

AMERICA AMONG EMPIRES? IMPERIAL ANALOGUES AND IMPERIAL SYNDROME

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Can we justify placing the American case in a lecture series on empires? Some readers of my recent book, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, have already taken me to task for evading a definitive answer to the question, "Is America an Empire?" Not all questions lead to unambiguous conclusions, especially when much depends upon the definition of terms. What follows is an effort to explain the facets of this inquiry in terms of what can be learned from comparative history, and to suggest a more fruitful way of addressing the question. For this publication, I have preserved the tone of a lecture rather than rewriting my text, for I wish to convey the open-ended nature of this inquiry. (For the scholarly citations and elaboration of evidence, I encourage consultation of the book.¹)

The empire boom, so to speak, may have already faded, as the Bush administration winds down and the certitudes of the Iraqi intervention have yielded to doubts and setbacks. The Congressional elections of 2006 suggested further that many American voters had become skeptical of the administration's confident agenda to democratize the Middle East. Certainly most Americans today do not think they aspire to empire, although the founding generation of the Republic often used the term just to describe the vast dimensions of the country they had created. At a minimum, empires imply extensive territory, whether accumulated in one large land mass or in overseas possessions. As early as 1778, the South Carolina patriot David Ramsay had predicted that America's "substratum for empire" would propel the country beyond the conquests of the Macedonians, Romans, and British. But the original concept of empire as size was quickly overshadowed; it became identified with conquest, and a program inimical to the Republic for some, its destiny for others. For some commentators, the idea of the United States as empire seems an absurd proposition; for others, such as my colleague Niall Ferguson, the fact of American empire seemed self-evident and not particularly disturbing, although he, too, has become skeptical of our national resolve to sustain imperial tasks.

But there are further reasons for ambivalence. Taxonomy in the social sciences is always difficult, and often unfruitful. When sociologists or

historians identify a social or political category by induction, arguing whether the category does or does not include a particular case will often be inconclusive. Over the last half century, social scientists have had long debates about whether certain countries or individuals are “fascist”; whether or not some regimes are “totalitarian”; and whether one or another political upheaval is “revolutionary.” The discussions can strain our patience and, after a while, become familiar; but they can also advance analysis. And why should definitive answers be expected? After all, as we’ve learned from Aristotle through Weber, an ideal type will not fit any individual case exactly: It’s an abstraction from all of them.

Historians like to think that it is only sociologists or political scientists who earn their living by arguing whether typologies adequately fit particular cases. Historians supposedly tend toward philosophical nominalism: If the abstraction never really exists, and no case will fully instantiate it, why constantly argue about it? Instead, let’s take refuge in the singularity that we can readily claim for every historical phenomenon. This stance, of course, reflects the classical German historiographical tradition that stressed the development of unique entities, usually nations and states, but occasionally larger, though still one-of-a-kind sociocultural formations, such as the Western bourgeoisie for Max Weber or the medieval statist tradition for Otto Hintze. But, in fact, despite the traditions of our guild, we historians, like policy advisers or journalists, have to play the same game as social scientists.

The problem is not that historians must search for general laws; rather, we cannot avoid describing most of the objects we study by reference to other cases. Like sociologists, historians argue that a persuasive mass of similarity is or is not present—similarity in terms of comparable structure, or function, or behavior. Underlying all these approaches is the question: What is it like?—“it” in this case being the United States’ historical role in world politics.² Not every form of knowledge is analogical, but increasingly, I think, a great deal of historical argument tends to be. “Is the United States an empire?” amounts to the question of whether the US has become in some critical dimensions similar to other megastates we agree to term empires.

Still, the utility of such a question is not just one of nomenclature, although to name a phenomenon does provide a degree of intellectual satisfaction. The real objective of the question “Is the United States an empire?” is to ascertain what elements in structure or behavior resemble earlier constellations of ideology and power we have agreed to term empires. The exercise involves breaking down the properties of empire. After all, what is worth knowing is not the name for the US regime, but the elements of American behavior. The stakes are civic and practical. If we Americans can’t say exactly what we are, we can say in what ways we

are likely to act. Thus the task is to explore those aspects of society and politics we find throughout the history of empires.

The problem, of course, is that there is no one pattern or analogue. Historical interpretation remains a struggle over the appropriate basis for analogy. If empire means possessing populated colonies abroad, such as the British, French, and Dutch did, then the term makes little sense for the United States. For Chalmers Johnson, the control of about seven hundred military installations abroad constitutes an empire, although without the ambition of ruling foreign peoples, many would say it lacks a decisive attribute. If empire refers not to colonization, but rather to a less formalized search for decisive control by intervening to remove governments we dislike and installing those we prefer, i.e., engaging in so-called regime change, then the United States should be reckoned as imperial, although most American policy discourse never describes regime change as imperial.

If the analogue of empire refers to political structures at home, that is to a state where the executive is given powers of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment and the representative assembly is reduced to a rubber stamp role, then there is room for debate about whether the contemporary United States fits. Most commentators, however, probably separate temporary, wartime emergencies, where "exceptional" control may be delegated to the executive (as it has been at least since the Roman Republic), from regimes that perpetuate exceptional control in times of peace as well as war. Empires are structures that persist in peace as well as war. To pass through an episode of executive centralization and suspension of earlier civil rights does not entail becoming a different regime. Most such delegations in American history seem to have been temporary expedients, if not aberrations. They have quickly ended. That is why my current answer to the question of whether we are an empire is, "Not yet." Of course, the provisional can be indefinitely prolonged, and when the executive claims we shall be at war for an indefinitely prolonged period, the situation is rendered more fraught. Only future historians will be able to tell us if the implausible came to pass, or just dissipated after a time.

If the analogue of empire is a historical process by which rule over an extensive territory is acquired by military expansion, then historians differ over how much a process of conquest was involved in filling the continental land mass the United States acquired beginning in the late eighteenth century. The question also remains whether a state geographically constructed, at least in part, by a process of imperial expansion must thereby remain an empire. Do the Cherokee removals and the Mexican War remain, so to speak, a sort of historical original sin?

My own preference is to seek the analogue of empire in functional and performative criteria; that is, in terms of what empires have sought

to accomplish and how they have behaved. Empires, so I suggested in my book, are best understood as a program by the elites of different national groups to stabilize their societies and their distributive norms by spatial as well as social hierarchy. Empires thus are about inequality across a spatial domain; call this horizontal domination. Empires are large enough to have differentiated territories that include a center and a perimeter, metropole and periphery. But empire is also about vertical domination. It helps keep certain groups wealthy and powerful, and it recruits others by birth or talent to become wealthy and powerful. And it helps assure this inequality within each territorial component. An empire is thus an arrangement, whether negotiated voluntarily or by force, in which elites in the so-called periphery accept the ultimate control of elites in the metropole in return for securing their own local domination. The security sought can be against outside rivals and domestic subversives, or both simultaneously. Empires thus rest on collaborators, but they are not alliances of equals, but rather structures of inequality, both inside their homeland and within the imperial structure as a whole.

Critics have objected that this functional arrangement can be better labeled merely as hegemony, a natural result of overwhelming US power and resources. I have suggested that empire can be distinguished by the fact that would-be defectors from an empire are punished, from Mitylene to Budapest and Prague. According to this model, the United States settled for a hegemonic role in much of Western Europe during the Cold War, but has tended to enforce, or try to enforce, a Caribbean empire. Ultimately, empires are about domination. Their leaders presuppose a political world in which peoples either rule or are ruled. Perhaps at advanced stages, they can be reorganized as a confederation of autonomous dominions or associated states, but this is rare.

In addition to structure and function, there is the evidence of behavior. Empires reveal certain characteristic modes of operation that I term the imperial syndrome. Some relate to the international role of empires, some to their internal procedures. I enumerate nine such traits here.

1. First, empires tend to pursue a typical spatial dynamic. They enlarge territory or influence to confirm their own new political order, and then they must defend the contested boundaries they have extended to avoid endangering the expansion just attained. Territories once occupied are hard to relinquish, sometimes for perfectly valid reasons of having taken on responsibilities toward the inhabitants, who might otherwise descend into fratricidal violence. The managers of empire need not premeditate expansion and continuing control of additional territory, although many obviously have done so. Most project managers of empire rarely have a vision of their cumulative power; but, like a ratchet, their acquisitions conduce to expanded commitments. Every time an expanded

frontier is stabilized, threats come from just across the new frontier. Retreat or retrenchment often seems catastrophic, and there is always an unpacified and menacing site of disorder just beyond the limits already reached. Every new border, every new acquisition, every new base, creates surrounding instability that often calls for further expansion. An alliance founded in 1949 to protect Western Europeans from invasion now finds itself patrolling Afghanistan at the behest of its major organizer.

2. Second, therefore, the imperial syndrome involves a particular relationship to the use of force. It lives with the possibility of force, it believes it is summoned to perpetual battle: The idea of war evolves from that of a particular conflict to a generalized state of national challenge. Empires are often at war. They often arise out of war; they maintain their domains through force or the threat of force; they collapse often in conflict. In this respect, the end of the Soviet Union was a striking exception, although Chechnya reveals that not every region might be relinquished easily. Finally, empires leave wars behind them as a legacy: Think of Ireland, Palestine, Kashmir, and Nigeria in the case of Britain, or the Congo in the case of Belgium. Of course, nation-states are frequently at war, too, but it is more difficult for the empire, with its preoccupation with frontiers and control, to forsake the military dimension of statehood. Perhaps empires bring peace to the interior of their large domains. This was Virgil's famous description of Augustus's task: To humble the arrogant, raise the oppressed, and impose the habits of peace. But there is always violence on some frontier, someplace, for each frontier imposed usually means violence just beyond it. The state of war becomes the normal state—there are many advantages to such a conviction. It justifies an executive politics. Empires maintain decisive reservoirs of force, and control of that force is what defines the imperial executive. The advent of the nuclear age placed that power in the hands of the American president, and according to some analysts, thus decisively transformed the constitutional weight of the executive.³

3. Third, and as a consequence of the tendency toward expansion, imperial regimes are preoccupied with frontiers. Politics in the empire is often made at the frontier, and the consequences flow toward the center. Often the interventions are direct: Caesar returns from Gaul to descend on Rome; Bonaparte returns at the behest of his political allies from Egypt to seize power in Paris; Britain defines much of its politics under pressure from the challenges of Ireland and of India; Japanese soldiers in Manchuria plunge their country into the vortex of militarism; de Gaulle imposes the Fifth Republic because the Fourth cannot resolve the issue of Algeria, and indeed, military rebellion spreads from Algiers to Corsica. General MacArthur helps to poison the atmosphere in Washington as he

returns from Korea, and Senator McCarthy attributes the loss of China to the machinations of Reds at home. The claims of the frontier vie with grievances at home to shape the politics of the Republic. To be sure, US politics undergoes great convulsions because of slavery and economic depression, but it does so as well because of the lure of Cuba, Mexican possessions, our trade across the Pacific and the Atlantic, or our connections in China. Finally, frontiers are never simply frontiers. They are also portals across which the poorer populations of the controlled territories will stream to make a new life within the borders of the empire, or, in the case of overseas colonial empires, in the metropole: whether Ostrogoths, Pakistanis, Algerians, or Hispanics. The imperial syndrome entails a continuing dialogue, but often a violent one, between the interests at the frontier and those at the center.

4. Empires are thus constructed in a dialectical process with those who resist. Resistance begins where the borders end, and where the claims of rule meet the demands for autonomy. Resistance is endemic; often, it seems merely bloody-minded, petty, reactionary. It does not manifest itself everywhere, but at least somewhere. To be an empire is usually to confront at least one site of resistance, external or internal. That is one reason why anti-imperialists at home are often so ineffective: They do not like open resistance, which is messy, uncontrollable, and requires unattractive allies at home and sometimes supporting enemies abroad. The power that empire possesses can finally be contested only on the streets, and liberals shrink from that unpredictable mobilization, and thus are left often to hand-wringing after another *fait accompli*. Let me admit that this description of confrontation is too stark. Since I described the dialectic of resistance in my book, one critic has usefully pointed out that for many colonial subjects of an empire (especially the overseas empires that prevailed until after the Second World War), the tactic is not resistance, but a sort of transaction or contestation (what Frederick Cooper terms “claims making”)—a struggle within the norms allowed by the colonizers to achieve as much autonomy and influence as possible. The colonial subject carves out domains of relative independence in labor relations, local government, and the like, which can, in fact, lead to the dismantling of the colonial project.⁴

5. So far we have cited only the dimensions of force and power. But empires expand in pursuit of some big idea: the rule of law or “citizenship,” in the case of Rome and Britain; the Catholic Church, in the case of Spain; culture, or economic growth, or, paradoxically, even the spread of liberty and democracy. The question of whether the idea motivates the advocates of empire or merely justifies their ventures gets into non-historical issues such as the nature of sincerity. Any successful empire needs a big idea. Empires thus enlist intellectuals as their justifiers. They

support culture. These great intellectual constructs often have a common structure: They propose at one level a shared interest among rulers and ruled—whether salvation, or economic advance, or cultural, scientific, or hygienic acquisitions—and justify the (at least temporary) tutelage of those in charge. At their base lies a conviction of what postcolonial writers have termed “difference.” Only the most predatory empires, such as the Third Reich, have suggested that those conquered have no benefits to gain from being ruled by conquerors. Nonetheless, the more racially constructed such ideas of hierarchy are, the less reciprocity they will allow.

6. Empires have another potentially beneficial value: They can nurture group tolerance, granting religious pluralism or a special role for diasporas; they also allow for enclaves of autonomy within their extensive spatial domains. They often welcome immigrants, especially those from the peripheries that they dominate. North Africans, Pakistanis, and Latinos have flowed into the countries that have often dominated them. This does not mean that empires do not assign such migrants inferior roles, or that they erase racial prejudice. And where migrants achieve high status or play key socioeconomic roles within empires, as Armenians or Jews or overseas Chinese have, they sometimes face murderous backlashes from either other subject peoples or the dominant ethnicities of the empire. Still, nation-states often impose greater conformity on minority entrants than empires. Nation-states are high on indices of belonging but potentially low on tolerance. Empires can be high on official tolerance, but low on belonging.

7. All this means that the imperial syndrome is built on the confidence that somehow one’s own state is exceptional, that it cannot be called to account by the others, and thus that it *should* not be—that it obeys a higher law. “Trust us: We’re different.” American exceptionalism has had a long and venerable tradition, but we usually think of it as Tocquevillian exceptionalism, or that spelled out by Louis Hartz a half-century back: the absence of feudalism, the existence of religious pluralism, the welcome extended to immigrants, and the vast reserves of free and open land. But I am talking about a less appealing sort of exceptionalism—the belief that great power grants great rights. Perhaps call it the American *Sonderweg*. Both the British and the Germans had this confidence before 1914, as did most other large states. There was arrogance, to be sure. But what made the attitude even more dangerous was the inner reassurance of virtuousness, the belief that ultimately one’s own country’s behavior was more responsible than that of the others. So, too, the conviction that whatever abuses might be uncovered—whether Herero massacres in German Africa, or concentration camps in the Boer War, or Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo detentions—were atypical exceptions.

8. The imperial syndrome also involves a particular relationship of rulers to ruled, of those who govern to their own population. An imperial regime searches not for discussion and deliberation, but for approval and acclamation. It measures popularity. The media replace parliamentary debate, and if there is any symptom of empire, it is the attrition of representative bodies. Perhaps they are formally kept in existence: Even Hitler preserved a mock Reichstag. But even in less pathological states, government by debate loses its integrity and capacity. Granted, these tendencies afflict modern democracies in general, especially when they face complex social choices. Decisions get passed to courts as well as to legislatures. But the attrition of legislative procedures in a democracy usually arises from the complexity of issues; in a proto-imperial situation, it results as a response to alleged security dangers. Parliamentary delegates accept the executive's diagnosis of danger rather than risk being seen as anti-patriotic. They pass blanket delegations of power. And even if they insist on legislation, the executive claims the right to interpret the laws that they might pass. Popularity becomes the ultimate measure. Now if those ruling fail in their enterprises, they can lose popularity very quickly. But until public opinion turns adverse, acclamation, photo-ops, spectacular games, and staged pageants replace debate. There are exceptions: Rule by committee or by party can continue, as it did in the French Third Republic. But even here, the issues that define empire and foreign policy are withdrawn from the arena of debate and discussion. The executive, individual or collective, reserves more and more of them. Empire, like authoritarian government more generally, involves the rule of the exception: There is always an exceptional danger that defines imperial politics; and the imperial syndrome embodies Carl Schmitt's notion that he who controls the exception in effect controls even democratic politics.

9. The imperial syndrome involves a rampant growth of privilege and inequality that corrupts an earlier civic spirit. This does not mean that, as measured by Gini coefficients or other statistical indices, society is less equal as a whole. Empires can be democratic at home—the British expanded the suffrage as they expanded their empire; the French Third Republic was Europe's most democratic regime, and it conquered Vietnam and Morocco—but empires cannot let their subject peoples share the same democratic ground rules. And even as they may extend formal equality, and even income equality toward the bottom, they give the top immense new opportunities for enrichment. This presents grave difficulties of judgment. If millions of middle-income families are each given a small tax rebate, while at the same time several thousand wealthy citizens can each reduce their bill by thousands or millions, the legislation may increase formal measures of equality because of the mass of less affluent citizens affected. But who can doubt which distribution has a greater

impact on civic participation, on the control of the media, or the sense of a gulf that separates ordinary citizens from those who emerge enriched? One of the curiosities of American public discourse is that growing income inequality, while often commented on (although so far hardly contested), is discussed solely as a domestic issue. Few commentators who are not considered on the radical fringe make a connection between the growth of inequality within the United States and the claims that the country has made for international primacy. However, this is the transaction that the imperial syndrome usually involves: not robbing the poor to pay the rich, although the periphery may be despoiled to pay the center, but fobbing off the humble so that privilege becomes more and more spectacular. For a while, public games, reality TV, philanthropy, and the admirable but hardly taxing (indeed often tax-exempt) charitable deeds of those enriched may counteract the emergence of populist class politics. How long that lasts is not at all clear.

Having identified these behavioral properties, which I believe the United States reveals along with empires of the past, one can take up the question again: whether America is or is not an empire. I have attempted frankly to finesse this question, which I think must always be dependent upon definition, to focus instead on structural similarities and patterns of behavior—on analogue and syndrome. Empire, for all of its variations, has been an enduring political form, a historically compelling method by which multiple political authorities can divide up the surface of the globe on which we live, given that diverse ethnic units have had vastly different levels of development. Empires have been major components of global politics since antiquity. Certainly the United States belongs among the ranks of the powerful global actors: It illustrates comparable structural and functional features, and it has behaved in some, if not all, comparable ways.

Still, commentators whom I admire have claimed that the age of empires has ended. Frederick Cooper seeks, I think, to downplay the invocations of empire in order to focus on colonialism.⁵ I would agree that the age of colonial empires is over; but while empire and colonial empire may overlap, as Cooper himself explains, they are not identical. If compelled to wager, I think that the most likely long-term organization of world politics will involve increasing levels of supranational association without imperial hierarchization, but history always vouchsafes surprises. I do not think that globalization brings with it necessarily either imperial or pluralist associations. Some would argue that the age of empire has ended because the presupposition of territory—preminent political control within borders—has changed fundamentally due to globalization. (Exploring the evolution of territoriality has become my current research project.) Of course, powerful and wealthy states possess

influence outside bordered space. Sometimes, as was the case for Great Britain, this influence is called informal empire, and rests on monetary coordination and cultural attraction. In the American context, this capacity is merely termed soft power, to use the term Joseph Nye originated. My own view is that a stubborn component of territoriality still clings to world politics, and to American ambitions for international order. Even in the age of the Internet and all the processes lumped together as globalization, global power is always contested in specific places, whether those sites be on the perimeter of control or in the heart of the metropole's cities.

Of course, historical structures will not be, and never were, just what they have been hitherto. Even so, we will continue to reason by analogue and similarity. Natural scientists reason and infer existence by two different research programs, according to Peter Galison's monumental study *Image and Logic*.⁶ Deductive reasoning, expressed today in digital form, appeals to one community; mimetic representation appeals to another. Both use experimentation, but experiments and instruments designed to produce one validating sort of data or another. We historians, I think, utilize analogue procedures as a sort of image program, and tend to distrust deductive research programs such as neo-realism or rational-action paradigms. So once again I fall back on analogy when reflecting on how historians work, as well as on what they study. That is why working with the analogue of empire seems to me a fruitful approach. Does it diminish historical understanding, when asked whether the United States is an empire, to say that it has come to behave (at least in recent years and perhaps decades) like an empire and exhibits the syndrome of empire? At the end, I would also say that as a political and moral challenge, perhaps even more than an epistemological one, we must take the current analogue of empire very seriously.

Notes

¹ *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). I have given earlier versions of the current argument in the Fritz Stern lecture at the American Academy in Berlin in May 2006, and in a "forum" contribution to the newsletter of the Historical Society, *Historically Speaking*.

² I am not trained as a philosopher, and the philosophical problems of analogy are difficult. But for some recent discussions I found helpful, see Esa Itkonen, *Analogy as Structure and Process: Approaches in Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology and Philosophy of Science* (Amsterdam, 2005), 25–35. See also Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (Cambridge, 1983), with its skepticism about the uses of explanation (53). Analogies are often constructed with a type of pictorial quality we associate with metaphor (on which there is another large literature) that can pack a rhetorical punch. By analogy I am not referring to the similarity of historical situations (e.g. whether Vietnam or Iraq should have been interpreted in terms of Munich), but to the underlying tendency to infer and describe in terms of a supposed archetype. Of course, the issue remains how we decide what repertory of models are available and relevant.

³ Franz Schurman, the Sinologist, advanced this analysis a generation ago. See *The Logic of World Power: An Inquiry into the Origins, Currents, and Contradictions of World Politics* (New York, 1974).

⁴ I owe this insight to Thomas Metcalf. See his review of *Among Empires* to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*. But the analysis also informs Frederick Cooper's studies of British and French African colonies, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996), and more briefly in Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 204–30.

⁵ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 26–32.

⁶ Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago, 1997).