The Empire Effect

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Why, in the year 2012, think about empires? We live, we are told, in a world of nation-states: about two hundred of them, each with a seat in the United Nations and a flag, postage stamps, and governmental institutions. Yet the nation-state is an ideal of recent origin, uncertain future, and, for many, devastating consequences. Following the destruction of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Romanov, and German empires after World War I and the decolonization of French, British, Dutch, Belgian, and Portuguese empires from the 1940s to 1970s, empire did not give way to a secure world of nations. Many bloody and destabilizing conflicts—in Rwanda, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, ex-Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Congo, the Caucasus, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere—have emerged from failures to find viable alternatives to imperial regimes, after 1918, after 1945, and after 1989. States created on the terrain of former colonies have not achieved many of the goals hoped for at the time of independence. The great powers proclaim a world of inviolable and equal nations, while deploying economic and military might to undermine weaker states' sovereignty.

Imperial nostalgia—sentimental evocations of the lost world of the British Raj or French Indochina—has nothing to offer to the present. Likewise, imperial name-calling—invocations of the word *empire* or *colonialism* to discredit interventions by American, French, or other governments—does not provide means to analyze or improve today's world. But an exploration of the histories of empires, both old and recent, can expand our understanding of how the world came to be what it is and open a wider perspective on the organization of political power in the past, present, and, perhaps, future.

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Over a very long time, the practices and interactions of empire configured the contexts in which people acted and thought. The study of empires helps us think about what made possible particular connections across space and time and what prevented other connections from happening. Empires were assertive shapers of production, communication, and culture in the world, but they had to deal with their own limitations, especially with the challenge of exercising power at a distance and over diverse populations, usually in the presence of other empires. Examining the trajectories of empires—their creations, conflicts, rivalries, successes, and failures—reminds us of the multidimensional nature of sovereignty. What gave empires their world-shaping force? For one thing, empires have been a durable form of polity. As large political units, expansionist or with a memory of expansion, empires maintain distinctions and hierarchy among people even as they incorporate them, forcefully or otherwise. The fiction of the nation-state is homogeneity—one people, one territory, one government—whereas empires recognize and have to manage diversity among their subjects. Empires govern different people differently. The multiple governing strategies used by empires gave them adaptability and the possibility to control resources over long distances and times. Compared with the longevity of the Ottoman Empire (six hundred years)—not to mention the more than two millennia of imperial rule carried on by a succession of Chinese dynasties—the nation-state is only a blip on the historical horizon. We ignore the real historical processes that have shaped polities and politics over time if we assume that the homogeneous state is the norm and anything else a violation of it.

As long as political leaders have ambitions to extend their control and as long as people live in different social and cultural contexts, the temptation to make empire or expand it is present. But since empires maintain differences among people, their component parts can potentially break away. This tension explains why the empire form of state is so common in history, but also why empires are subject to fission, reconfiguration, and collapse. The empire form is contagious. People can imagine many forms of the state, but as long as empires are in the neighborhood—with their command over human and material resources beyond any single territory or "people"—putting political ideas into practice requires thinking about empires and possibly making one.

All empires faced some common problems—how to govern different groups of people, how to govern at a distance, how to control dispersed subordinates. Still, there was no single way to run an empire: empires operated with a variety of repertoires of power.

Empires learned some of their strategies from predecessors or rivals. The Otto-

man Empire, for example, managed to blend Turkic, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, and Persian traditions. To administer their multiconfessional realm, the Ottomans counted on the elites of each religious community without trying to assimilate or destroy them. The British Empire over time encompassed dominions, colonies, protectorates, a separate civil service governing India, a disguised protectorate over Egypt, and "zones of influence" where the British engaged in what has been called the "imperialism of free trade." An empire with a varied repertoire of rule could shift its tactics selectively, without having to face the problem of assimilating and governing all parts according to a single model.

We can observe some basic—and contrasting—patterns in empires' management of their diverse populations. The "politics of difference" in some empires meant recognizing the multiplicity of peoples and their varied customs as an ordinary fact of life; in others it meant drawing a strict boundary between insiders and "barbarian" outsiders. For rulers of the Mongol empires of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, difference was both normal and useful. Mongol empires sheltered Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Taoism, and Islam and fostered arts and sciences produced by Arab, Persian, and Chinese civilizations. The Roman Empire tended toward homogenization, based on a syncretic but identifiably Roman culture, the enticing rights of Roman citizenship, and, eventually, Christianity as a state religion.

Empires developed variants on these two ideal types; some, like the Ottoman and the Russian, combined them. European empires in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth 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. "Civilizing missions" declared by European empires in the nineteenth century existed in tension with theories of racial difference.

No matter how imperial rulers conceived of "other" people and their cultures, conquerors could not administer empires by themselves. They needed intermediaries. Often imperial rulers used skills, knowledge, and authority of people from a conquered society—elites who could gain from cooperation or people who had earlier been marginal and saw advantages in serving the victorious power. A different kind of intermediary was a person from the homeland—a settler or a functionary. Both strategies relied on intermediaries' own social connections to ensure effective collaboration. Another tactic was just the opposite: putting slaves or other people detached from their communities of origin—and dependent for their welfare and survival solely on their imperial masters—in positions of authority. This strategy was used effectively by the Abbasid caliphate and later by

the Ottomans, whose highest administrators and commanders had been extracted from their families as boys and brought up in the sultan's household.

In theory, nineteenth- and twentieth-century 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 administrator considered himself "le roi de la brousse" (king of the backcountry). The local official needed chiefs, guards, and translators, all of whom were trying to find an advantage for themselves. Throughout the history of empires, intermediaries were essential but dangerous. Settlers, indigenous elites, and groups of subordinate officials might all want to run their own shows. By focusing on intermediaries, we emphasize vertical connections between rulers, their agents, and their subjects, a political relationship that is often overlooked today, in favor of horizontal affinities—of class, race, or ethnicity.

Political imagination was critical to empires' practices and impact. Imperial leaders saw their possibilities and challenges in particular situations; their imaginations were neither limited to one idea nor infinite. Local elites and other imperial subjects had their imaginations too; we need to understand them in their contexts, not ours. Monotheism, for example, was adopted by the Roman emperor Constantine and later by Muhammad: 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.

Empires tried to associate themselves with ideas of justice and morality. But critics could turn those ideas against them—think of Bartolomé de las Casas's criticism of Spain's treatment of indigenous people in its American domain in the sixteenth century, of the antislavery movement of the British Empire in the early nineteenth century, or of Asians and Africans who turned European assertions of a "civilizing mission" into the claim that democracy could not be quarantined inside one continent.

The concept of "trajectory" can help us analyze transformations and interactions among empires, avoiding the tautological explanation of history as a succession of epochs, each with a characteristic distinguishing it from its predecessor. What is sometimes called the "expansion of Europe," from the fifteenth century onward, was not the product of an inherently aggrandizing instinct of European peoples but rather one effect of a particular conjuncture. Wealth created in the powerful Chinese Empire and Southeast Asia offered tempting incentives to distant merchants, but the Ottoman Empire—bigger, stronger, and more securely ruled than the fragmented political units of Western Europe—stood in between Europe and China. The rulers of Spain and Portugal, and later the Netherlands

and England, sought overseas connections as a way around the Ottomans and their own dependence on local magnates. An unexpected outcome was connecting people on two sides of the Atlantic, after Columbus sailed west to Asia and ran into what would become America.

Another critical conjuncture in world history looks different when seen in terms of relations among empires: the European and American revolutions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The revolutions in French Saint-Domingue, British North America, and Spanish South America were conflicts within empire—over the relative powers of home governments, overseas settlers, and subordinates—before they became efforts to get out of empire.

Much of the recent burst of interest in questions of empire has focused on a particular part of the imperial spectrum—the colonial empires of Western European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; colonial studies and postcolonial theory have brought attention to essential aspects of contemporary history that narratives of global progress obscured. But if we take a longer perspective on imperial power, we face a paradox: the empires with apparently the biggest technological advantage abetted by a strong sense of their cultural superiority over other societies were among the shortest-lived in history—seventy to eighty years of British or French domination over Africa, compared with the centuries-long histories of the Russian, Hapsburg, or Ottoman empires or even the very last of the succession of Chinese dynasties (Qing, 1644–1911).

Western European empire builders, eager to distance themselves from the conquistadors of the past, could not admit to themselves how much their tactics resembled those of the Mongols—concentrate force, terrorize villages, and move on, leaving a thin administrative presence—or how much effective rule and revenue collection depended, as in older empires, on cultivating relations with local elites whose supposed inferiority had justified colonization.

Europeans' efforts to assert racial or civilizational superiority could rationalize both brutality and missionary zeal but rarely produced ideological coherence or consensus. When antislavery leaders in early nineteenth-century Britain denounced the oppression that occurred "under the British flag," they invoked the incorporative pole of imperial self-conception, suggesting that subjects in America, Africa, and Asia, with whom most inhabitants of the British Isles had no cultural affinity, had to be recognized as people for whom the empire had responsibility. When the first generations of Indians and Africans educated in European languages turned liberal or republican assertions into claims to rights and political voice, they opened up arguments that kept coming back even as rulers tried to shunt them aside. Movements or rebellions that drew on "indig-

enous" ideas and affinities, wholly alien to imperial rulers, could have multiple consequences and meanings: reinforcing official visions of the "otherness" of the colonized or underlining the need to find intermediaries who could help contain the tensions of empire.

When challenges to colonial domination escalated in the mid-twentieth century, they did not take only the form of national self-assertion. In French West Africa after World War II, political movements claimed all the rights of the French citizen—social and economic as well as political. The government in postwar Paris, its authority under considerable threat from many sides, formally repudiated the demeaning category of "colonial subject" and accepted that the inhabitants of French colonies would have the "quality" of the citizen. The administration then sought to contain the implications of this fundamental legal reform in the face of assertive claim making by trade unions, veterans of the French army, student associations, and political movements, all in the name of the equality of citizens. The French state became trapped between two dangers: that its new emphasis on imperial inclusion would not go far enough—leading to revolution, as in Algeria—or that the expanded imperial project might succeed, leading to rising burdens on the budget coming from impoverished territories.

African leaders were also not secure in their positions or demands. They were hemmed in by their territorially based constituencies, their desire for African unity, their need for French resources and the benefits of French citizenship, and their disagreements among themselves over the creation of a unified African nation. In the end, both France and West African leaders backed away from federation or confederation—from the complex, layered forms of sovereignty that they had advocated—and into a political status they had not sought: the nation-state. Both France and its former African colonies then rewrote their histories as if the independent nation had long been the aspiration of their peoples. By the 1970s, France was striving to keep out the children of the people it had once tried to keep in.

But colonial empire and the challenges to it were not the only empire story of the twentieth century. The world was repeatedly torn apart by conflict and wars among empires. New imperial projects emerged—in Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. The USSR, France, and Great Britain mobilized people and resources of their empires to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan in World War II.

Midway through the twentieth century, the supposed transition from empire to nation-state was not self-evident. The mixed populations in southern and central Europe had lived under multiple empires, including the Ottoman and the Hapsburg, and suffered waves of ethnic cleansing, each supposed to assure that every

nation would have its state: in the Balkan wars of the 1870s and 1912–13, after World War I, when the victors dismantled the losing empires, and after World War II, when ethnic Germans were expelled from some places, Ukrainians and Poles from others. Even so, state did not correspond to nation; a deadly burst of ethnic cleansing followed in the 1990s.

In Africa, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was yet another postimperial attempt to produce a singular people who would govern themselves. In the Middle East, the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after 1918 has still not been digested: opposed nationalists claim the same territory in Israel-Palestine; different groups vie for power in Iraq, Egypt, and elsewhere.

The trajectories of empires have shaped today's most powerful states. Take China. China's eclipse from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries by other—at the time more dynamic—empires turns out to have been only the latest of several interregna, shorter than others in the more than two thousand years of Chinese imperial dynasties. During the republican and communist periods, aspirants for power took for granted the borders established earlier, by the Yuan (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) and Qing (seventeenth to twentieth centuries). The leaders of China today evoke these dynasties and their imperial traditions. China has turned the tables on the West, exporting industrial goods in addition to silks and porcelain, running an enormous trade balance, becoming the creditor of the United States and Europe. The desires of Tibetans for independence and secessionist politics in the largely Muslim region of Xinjiang pose classic problems for Chinese empire. As earlier, China's rulers must control economic barons and monitor diverse populations, but the polity can draw on its accumulated imperial statecraft to meet these challenges and resume a prominent place in a shifting geography of power.

Both the formation and the breakup of the USSR can be understood in imperial terms. The Soviet Union's strategy of fostering national republics—led by communist intermediaries with native credentials—provided a road map for disaggregation as well as a common language for negotiating new sovereignties. The largest of the successor states, the Russian Federation, is explicitly multiethnic. The 1993 constitution offered Russia's constituent republics the right to establish their own official languages, while defining Russian as the "state language of the Russian Federation as a whole." After a short unruly interlude, Vladimir Putin revived the traditions of patrimonial empire. As he and his protégés reconnect magnates to the state, tighten control over religious institutions, bring the media to heel, work to transform electoral process into a controllable "sovereign democracy," supported by a single party, compel loyalty from the federation's

governors, flirt with Russian nationalists, reenter the competition for Russia's borderlands, and effectively wield Russia's prime weapon—energy—in the international arena, Russian empire has reappeared in yet another transmutation on its Eurasian space.

The most innovative of today's large powers is the European Union. Europe had been torn up from the fifth to twentieth centuries by the aspirations of some of its elites to produce a new Rome and the determination of others to prevent such an outcome. Fights for and against European empire run from Charlemagne through Charles V and Napoleon to Hitler. It was only after the mutual destruction of World War II and the consequent inability of Europeans to hold onto their overseas colonies that the deadly competition among European empires came to an end. European powers nevertheless tried after the war to reconfigure their overseas empires to make them more productive and legitimate. Only at the end of the 1950s did Britain and France give up such attempts. Germany, like Japan, was freed from the empire game; both countries flourished as nation-states where they had failed as empires.

Between the 1950s and 1990s, European states put their freedom from empire to use in working out confederal arrangements among themselves. The European Union emerged from this restructuring and has functioned most effectively when limiting its ambitions to administration and regulation. But anyone who passes abandoned customs houses along frontiers where millions of people have died in repeated wars can appreciate the remarkable achievement of the Schengen states. One of the most basic attributes of sovereignty—control of who crosses a border—has been pushed up to a European level. Europe's transit from conflicting empire-building projects to national states shorn of colonies to a confederation of nations underlines the complexity of sovereign arrangements over time and reminds us that national conceptions of the state have only recently detached themselves from imperial ones.

After 2001, it became fashionable among pundits to anoint the United States an "empire," either to denounce the arrogance of its actions abroad or to celebrate its efforts to police and democratize the world. The "is it or isn't it?" question is less revealing than an examination of the American repertoire of power, based on selective use of imperial strategies. In the twentieth century, the United States has repeatedly used force in violation of other states' sovereignty; it does occupations, but it has rarely sustained colonies. But even the United States' national sense of itself emerged from an imperial trajectory: Thomas Jefferson had proclaimed in 1780 that the rebellious provinces of the British Empire would create an "Empire of Liberty." The new polity emerged on what we could call a Roman politics of

difference: on the basis of equal rights and private property for people considered citizens and the exclusion of Native Americans and slaves. Extension over a continent eventually put great resources in the hands of Euro-Americans, and after nearly foundering on the rock of slavery, American leaders gained the strength to choose the time and terms of their interventions in the rest of the world.

Empire has existed in relation to—and often in tension with—other forms of connection over space; empires facilitated and obstructed movements of goods, capital, people, and ideas. Empire building was almost always a violent process, and conquest was often followed by exploitation, if not forced acculturation and humiliation. Empires constructed powerful political formations; they also left trails of human suffering. But the national idea, itself developed in imperial contexts, has not proved to be an antidote to imperial arrogance.

We live with the consequences of these uneven and broken paths out of empire, with the fiction of sovereign equivalence, and with the reality of inequality within and among states. Thinking about empire does not mean resurrecting the British, Ottoman, or Roman Empire. It allows us to consider the multiplicity of forms in which power is exercised across space. If we can avoid thinking of history as an inexorable transition from empire to nation-state, then perhaps we can think about the future more expansively. Can we imagine forms of sovereignty that are better able than either empires or nation-states to address both the inequality and diversity of the world's people?