Todd, David. *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, NJ/Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv+350. Paperback, $39.95.

Prior to the publication of *A Velvet Empire*, conventional wisdom associated empire with formal colonization and territoriality. David Todd offers a compelling analysis of how France's elites used "soft" cultural power to go after their imperial ambitions in the nineteenth century. From the outset, Todd raised the question as to how France, without extensive overseas colonies besides a few islands, trading posts, and Algeria, became a global second imperial power after Britain between 1815 and 1880. France's imperial strength, Todd argues, stemmed from its informal use of cultural, economic, and legal imperialism. Thus, *A Velvet Empire* focuses attention on the aspirations of French aristocratic and bourgeois elite that powered France's cultural and commercial success ("velvet empire") far and beyond its European borders. In effect, France in the nineteenth century was an imperial power without colonies. This, by no means, suggests that France opted for informal empire to the total neglect of formal empire, as French military incursions into Mexico, Southeast Asia, Lebanon, and Algeria show. Also, it highlights France's contribution to the expansion of imperialism and global capitalism. Todd asserts France's largely informal empire made a significant contribution to nineteenth-century globalization, adopting a subtler mechanism of coercion and collaboration than the formal British empire ever did. As Todd puts it, "France's informal empire was more sophisticated than Britain's, because it drew to a greater extent on "soft" cultural power, and used it in combination with conventional "hard" economic and military power" (p. 2.) The book comprises an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion.

The first chapter ("Empire Without Sovereignty: The Political Economy of French Informal Imperialism") examines the post-Napoleonic era that sought new ways to expand

France’s global influence without resorting to flexing military muscles. In fact, for French kings, including Napoleon III, in the nineteenth century, empire was more about capitalism than conquest. French statesmen and a broad spectrum of the intellectual elite and their advocacy of informal empire influenced official thinking about the place of France in the post-Napoleonic world. The elites viewed commerce and the extension of credit as alternatives to formal sovereignty. The significant exception to this pattern was the ruthless and formal colonization of Algeria in the mid-nineteenth century.

The second chapter (“Algeria, Informal Empire Mangue”) attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction between the informal posture of the French empire before 1870 and the invasion (1830) and annexation of Algeria. Todd contends that the formal colonization of Algeria was the unintended product of a failed project of informal colonialism. Todd maintains that “… the actual course of Algerian colonization was not entirely deliberate. Even in Algeria, at least some French players pursued informal empire. It was only once this project had failed that France’s political elite opted for formal conquest” (p. 121.) “Manque” suggests unfulfilled or frustrated in realizing an ambition. Todd points to failed efforts at collaboration with local elites, in terms of indirect rule in Algeria, but the Ottoman Empire, to which Algeria was a vassal, scuttled any collaboration with infidels. As it turned out, given the huge costs and lackluster economic returns, the Algerian conquest did not dissipate the French preference for informal empire. Thus, informal empire meant that France should pursue imperial expansion through commerce and credit without military coercion. This strategy implied a thriving industrial sector and boundless readiness to fund foreign loans.

The third chapter (“Champaigne Capitalism”) explores the origins of the cultural, political, and economic specialization in the provision of luxury and semi-luxury goods (wine, spirits, silk, perfumes, velvet jacquard cloth, ready-to-wear clothing) in a bid to understand how it facilitated the regaining of imperial status by France after 1815. Todd described it as the "imperialism of the empire of taste." A dazzling array of pleasures produced by champagne capitalism enticed foreigners. Foreign residents played a significant role in the Parisian and French economy as lavish consumers. Todd also noted that while the French were described as "shopkeepers of the world," other capitalist entrepreneurs, namely: Germans, English and Americans were the merchants. The French empire of taste provides a useful comparison with other capitalist imperial formations that relied on a sophisticated blend of cultural, economic, and military power, such as the United States in the twentieth century. America's Coca-Cola readily comes to mind. Todd observes that the similarities between the nineteenth-century French and twentieth-century American imperial domination relied on the command of global commodity chains as well as territorial control. The bottom line is that the economic power base of modern empires is anchored on cultural, as well as material factors.

The fourth chapter ("Conquest by Money: The Geopolitics and Logistics of Investment Colonization") examines the role of French financial institutions in extending loans abroad as an essential practice of informal empire. Among other loan beneficiaries in post-colonial Latin America, archival records show that the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire bankrolled his wars with French loans, just as France extended credit lines to its former colony of Haiti. While France served as creditor to foreign states, it amassed the largest national debt in the world. The French Treasury, in turn, managed the debt by floating bonds to the French public, who were ardent small-scale investors. Even housewives were known to channel their savings into state securities. The notion that finance could serve to leverage power abroad was championed by the leading lights in French political economy. Paris emerged, almost simultaneously with London, as an international market for government bonds.

The fifth chapter ("Agents of Informal Empire: French Expatriates and Extraterritorial Jurisdiction in Egypt") pieces together the emergence of French informal empire in Egypt before the latter's 1882 British annexation. Not only did French Consular officers exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction in Egypt, but also their effect on the Egyptian economy was enormous. Undoubtedly, French culture had a pivotal influence in Egyptian life. For example, the French gradually replaced Italian as the main communication medium with Europe. The status of French as a global language is evidence of France's informal empire. However, the global shift towards territorial colonization between 1860 and 1880 destabilized France's informal empire and prompted the resurgence of French formal imperialism in Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar, Tunisia, and Morocco.

Without question, kudos to David Todd for his impressive archival research that sourced *A Velvet Empire*. In highlighting French informal imperialism, the book acknowledges the role of France in the facilitation of global capitalism in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it complements our understanding of the four types of imperialism in the world: military, political, economic, and cultural.

Okori Uneke, PhD
Associate Professor of Behavioral Science
Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina