

The Persistence of Empires

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Empires are not necessarily the obsolete political form that the historiography likes to condemn. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper offer a global and long-term history that convincingly shows their relevance and complexity. Should not the European Union look at empires of the past to define its sovereignty?

This text is the English version of a presentation Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper gave on their book *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010) on June 2 2010 at la Vie des idées.

The origins of our book go back to 1999, when we created a new seminar at the University of Michigan, called “Empires, States, and Political Imagination.” One motivation for this course was our discontent with the popular narrative of world history told as an inevitable movement from a world of empires to a world of nation-states. This supposedly obligatory transition was an *idée fixe* in historiography when we were students in the 1960s. Later, our graduate students were influenced by Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*, which came out in 1983. They accepted, for the most part, the idea that political imagination in the 19th and 20th centuries was necessarily national – the triptych of one people, one government, one territory. But in our view this perspective does not correspond to historical reality.

We also wanted to get beyond another, more recent, approach – that of colonialism or “post-colonial” studies. This kind of interpretation – founded in large part on a critique of euro-centric approaches – itself reproduces euro-centrism, with its values turned upside down. Europe, from this perspective, is no longer the source of progress for world, but it is still Western Europe that dynamizes – but this time for the worse – world history. Colonial

studies either ignore history before the 19th century or generalizes about “coloniality” – represented as a single, unified European project that lasted from the 15th to the 20th centuries.

Our book presents a history that is more inclusive both in time and space – a broad canvas of 2000 years of history, from ancient Rome and China to the present. We write about empire without privileging concepts like “modernity” or “the expansion of Europe” as explanatory concepts. The so-called old empires did not transform themselves into nations, and only then set out to extend themselves overseas for glory and national prosperity. The idea of a modern colonialism made by “new empires” toward the end of the 19th century – a colonialism more rational than that of ancient empires – is interesting as an ideological construction of its time, but contestable as a description of the actual ways that Europeans exercised power in Africa and Asia. From a long-term perspective, we see that the Western European empires that thought of themselves as the most advanced in history – assured of their technological, cultural, and racial superiority – only lasted a few decades, while the Byzantine empire lasted for over a thousand years, and a succession of Chinese dynasties have claimed an imperial tradition for more than two millennia.

A “modernist” perspective not only eclipses the power of the empires of the past, it also obstructs our vision of the context in which political innovations were made during previous centuries and up to the present. Our goal was to write a history that was more global and more long term, one that could explain how the empires of Asia and Eurasia, as much as Mediterranean or American empires, have structured the possibilities and constraints of political life.

We now want to present briefly the main themes of our book. Let us begin with our definition of empire. We consider an empire to be a large political unit, expansionist or with a memory of expansion across space, a political entity that maintains distinctions and hierarchy as it incorporates new people. We can distinguish empires from kingdoms, tribes, or city-states, as well as from nation-states. We use the word “state” in a general sense, referring to the institutionalization of power, to make possible a comparative discussion of different political entities. In this sense, there are both empire-states and nation-states, and one form of power can be transformed into the other.

As long as political ambition exists, alongside differences among societies, the temptation to make empire will be present. And, since empires reproduce differences among people, the possibility of fission and the recombination of elements will also persist. This is why the empire form of state is found so often in history, but also why empires are put together and pulled apart over the centuries.

Imperial repertoires

There were many ways to govern empires and many ways to govern different regions of the same empire. We use the concept of “imperial repertoires” to trace out the mixes, combinations, and transformations of imperial practices. The Ottoman Empire, for example, managed to blend traditions from Eurasia – from Turkic and Mongol empires – with Byzantine experience – thus from the Roman empire – and with practices of the Islamic caliphates. To administer their multi-confessional empire, the Ottomans counted on the elites of each religious community without trying to assimilate or destroy them. The Sultan proclaimed himself the guardian of Islam, but at the same time he recruited his closest servitors from Christian villages in the Balkans. Boys converted to Islam and trained in the palace became administrators and military leaders, cut off from all social linkages except those that linked them to the Sultan himself.

France, an empire that called itself modern, governed people who had different statuses and rights. In the mid 20th century, the French empire included, in addition to the *métropole*, old colonies like Guadeloupe where people had been citizens since 1848, new colonies in Africa and Asia where people had the status of subjects, protectorates where the king or sultan remained sovereign formally, but under the control of French administrators, and the people kept their own nationality, and Algeria, whose territory had been incorporated into the French Republic but where the population was divided into citizens and subjects.

The French Republic thus faced similar challenges to those that confronted ancient China or the Ottoman Empire: to make persons from different regions obey and to offer them a reason to cooperate with the imperial power. A varied repertoire gave empires flexibility and could help them to adjust to change.

The politics of difference

We use this term more broadly and more neutrally than today's multi-culturalists. The demand for recognition of distinct ethnic or confessional communities by the state is only one way to make difference an element of politics. The politics of difference, in some empires, could mean recognizing the multiplicity of peoples and their varied customs as an ordinary fact of life and as a tool for rulers. The center could construct ties to the elites of each community. Elites could be linked to the center by vertical relationships, without horizontal ties to other elites in the empire. In other empires, the politics of difference meant drawing a strict boundary between undifferentiated insiders and "barbarian" outsiders. These empires tried to eliminate cultural differences by forced assimilation, extermination, expulsion or by a combination of these strategies.

The Roman Empire produced an imperial culture founded on the republican politics of the city of Rome and on practices from conquered regions around the Mediterranean. Rome created a new political institution: a citizenship extendable to others, outside the limits of the city of Rome. Rome's citizenship, its judicial system, the advantages of a large scale economy, its urban practices and its artistic productions attracted elites of diverse origins. Becoming Roman was both possible and attractive. After Rome adopted Christianity as a state religion in the 4th century CE, the Roman way became more homogenizing. This idea of universal empire founded on citizenship later influenced other empires in Europe and elsewhere.

The Mongols' imperial strategies offer a strong contrast to this homogenizing tendency. Their empires were not built around a fixed capital, or a central cultural or religious conception, but founded on a superior person, the Great Khan. The Mongols were pragmatically open-minded when it came to religion, ethnicity, and culture. Mongol empires sheltered Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. Mongol rulers fostered arts and sciences produced by Arab, Persian, and Chinese civilizations. Mongols treated diversity as an advantage and a sign of the grandeur of their realms.

In China, successive dynasties produced another means to manage elites and populations. Administrators were recruited by merit and compensated by the state. This offered a framework for the mobilization, incorporation, and control of elites of many

religions, even when the dynastic rulers came from outside, such as the Mongols (Yuan) and the Manchus (Qing).

European empires in Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries hesitated between an assimilationist tendency – motivated by their confidence in the superiority of western civilization – and a tendency to indirect rule, to govern through the elites of conquered communities, without being able to choose between them or find a just middle. Only in narrow limits – zones of European settlement, mining regions, or big cities – did colonial rule in Africa actually approach its image in official descriptions, or even in the eyes of those who criticized its abuses. European officials could not admit to themselves how much their tactics resembled those of the past, including those of the Mongols: for inflicting terror, the soldier with a machine gun replaced the horsemen with his bows and arrows.

Intermediaries

We arrive at a central theme of our book: the importance of intermediaries to the administration of empires. Rulers faced the challenge of ruling at a distance and administering different people. These were tasks that they could not carry out by themselves. What kind of intermediaries to rely on and how to keep them loyal were common imperial challenges, but empires took different approaches to the problem. Agents from the imperial center and colonials arrived with their networks and skills acquired in the *métropole* – which was advantageous for the empire – but these also presented a double danger: the lack of knowledge of local societies and the temptation for the new arrivals to create a version of their society of origin, independent of the imperial power. Such cases of succession happened in the British and Spanish Americas.

Another approach was to use the skills, knowledge, and authority of people from a conquered society. This solution had the advantage of reducing administrative expenses by incorporating local elites into structures of clientelism linked to the center. The disadvantages were the potential autonomy of these elites, their proximity to their own social base, and their separation from the *métropole* with its methods and interests. A third possibility was using people who were detached from their communities of origin, by enslavement, competitive examinations, or other means.

In principle, recent European empires should have replaced such personal structures of intermediation by bureaucracies – but they did so more on paper than in reality. In the vast spaces of Africa, the French administrator considered himself “*le roi de la brousse*,” the king of the back country, but like other kings, he depended on numerous intermediaries to make his power felt. A colonial official needed chiefs, guards, translators, all of whom were trying to find an advantage for themselves while the colonial power exploited their assistance.

At a time when the Ottoman empire was constrained by its military and economic defeat to adopt technologies from “western” empires, the British in India “ottomanized” themselves, following the logic of an empire founded on land revenues, conscious of the dangers of going too far with reforms or mobility, dependent on elites capable of managing local social relations. Throughout the history of empires, intermediaries were essential but dangerous.

Political imagination

The leaders of empires imagined their possibilities and challenges in particular situations. Their imaginations were neither limited to one idea nor infinite, but they defined at any particular moment, the horizon of possibility. Local elites and subjects had their imaginations too, and we need to understand them in their contexts, not ours.

Rulers wanted to make their power visible and acceptable, and to exclude alternatives. Monotheism, for example, was adopted by defenders and builders of many empires – Roman emperor Constantine and later by Mohammad. The idea of one empire, one God, and one emperor was a powerful one. But the other face of monotheism was schism, the argument that the current emperor was not the proper guardian of the true faith.

The universalism of the catholic Habsburg monarchs facilitated their effort to incorporate American peoples into a Christian community, but Catholic monarchy was also the basis of Bartolomé de las Casas’s denunciation of colonial practices. Antislavery organizations in the late 18th and early 19th centuries took up the crusade of las Casas, but in the ideological language of their time. For at least some of the British public, the empire in which they believed was disgraced by the abuses inflicted on African slaves, whose culture was very different, and who lived on islands most British subjects had never seen.

Imperial trajectories

Rather than presenting history as a succession of epochs, each one with some characteristic distinguishing it from its predecessor, we argue that the world did not all dance to the same rhythms or in the same direction. Empires are not static: they emerge, transform themselves, and disappear, but may leave their marks on other polities and on world history.

The continental expansion of the United-States is an example of a trajectory that moved in the direction of homogenization, either by assimilation – as with the populations immigrating from Europe – or extermination and exclusion – as with the indigenous peoples. The trajectory, after the civil war had ended the distinction between slave and free states, was toward a single structure – toward legally equivalent states – and toward a national ideology. Even at the height of its power, the American empire did not want to rule colonies or to give people of color the rights of American citizens.

The USSR offers an example of reified difference. Founded on the imperial tradition cultivated by the Russian empires that preceded it, the USSR was a composite of national republics. National elites were connected to the center by party networks, and disciplined through police power.

In China, a succession of dynasties, including outsiders like the Yuan and Qing, claimed the space of a unified empire, while modifying their repertoires of practice. The nationalists of 1912 and the Communists of 1939 attempted to keep the borders established by the Manchus. The rulers of today's China must face old tensions in Tibet and the Muslim west and find means to control multiple religious and ethnic groups on their territory.

The trajectories of several empires help us better understand the European Union today. The European past is rich in of efforts to incorporate diverse peoples and territories into a single political entity, but also in ferocious fights to prevent such an outcome. The ambitions of Napoleon or Hitler were countered by efforts of other empires, notably those of Russia and Britain. The mutual destruction of the Second World War – another war among empires – so weakened all European powers that imperial conquest of the whole was no longer possible. Western European countries were free to imagine new forms of

supranational institutions in the framework of a union which is, like empires, complex and difficult to manage.

To conclude, we consider the history of the present moment. The history of empires makes the instability and the possibilities of the last two centuries more visible and understandable. Several tensions between political visions and organizations remain unresolved to this day, even in a so-called modern era that likes scientific certainties.

First there is the tension between the conventional notion of a territorial state and the fact that the strongest states – in the 21st century as in the 16th – do not want to limit themselves in space and profited from flexibility in the way they exercised power across regions and peoples.

A second long-lasting tension is between the arrogance of conquerors—in the Roman empire in Gaul or the British empire in Africa – who think of themselves as masters of the world and the need of conquerors to seek the cooperation of intermediaries among people they thought inferior. We still see such a tension in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

Third is the tension between the desire of political elites to control their own destiny and the fact that they cannot escape the similar ambitions of their rivals.

Fourth, the imperial situation creates opportunities for local elites or marginalized populations to escape from the bounds of local politics and to seek connections with groups in other regions of the world. The antislavery networks of the 19th century and the communist networks of the 20th crossed the boundaries of empires, calling their legitimacy and power into question.

Fifth comes an important question for the opponents of empires: whether to reform state structures or to destroy them. Several great revolutions thought of as national – in North and South America, as well as in Saint Domingue in 1791 or in French Africa in the 1950s – took place inside empires, before becoming revolutions against empire.

A last tension remains today between political theory of states and the reality of

power in the world. The dominant theory of international relations assumes that sovereignty is total and indivisible and that international politics is a game among juridically equivalent entities. But the reality of power and political organization in our world is that of the non-equivalence of states and of sovereignty divided in several ways: in empires where the emperor could be the king of kings, in empires that included protectorates or dominions, in federations where sovereign functions are divided among different units, or in a confederation, like the European union

If we keep in mind the non-resolution of all these tensions, we can better reflect upon a reality that has been with us for centuries: the existence of a world that is both connected and unequal.

Article first published in www.laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper

Published in booksandideas.net 14 February 2011.

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