

“Staying away from Europe by Playing Its Rules of Conduct”

Eliga H. Gould: *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. pp. 344. ISBN: 9780674046085

Zoltán Peterecz

It is well known and understood that the once British colonists in becoming Americans and creating a new country had to struggle through various phases in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. One such phase was the War of Independence itself, in which the scattered new states had to prove they were military equal of the mighty British Empire. Another question was the domestic situation that for long remained chaotic once independence was achieved, and by being in such a fluid state, it endangered the whole independent status of the Union for a while. The third factor was the diplomatic arena in which the young United States had to make a stand and maneuver among more and less hostile European powers in order to be recognized not as an accident in history but a new chapter that came to stay.

Eliga Gould' new book, *Among the Powers of the Earth*, picks up this latter stream from a somewhat uncommon point of view. He does not deal with the intriguing and very important foreign diplomatic issues in detail, although these stay throughout in the background. Rather, he investigates how the United States rode an overall scheme in its relationship to European powers. That was, according to the author, the recognition of the importance of the treaties concluded between equal

partners and their trust that the other side would faithfully carry out the stipulations laid down in those treaties. As a newcomer, and often seen in terms of rebellious and not worthy of taking its place in the family of nations, let alone powers, the United States had to find the way to be seen as a country that deserved to sign a treaty with. On the other hand, as the book convincingly shows, the American administrations used this outer veneer of diplomatic recognition to make maximum use of freedom in dealing with others closer to home, such as Indians, African Americans, and other European subjects in America.

The author maintains throughout the book, which covers the period between the French and Indian War (1756–1763) and the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, in a convincing fashion how much the United States was dependent on the European question of war and peace. In Gould's thesis, the more the United States wanted to pry itself free of European entanglements, the more it took a very similar internationalist legal point of view. He emphasizes that for the new-born United States one of the most important things was to become an accepted partner, first and foremost, to the European powers. In order to do that, the United States had to become a treaty-worthy nation, the most often recurring term of the book, which, in the author's view, was just as equally important as the liberal and republican ideologies that have so prominently appeared in the post-World War II historiography. It is important that the struggle to attain this prominent level in the international arena, and, therefore, the future of the United States, was to a large degree dependent upon how the European powers related to it, or as Gould puts it, "the history they made was often the history that others were willing to let them make" (2).

In the wake of the defining peace treaties of Westphalia (1648) and Utrecht (1713), a law of nations slowly became the norm in Europe, which was not the reality, however, outside the European continent, for example, in America. There, Spanish or French privateers and Indians did not heed to the accustomed law of nations of Europe, and the plurality of the colonies did not help this matter either. The French and Indian War in the middle of the eighteenth century was a war between European powers reacting to trouble outside Europe. As a result of Britain's effort to extend the law of nations to America, the British became better "friends" of the Natives than the colonists. Still the origins of the Revolution, according to the author, did not lie simply in resentment to taxes by Britain "but in the bonds that tied them as never before to Europe's diplomatic republic" (42).

Britain tried to clamp down on any effort that seemed to endanger the peace on the high seas, as they saw it, so they doubled their effort during and after the French and Indian War to strike down on any type of smuggling. This, however, in the end was a major source of contention in the American colonies and, therefore, can be seen as another significant source of the Revolution. After the Seven Years' War, Britain maintained a 10,000-troop contingent in America to uphold the treaty against any violations from either France or Spain. The triple threat to Britain's effort to keep the treaty-bound peace on the North American continent came from other nations (France and Spain prominently), the Natives, and, mainly, the colonists. British colonists, who would become later Americans, took to a narrow interpretation of the British laws and peace efforts on the North American continent. Strangely, the would-be Americans wished to achieve as a nation the very same level, which they resented when their mother country earlier had tried to make them recognize it.

So, Gould states, "Americans recognized that independence was a condition that required the consent of other governments, not something that they could achieve unilaterally" (114). Two things especially complicated this issue. One such thing was that Americans were seen by many simply as rebels, or even criminals. The second was, largely stemming from the first, that "neither Britain nor Europe's other powers accepted them as treaty-worthy equals" (119). This was particularly true in the relationship with London, which after the War of Independence refused to grant Americans full commercial privileges. Britain opposed the young United States on the seas and on land, where it did not empty stations and provided materiel to the Indians. Low-grade hostilities characterized the relationship with Spain as well, and France also created some problems. The chaotic situation under the Articles of Confederation did not help either: on the one hand, Europeans did not see a unified country¹, on the other, the sovereign state made it difficult to carry out the provisions of the Treaty of Paris (1783), for example, such questions as the Loyalist compensation or claims of British creditors remained

¹ John Adams, on his proposal to enter into a commercial treaty with the former foe, Great Britain, was met with the cynical question, "Would you like one treaty or thirteen, Mr. Adams?" quoted in Janda, Kenneth, Jeffrey M. Berry, and Jerry Goldman. *The Challenge of Democracy. American Government in Global Politics*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2012, 71.

unresolved for years. Therefore, it further strengthened the view that the Americans were not treaty-worthy as a nation. That is why the Constitution of 1787 was so crucial. Not only did it create a strong central government and paved the way for a more unified country, but, as a consequence, with the ratification of the new Constitution, the United States managed to reach such a status that satisfied the European powers that it could be counted among their ranks.

The first real watershed from this vantage point was Jay's Treaty in 1794. It helped to avert the possibility of a future war against Great Britain, at least for the time being. Despite the almost unanimous clamor with which the treaty was greeted in the United States, because it was seen as subservient to British will, the treaty ensured that trade relations were further cultivated with the strongest empire in the world in the time of the French revolutionary wars. Also, the British at long last commenced the evacuation of various military posts on the territory of the United States. Perhaps more importantly, "the ceremonies" that accompanied the handing over of these garrisons, "confirmed that the United States now had a government worthy of Europe's respect" (139).

Gould expands the picture to minorities as well, which is a welcome novelty to the era in question. One such outstanding issue was naturally slavery. Although on paper slave trade was illegal, slaveholding was not. The nation's most important founding documents all embraced the legality of slavery, even if not by name, and the aforementioned Jay Treaty, an international treaty, only strengthened this feature. This duality, together with Britain's sometimes trepid enforcement of the law on the high seas, and Americans doing everything in their power not to submit themselves to such law enforcement by Britain, slave trade, illegal on paper after 1807, and slavery remained lucrative and essential in the south of the United States. This was the duality that characterized America so much until the Civil War: no slave trade but slavery, slavery-free states together with slave states, becoming party to the international treaty-bound community, but picking selectively the ones that referred to slavery. As a result, by the mid-1810s, "the United States enjoyed all the rights of a treaty-worthy nation, and those rights worked almost entirely to the advantage of the Union's slaveholding citizens" (177).

The other large group that was affected by the appearance of the new country in North America was the Native Americans. The British maintained good and, from the United States' point of view, detrimental relations with the Indian tribes. The First Seminole War in the Floridas

(1814–1819) then proved how much had changed in a few decades. The United States emerged as “not only a treaty-worthy nation in its own right but was increasingly able to impose its views on others” (179). The United States, after all, took this territory by the force of treaty, although the tangible force of Andrew Jackson played a crucial part in provoking those culminating treaties. Great Britain left the place for good, basically together with Spain, and both concluded treaties with the United States that established clear borders. The Indians, however, were deemed in Florida as extralegal, since they refused to acquiesce to the treaty made between the U.S. government and the Creek National Council. The Indians fell victim to the will of the United States, and the runaway slaves lost all hope to remain free in the Floridas. As Gould states, one of the main reasons for such events becoming possible was that “for the first time in the Union’s brief history, Europe was at peace, and, as a result, Americans were free to claim all the rights of a great treaty-worthy nation, including the right to make whatever peace they chose with their neighbors who lacked that status” (180).

The ensuing peaceful period had three major consequences for Gould. The American government had the right to decide over peoples’ faith within its sphere; it helped slavery to be maintained in the South; and it enabled “the United States to assume the role of a great nation in the lands and waters in its immediate vicinity” (215). However deeply entrenched the notion is that the United States sought absolute non-entanglement with Europe, Gould calls attention to the fact that the United States “remained entangled in deep and profound ways with the history of Europe, including, especially, Britain, and the same was true of the nations and peoples in the Union’s immediate vicinity” (218).

Gould’s book merits praise on at least two accounts. One is that his approach is not a narrow one readers are usually accustomed to. Largely relying on primary sources, he does not take only the “American” point of view, but deliberately takes into consideration that of the British and the Spanish, the Indians, and the African Americans. By doing so, he arrives at a more holistic picture of the discussed period. The other is that all this is done with a fluidity that does not render the reading heavy. With the small stories that are nonetheless very relevant to the larger topics being discussed, he manages to render the sometimes more abstract topics very tangible. The reader can be sure that their knowledge will be largely expanded by this new book, and it is only a question of time before it becomes a standard textbook at colleges.