculated for the Company’s interest.”<sup>180</sup> Given that capitalism “is essentially the investment of money in the expectation of making

a profit,"<sup>181</sup> it is not surprising that modern MNCs would get involved with land leasing just like their historical counterparts. It was the English economist and critic of empire John Hobson who drew attention to this *liaison dangereuse* between state and corporation in *Imperialism*.<sup>182</sup> Writing at the time of the South African War, Hobson accused vested interests, especially Cecil Rhodes' mining operations, of directly benefitting from the conflict. Cain and Hopkins later picked up this point as they "studied the connections between policymakers and . . . financiers" and which the authors argue "guided the expansion of the British Empire."<sup>183</sup> Likewise, whilst George Goldie of the Royal Niger Company was certainly motivated by patriotism, he also "meant to do well for his Company and himself . . . and . . . benefited financially."<sup>184</sup> Yun Tae Kim, in a study of the "power elite" in South Korea, also emphasised the "strong patterns of co-ordination and collaboration between business elite and state elite."<sup>185</sup>

## Daewoo and Madagascar

Aside from the method of acquisition or the size of the proposal, what makes the Daewoo deal of further interest is the fact that one of the key players was a corporate entity from a formerly colonised Asian state, as historically Korea had seldom been free of control from powerful neighbours. Following independence from Japan after the Second World War, the South Korean economy transfigured by "developing shipbuilding, petrochemical, and automotive industries."<sup>186</sup> At the vanguard of this development were the *chaebols*, the large family-run conglomerates which had benefitted extensively from government policies. Much of this support derived from the fact that the *chaebol* leadership had "developed their social ties with state officials and politicians in order to pursue their own interests."<sup>187</sup> So significant are these close personal-political relationships that this period of growth from the late 1980s until 1997 is frequently referred to as the "Chaebol Republic."<sup>188</sup> In 2008, a former *chaebol* CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction, Lee Myung Bak, was inaugurated as the nation's president. It is perhaps no coincidence that the South Korean government then proclaimed that it was "formulating a national plan to facilitate land acquisitions abroad for Korean food production, with the private sector as the main player."<sup>189</sup> Shortly after Daewoo Logistics, which had split off Daewoo, announced its proposed land deal in Madagascar.

At the height of its power, Daewoo had become South Korea's fourth largest *chaebol* with at least twenty-five subsidiaries.<sup>190</sup> Founded by Kim Woo Jung in 1967, after whom the company is named ("Great Woo"), it had risen to prominence through the production of textiles. In the mid-1970s, and with government support, it expanded into other operations, including shipbuilding, car manufacturing (working with General Motors to produce small compact cars), engineering, construction, electronics, financial services, and petrochemicals. But in the late 1990s, faced with higher labour costs, growing popular discontent at



*chaebol* corruption and calls for more transparency, the government mandated the company's break-up. Daewoo Logistics, which went on to focus on shipping transport, emerged from this division. Although Daewoo Logistics nearly went bankrupt as a result of the failed land-lease the company survived and continues to remain involved with maritime transport.

Renowned primarily for its lemurs and for a series of DreamWorks children's animation films, Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world and two and a half times the size of Great Britain. It was partly this considerable land area, combined with a relatively low population density (it ranks 137<sup>th</sup> in the world), which attracted corporate interest in establishing leases there. The fact that it is quite isolated and that events there frequently fly under the proverbial radar, might also account for Daewoo's interest in the island. Given the fact that monopoly imperialism as a colonialist practice is often successful for not attracting headlines, this, and the island's seclusion, could account for additional strategic rationales as to why Daewoo chose the country as a target of acquisition. Nevertheless, Madagascar is also of interest for its intriguing ethnic population. Its first settlers came not from Africa, its closest land neighbour some 400 kilometres to the west, but from Indonesia. These settlers arrived about the time of Jesus Christ and thus, uniquely (for an African nation), the island's language and peoples have Malayo/Polynesian origins.<sup>191</sup> A second wave of settlement followed, this time African in origin and Bantu-Arabic speaking. Whilst the former settled primarily in the highlands and the interior, the latter settled along the coasts and are frequently referred to as *côtiers*. Europeans arrived in the early 1500s, although no European power initially claimed the territory. Instead, the island in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries became infamous as a pirate lair. In the early nineteenth century, a local Malayo-Polynesian kingdom centred in Merina rose to prominence. But in 1890, following growing troubles between the Merina supporters and their *côtiers* neighbours, the French stepped in on the pretext of bringing an end to the conflict. The British accepted this French action after signing the Anglo-French Agreement of 1890, which gave to the British the island of Zanzibar in return. This land *swap* demonstrates yet another example of imperial territory being obtained by methods other than conquest. After the Second World War, anti-French nationalist feeling grew, particularly amongst the former Merina ruling classes and returning veterans. A bloody insurrection followed in the late 1940s with as many as 89,000 being killed in fighting, including many *côtiers* who tended to be more supportive of French rule.<sup>192</sup> Eventually, in 1960 the French granted the country independence. These early years of freedom were accompanied by a series of coups, assassinations, and protests. Concerns were also expressed by nationalists that despite sovereignty, "the French were still running the country."<sup>193</sup> The latter was exemplified by the Grand Moulins de Dakar affair of 1967, wherein a French company had obtained monopolistic control of the importation of all flour into the country in return for \$25 million of development aid.<sup>194</sup> This French economic deal collapsed, like the later

Daewoo lease, as a result of intense local opposition. It was a foretaste of things to come and helps to explain why the Korean land lease never took off.

## Conclusion

As there appear to be groups within imperial states/corporations and conquered peripheries who work together, perhaps it makes sense to define this relationship as one of “co-imperialism” or “co-dependency?” The former is usually defined as “the exercise of imperialism as a collaborative project between multiple imperial states,” signifying a state-centric approach.<sup>195</sup> The notion of co-dependency, by contrast, refers to the idea that there is an unspoken “co-dependent relationship between empires,” albeit one that is usually never acknowledged.<sup>196</sup> Given the previous East India Company-Crown and now Daewoo-Korean-Madagascan government relationships, it seems that such symbiotic alliances can exist also between states and corporations alongside their local allies. Moreover, as this case illustrates, this sort of arrangement is not an artifact of the past and remains relevant today.

For some critics of these new land leasing proposals one of the dangers is that the interests of the corporate actors will trump those of the peoples within the state. Lee Raymond, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, is on record for saying that, “I don’t make decisions based on what’s good for the U.S.”<sup>197</sup> This corporate-first policy is especially concerning where “low-income countries have weaker bargaining power in negotiating agreements.”<sup>198</sup> As a result, although there is no disputing the fact that states have agency and in theory could regulate the market if “strong enough,”<sup>199</sup> their room for manoeuvre is limited. As Bush argues, when corporate and local interests align, it only serves to “diminish the power of nation-states.”<sup>200</sup> As a result of this client subordination, Streets-Salter and Getz argue that such an unequal relationship is an imperial one.<sup>201</sup> To be sure, the East India Company’s Robert Clive certainly put the company’s interests over that of the government in whose forces he served.<sup>202</sup> A similar picture occurs with Korean politics whereby economic and political policies which were developed in the 1980s “mostly tailored to suit the interests of the chaebols.”<sup>203</sup> Not surprisingly, when Cheru and Obi talk about local African agency in attracting investment, they simultaneously warn about the dangers of “neo-colonialism by invitation.”<sup>204</sup>

Such large-scale land-scale acquisitions and swaps are not just occurring in Africa. Commentators are recognising that variations of such developments are happening elsewhere. The Prime Minister of New Zealand introduced a moratorium on house sales to wealthy foreigners.<sup>205</sup> The most controversial of these was the acquisition, by PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, of an area the size of lower Manhattan as a retreat in the event of an apocalypse.<sup>206</sup> In 2019, former US President Donald Trump drew international media attention where he proposed purchasing the entire island of Greenland. The next year, he

suggested selling Puerto Rico. Also in 2019, the then-prime minister of Australia Kevin Rudd suggested that Tuvaluans may want to take Australian citizenship in exchange for Australia taking direct control over that island nation and its EEZ. Many of these contemporary examples, like the historical ones discussed above, are being discussed as legal transactions; hence this form of expansionism is viewed as nearly ordinary and so goes almost unnoticed in the international press. It was only the Greenland incident which appears to have incited significant Western interest, possibly because: it was so overt, it involved two western states and because Trump notified the world by tweet. By contrast, events in Africa or the Pacific do not garner the same levels of media attention.

With decolonisation post-World War II, says Bush, “the world supposedly entered the post-imperial era.”<sup>207</sup> Indeed, neo-Marxist, dependency, and globalisation theories suggest that instead new modes of informal or indirect imperial power had subsequently begun to rise, replacing older, state-driven colonial practices. Hardt and Negri, for instance, advocated that the end of the Soviet Union was accompanied by “a *new* logic and structure of rule . . . a new form of sovereignty,” within which older forms of traditional power, exemplified by the nation-state, lost their power.<sup>208</sup> Likewise, Bush labelled empire by multinational corporations a *new* approach to empire—that is, “imperialism without colonies.”<sup>209</sup> Similarly, in the wake of global warming and the so-called “new Scramble for Africa,” Frame argues that, “The imperialism of today is different from the imperialism of yesterday.”<sup>210</sup> And Obeng-Odoom suggested that because African land grabs of the twenty-first century were not state-centric and involved local actors buying or renting land, “a new variety of imperialism” was at play.<sup>211</sup>

This study has explored contemporary land grabbing as colonialist practice. As such, it can be seen perhaps as another expression of what Haraway refers to as “plantationocene” imperialism by linking the buying of land to economic and ecological colonial practices which primarily impact the Global South.<sup>212</sup> In doing so, however, this work has invited a re-think about traditional definitions of empire, and this has been the crux of the argument. It has mapped out some historical and contemporary examples of non-state imperial actors, in particular emphasising the historical significance of corporate empires, and has re-thought notions of size and core-led agency. Whilst doing so, it has moved beyond even more radical economic arguments of states and corporations using informal means to maintain or achieve control. Instead, taking up the challenge posed by Hoganson and Sexton “to call out empire,”<sup>213</sup> it has focused upon the longstanding but ignored practice of “monopoly imperialism” as an additional means, beyond conquest, for imperial actors of whatever hue to obtain *formal* territorial control. Like informal imperialism or dependency theory, this monopoly imperialism is also, however, under the radar. Consequently, contrary to Hart and Negri, Obeng-Odoom and Frame, and in the spirit of Gallagher and Robinson who argued “that there was no anti-imperial interlude in the mid-nineteenth century, but rather a consistent and continual press for empire,”<sup>214</sup> this work suggests that

whilst empire is certainly alive and well, this so-called post-imperial phase is perhaps not necessarily as different from the past as many assume. MNCs, with their private armies, state-like powers, emperor-CEOs, local compradors, and/or aspirations of territorial control through leasing or purchasing, appear rather as modern variants of a longer-standing corporate-imperial lineage stretching all the way back to the first Scramble for Africa, and then even further back in time to the history of the VOC, HBC and EIC.

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## NOTES

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