

## INTRODUCTION

*Empire* for a time became a quaintly antiquated word, banished from the political spectrum with the collapse of European colonial rule in Africa and Asia. Now, the word has come back. Journalists, scholars, and politicians try to come to grips with the singular power of the United States and its apparent willingness to intervene in territories generally recognized as sovereign. For the most part, empire is evoked in two opposite ways. The first might be termed “empire as epithet”: the mere use of the word underscores the illegitimacy of American interventionism. The other is “empire as model” and relies on a very different image of empire, not as the arrogant exercise of power over people who are somehow different, but as the benevolent exercise of authority by those who have achieved political responsibility over those incapable of it.

Curiously, most evocations of empire do little to probe the empires that have actually existed in the course of history.<sup>1</sup> They often draw a single “lesson” from a complex historical context. Yet the lessons of empire do not leap from the pages of history unambiguous and uncontested. Missing are the historical trajectories—often long and convoluted—of particular empires; the relationship of empires with each other; the ways in which interactions or rulers, agents, and colonized people shaped empires; and the economic and cultural processes in which imperial formations played a part, but not necessarily a determining part. This volume brings together scholars who have studied actual empires, along with scholars of international politics who can help link that historical knowledge to the current political conjuncture.

Most current historical scholarship on empire stresses the limits of imperial power, the compromises with local and regional systems of authority, and commercial networks upon which imperial stability depends, the contradictions at the heart of efforts to use colonial power as an agent of reform.<sup>2</sup> Popular political writing, however, more often stresses imperial power—whether in a celebratory mode combined with calls for the United States to assume imperial leadership or in a condemnation stressing the all but unchallengeable global power of empire.<sup>3</sup> This suggests a possible disconnect between the lessons that participants in public debate are drawing from the concept of empire and the implications of cutting-edge research on

historical empires. We asked a group of scholars who have contributed to that research to reflect on the significance of their work both for the broad study of empires across time and space and for its implications for contemporary politics. In the months since the conference on which this book is based, the importance of thinking about limits of power has become tragically evident. As previous colonizing powers learned, conquest is easier than rule. The mightiest power on earth has found its military forces extended, its budget strained, and its public bitterly divided over the administration of a territory of modest size and minimal political resources.

We have drawn on case-based knowledge to expand and situate our understanding of the current organization of American power in the world. Analogies and contrasts from studies of empire and similar arrangements of global power are central to the volume, but we do not presume that any conception of empire—whether “formal” or “informal”—exhausts the relevant frame of comparative reference. We have invited the contributors to engage questions of hegemony, nationalism, and related organizations of power as they have played out in the United States and in other “imperial” projects. In what ways, for example, is the current global power of the United States similar to or different from earlier empires? Can the differences between power, force, and hegemony be sufficiently explained by the category of empire? Is the United States in fact pursuing a classically imperial project of rule over others, whether in pursuit of a “civilizing mission” or economic exploitation? If, in contrast, the United States today represents a new form of domination, what are the international and domestic implications of this? What kinds of relationships between “home” and “colony” are coming into being? Finally, if empire is not the best way to understand the current situation, what are the alternatives?

The tendency to use empire as a metaphor, either for unlimited state power or for projects of uplift and reform, tends to blur the categories we need in order to analyze specific forms of political power. The chapters of George Steinmetz and Jack Snyder bring out some distinctions in how a powerful polity intervenes in the affairs of weaker ones. Such distinctions in forms of power might include: imperial (intervening in a polity without actually governing it), hegemonic (setting the rules of the game that others must follow), and colonial (governing internal affairs of a subordinated polity). Even as iconic an empire as that of Great Britain in the nineteenth century acted “imperial” in regard to countries in Latin America and China at the same time as it acted “colonial” in Africa. But we need to be careful about thinking of empire as something one “society” did to another, for societies have themselves been constituted out of the interplay of empires.<sup>4</sup> Our contemporary tendency to think of societies as well-defined, bounded, self-conscious units is misleading when projected backward—and misses a great deal of twentieth-century history.<sup>5</sup> Building empire around a “core” people projecting power outwards is only

one part of a range of possibilities; the Ottoman, Russian (including its twentieth-century, Soviet, variant), and Austro-Hungarian empires cannot be well understood as projections of Turkish, Russian, or Germanic societies (see the chapters of Caglar Keyder and Ronald Suny).

Arriving at a precise definition of empire and debating whether such and such a situation fits it is not the only question of importance. As Ann Stoler suggests, the conditions that make plausible the use of such a term is very revealing about the nature of political debate at a particular moment. Claims *not* to be an empire are also ideologically loaded, as are claims to being a different kind of empire from anybody else, something which several contributors point out are common to many empires. Stoler and Emmanuelle Saada emphasize that older European empires saw themselves as regimes of exception, setting up different sets of laws and rules for the “colonized,” giving rise to debates and uncertainty over how such systems reflected back on the legitimacy and consistency of the empire as a whole. Such considerations lead us to give attention to the ways in which regimes of exception—whether in defining a “rogue” state whose sovereignty is unworthy of respect or an “enemy combatant” unworthy of protection under American law or Geneva conventions—are defined and defended today. Perhaps the invocation of empire is a way of breaking into a set of international norms that have achieved generalized support over the past decades on the universality of sovereignty and respect for rules of international conduct. Empire talk reframes issues on the basis of hierarchical distinctions between states and peoples who merit sovereignty and self-determination and those who do not.

At the same time, recognizing the importance of regimes of exception gives rise to concerns that they may not be so exceptional. Some contributors to this volume—Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Craig Murphy, and Stoler for instance—express concerns that the effects of imperious behavior abroad can come home, fostering intolerance and xenophobia.

But if the present use of the term is worth pondering, regardless of its accuracy in regard to contemporary politics, thinking about historical empires also helps us understand alternative forms of political power, their trajectories, and their consequences. We can set out a family description of “empire,” if not a precise definition: a political unit that is large and expansionist (or with memories of an expansionist past), reproducing differentiation and inequality among people it incorporates. Empire could be a phase in a polity, for if incorporation ceased to entail differentiation, it could result in a relatively homogeneous polity that becomes more nation-like and less empire-like. Uniformity could reflect assimilation, imposed or otherwise, or extermination. The manner in which distinction is institutionalized is crucial to empire building, and the difficulties of presiding over a polity that was

both incorporative and differentiating shaped the policy choices made by the rulers of empire.

While our contributors apply the analytic insights that arise from the study of particular empires, or particular political/historical situations, to the United States's role in the world today, we also wish to historicize the very idea of "American empire" and stress that questions of whether or not the United States is an empire have been with us for a very long time. Any exploration of America's alleged "new" empire, therefore, should recall that there truly was (and to a considerable extent still is) an "old" American empire. There is a reason the "Marine Hymn" rings out "from the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli." The United States did not join in the European "race for Africa" (though it did create a quasi-imperial dependency in Liberia). But, as Julian Go argues herein, the United States was active in acquiring overseas territories during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and ran into—in the Philippines, the Pacific Islands, and Puerto Rico—the dilemmas of rule that other conquering powers at the time faced. The tutelary ideology on which the architects of American empire drew in the Philippines and elsewhere has much in common with mantras of "commerce, civilization, and Christianity" in the British empire or the "civilizing mission" in the French, as well as in claims to be spreading democracy and the free market today. During the same period as its overseas colonizations, the United States was also active in ways reminiscent of the "imperialism of free trade" that scholars have used to describe British policy before the late nineteenth century: efforts to open ports and secure free trade, and also to secure positions of power amid the empires of others.<sup>6</sup> The "opening" of Japan and the insistence on rights to trade in Hong Kong and China stood alongside the conquest of the Philippines; it would be misleading to think of the United States as always a "national," rather than an "imperial," power, simply committed to open access to markets. Closer to the mainland itself, the United States has variously treated Cuba as occupied territory, a place to subordinate without governing, and as an autonomous—but enemy—state.

These examples of overseas acquisitions and interventions leave out the most dramatic extensions of U.S. imperial power, namely those on the North American continent itself. The United States did not simply "expand" westward. It ruled for varying lengths of time territories and populations it did not immediately seek to integrate into a common national framework. It fought Mexico to determine whose imperium would incorporate what has now become the U.S. Southwest. It ruled Native American populations as what the Supreme Court in 1831 called "domestic dependent nations."<sup>7</sup> It acquired imperial domains by purchase, from Louisiana to Alaska, as well as by war. Acquisition of Hawaii was precipitated by nongovernmental mission and commercial activity.<sup>8</sup>

If the "American empire" turns out to be a question with a past, the current object of American attention—Iraq—has an imperial past as well. In some ways, a study of empires throughout history might well be entitled "Empire: From Iraq to Iraq," for among the earliest imperial formations were those that developed in ancient times along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Iraq, in short, has never been a pristine nation that is now experiencing intrusion on its sovereignty. The more recent past of the region included incorporation into the Ottoman Empire. In World War I, Ottoman forces in this space gave British invaders a fight they had not expected. The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire—along with that of the Habsburgs—only in some places gave rise to nation-states (with disastrous enough results in Central Europe), but the Middle East remained firmly within systems of imperial domination, and was given a tutelary, international imprimatur by the mandate system. Iraq became a British dependency. What followed was a typical empire story: a regional rebellion (tribal, it was called at the time, as such things sometimes are today) in Mesopotamia took place, and the British government was as usual trying to govern "on a shoestring."<sup>9</sup> But it had new technological means to do so: airpower. The repression of the Mesopotamian revolt was one of the earliest testing grounds for the use of bombing against an indigenous insurgency. It was cruelly effective—a few bombs could terrorize a village—and the rebellion was put down. But the episode revealed the limits of this configuration of new weaponry with the old imperial strategy of concentrating force, terrorizing a population into submission, and moving on. The ability of the British government to conduct routine administration was minimal; dropping bombs from the air reflected just how unsystematic empire was on the ground.<sup>10</sup> Soon, British strategy moved to finding a suitable client-ruler to take on the complex tasks of administering a heterogeneous population that Britain had ruled without considering it to be British: they found one among the Hashemites, whose Iraqi connections were tenuous, but could at least be passed off as from the region.

What is most important about this empire story is who remembers it and who ignores it. As Rashid Khalidi has pointed out, memories of empire are acute in the Middle East. People have witnessed many attempts by Europeans to pacify, civilize, and liberate them, and—as in Iraq—the assertions are hard to separate from the violence that was experienced with great immediacy.<sup>11</sup> Juan Cole's chapter in this volume describes three such episodes, the last of which is the present one. The absence of the Ottoman and British experiences from discussion of the American invasion of Iraq reveals the dangers of not using past experience of actual, historical invasion, occupation, and imperial rule in order to delineate, at the least, possible scenarios and contingencies. The past has indeed repeated itself, from "tribal" rebellions to the terror of air attacks.

## EMPIRES, NATIONS, AND NATION-STATES

Such stories should be part of contemporary discussions of epochal transformation, crises of the state, and prospects for cosmopolitanism global order. During the 1990s it became commonplace to assert the end of the “post-Westphalian era” or the arrival of a “postnational constellation.” The historical referents for this were illusory, however. After all, the Treaty of Westphalia signed at the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 did not usher in thirty years of peace and harmony, or even order, any more than the Wilsonian idea of self-determination gave the nation-state a secure place in Central Europe, let alone in European colonies.

Sovereignty has been a relative concept for a long time. Protectorates, such as Morocco and Tunisia until the mid-1950s, had their own nationality and their own “rulers” under imperial overrule; Egypt was at times under Ottoman rule, at times under British, and at times an independent state that did not, truly, rule itself. Iraq was a mandate until 1932, but hardly autonomous afterward. Client states and proxy wars characterized the cold-war era. All this implies that any search for precedents for understanding policy today should take into account what the precedents actually are, not fall into an artificial dichotomy of pure sovereignty and pure domination. The precedents, at the same time, existed in context, and just as struggles in the 1950s over the status of a protectorate like Morocco took place in relation to a field of anticolonial mobilizations, the loss of legitimacy of both these forms of domination reshaped options for the future, as did the reconfiguration of international politics through different kinds of multilateral organizations and the formation of new forms of sovereignty-compromising institutions like the European Union. Our case studies here can hardly draw out the policy implications of different sovereignty regimes, but they can at least suggest the importance of posing such questions with precision and attention to context, rather than abstracting singular lessons from a decontextualized past.

Following the trajectories of a number of imperial histories—however small a portion of the spectrum we have touched upon in this volume—points to the difficulty of seeing history, whether since Westphalia, the French Revolution, or the North and South American revolutions, as a teleology of “from empire to nation.” It makes more sense to say that the nation-state *project* became *available* and increasingly prominent in both domestic and “international” affairs at some point after the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Claims were made in the name of the nation—for political voice, for autonomy, for resources. Some elites sought to align territory, economy, government, and culture. The alignments were never perfect and to the extent achieved were the products of both material and symbolic violence as well as of new systems of communications and transport, access to common education,

vernacular language literatures, and mass participation in public affairs. Not only did empire coexist with nation throughout this period, but the existence of an “order” based on the sovereignty of states—national and imperial—was a fiction that enabled the construction of certain alliances, practices, and organizations.<sup>12</sup> That it was not simply a description is signaled by the violence, war, and disorder that followed Westphalia.

Conflicts were shaped in more ways than by the opposition of nation-state and empire. British and French conceptions of political order were shaped imperially, not just nationally.<sup>13</sup> The revolutions of North and South America were contests *within* empire—about the rules of membership—before they were struggles against empire.<sup>14</sup> The Haitian revolution also began as an attempt to redefine the French empire, as white planters, mixed-race property owners, and eventually slaves fought over the question of whether the rights of man and of the citizen would apply to a national, European France, or to an imperial, diverse, transcontinental France. Both the French revolutionary government and the Haitian rebels were operating in the space of empire; and as the latter evoked revolutionary principles, the former geared its own strategies around the reconfiguration of the rules of incorporation and differentiation, promising emancipation and citizenship for a time to colonial slaves, a policy reversed under a different vision of empire instituted by Napoleon.<sup>15</sup> The Napoleonic episode in turn was not a simple extension of France into Europe, but a remaking of France in the context of empire—a complex combination of different alliances with regional aristocracies or regional opponents of local aristocracies, a system of administration based on different rules for different places, and on harnessing populations in new and old territories to a war machine based on conscription.

The Napoleonic Wars may have stimulated various nationalist projects in Europe. Napoleon was defeated not by nation-states, however, but by other empires, notably Russia and Britain, both of whom drew on supranational resources. Just how one is to balance the tendencies within European states to draw on national ideas and reinforce national institutions, and how much they remained supranational, differentiated polities can be fruitfully debated. But the supranational forces of the major powers, from colonies, dominions, and protectorates overseas and from alliances and dynastic affiliations within Europe, were still horrendously in play in 1914, and the Great War hardly resolved the relationship of national and supranational political systems. Even after World War II, France kept trying to redefine itself as something other than a European nation-state—as the French Union (1946), and then as the French Community (1958). And opposition to this variously projected entity was as much focused on making citizenship real within Greater France as on exiting from it.<sup>16</sup>

While one could argue that empires were cosmopolitan and therefore good and nation-states were exclusionary and therefore bad, or that empires institutionalized

racism and nation-states institutionalized self-determination and citizen participation in a polity, such arguments would be an oversimplification of a much more complex reality. The objective of these papers, therefore, is to bring out different forms of political organization and political imagination, and to enlarge our perspective on the forms of rule and the forms of contestation of rule that existed within imperial formations.

One is struck, when reading the accounts of empires past collected here, by the sheer durability of empires as political formations, compared to the relatively short time span in which the nation-state was the modal form of politics. The world of individual, sovereign nation-states dates only to the 1960s; until then nation-states were one of several forms of polity. It is only in hindsight that the inevitability of the world of nominally self-determining nations appears as such. The world of empires, in contrast, goes back over two millennia. A series of empires dominated China for most of that time, up to 1911; the Ottoman Empire lasted from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries, and the Russian nearly as long. The distinction of nation from empire is not merely a neutral description of contrasting institutional forms. It is an ideologically charged political contrast. And it is informed by different implicit and explicit empirical examples. Indeed, as Sheldon Pollock notes in this volume, empires exist in a community of interpretation. One of the most important lineages of such interpretation considers Egypt, Alexandrine Hellas, Rome and then its split of East and West. This yielded Byzantium, which in turn gave way to the Ottoman Empire, whose emergence also came out of a world of steppe empires—the different Mongol empires—which shaped as well the rise of Russia and whose offshoots imposed dynasties on China. The Ottoman Empire took up a Mediterranean space which had been pioneered by Rome, and it was also influenced by the Persian Empire (which itself had roots back to struggles with Greece even before Alexander) and operated in an Islamic milieu that grew out of the early caliphates. After its conquest of Mecca and Medina, it took up the mantle of the caliphate itself—a claim which carried much weight until the destruction of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, a loss which still carries symbolic weight among many Muslims today.

Mughal India also traced roots to the Mongols and to Persia but also understood itself in relation to imperial complexes and successions in western and southern Asia (as evoked by Sheldon Pollock in this volume). And if the Holy Roman Empire was less exemplary in the West than its eastern counterparts, it was still part of a series that was linked to Spanish, Austro-Hungarian, Portuguese, French, British, and Prussian empires. Napoleon could see himself as both a direct inheritor of Charlemagne and the creator of a latter-day Roman empire, and even Republican empires—in Britain as well as France—looked back to Rome as they developed visions of what amounted to good imperial rule.

China, as Bin Wong makes clear, was one of the world's largest and most centralized polities, but the success of its rulers in creating and re-creating a series of imperial regimes within a vast space owed much to their sense of the limits of how far they could go in relation to local social practices and local elites. China—in both national ideology and much of western scholarship—is sometimes portrayed as a unique sort of polity, steeped in a set of traditions far more homogeneous than those of most empires. But more recent scholarship—such as that of Mark Elliott and Peter Perdue<sup>17</sup>—has brought Chinese history into dialogue with other empire stories, stressing not only the way dynasties of foreign origin—the Yuan of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the Qing of the seventeenth to the twentieth—adapted to forms of bureaucracy and imperial ideology of older Chinese empires, but the way in which these rulers maintained their distinctiveness as a means of fostering coherence and authority among themselves. China's relations with its periphery—including areas of conquest and tributary states—as well as to the shifting political and commercial patterns in the rest of East and Southeast Asia and the back-and-forth commerce along the Silk Road and across the Indian Ocean tie it into the dynamics of imperial formations in western Eurasia and Europe.

The work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam (this volume) and Christopher Bayly in turn suggests that Portuguese and British empires were shaped by their interactions with the polities around the Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup> We start to get a picture of world political history that looks rather different from that coming from the North Atlantic perspective that has been so dominant among English-speaking historians. Empire history suggests not the evolution of bounded societies that can be compared, but the consolidation and dissolution of structures of power in relation to each other—a pattern still relevant today.

Our case studies thus not only multiply the examples and reveal the durability of the empire form of a polity, but provide a basis for thinking about interactions among different sorts of political entities. Nation-states are neither wholly distinct from empires nor supplant them completely. Political mobilization—from the top (imperial reformers in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, as Keyder shows) or from the bottom (the Haitian revolutionaries)—showed that political imagination often took up the spatial configuration and ideological framework of imperial regimes and tried to turn them into something that was different but still imperial. At the very end of the French Empire, some African political leaders were still trying to turn the empire into a federal system, and when France itself took the initiative to devolve power to self-governing individual territories, Léopold Senghor lamented the loss of the federal option as the “balkanization” of Africa, an interempire analogy that used the consequences of the breakup of Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires to make a point of the dangers which he feared from making national territories the only unit of governance.<sup>19</sup>