

Reviews

Universal empire: a comparative approach to imperial culture and representation in Eurasian history

Edited by Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii+378. 56 illustrations, 8 maps. Hardback £68.00, ISBN 978-1-107-02267-6.

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This book contains an introduction to the theme of universal empire by the editors and a concluding chapter by John Hall. Between are ranged eleven chapters, some on individual empires, more on specific imperial genealogies, and a few explicitly devoted to comparisons. One chapter, by Justyna Olko, steps outside the book's Eurasian focus to look at Aztec universalism. The other chapters focus on the Mediterranean world, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. China is almost as much an outlier in this book as is the western hemisphere, being represented by just one chapter, by Evelyn Rawski, which looks at how the Qing dynasty took over, modified, and used the Chinese tradition of universal empire. As one would expect from Professor Rawski, the chapter is very well informed and thought-provoking but of course one could write a vast tome on Chinese dynastic variations on the theme of universal empire. One interesting point that unites Rawski's piece to many of the other chapters is the manner in which rulers of empire exploited empire's magnificence and the allure of its claims to universal rule while remaining coolly realistic in their management of relations with powerful, albeit 'barbarian', rivals.

The core of the book covers the region between Europe and the Indian subcontinent. It starts with a

fascinating comparison between Assyrian and Persian imperial culture by Gojko Barjamovic, which illustrates excellently the very different ways in which the two imperial elites portrayed themselves in their palaces, art, and rituals. He notes, too, the gap between Assyrian propaganda and the realities revealed in surviving 'archival' correspondence. From there we move on to the Hellenistic empire and thence down the centuries into the Roman, Byzantine, Mughal, and Ottoman imperial traditions. Slightly outside this core group of empires we have essays on the south Indian empire and on post-imperial orders in medieval and early modern Latin Europe.

The book illustrates how this whole region was to some extent influenced by a common memory of empire which can be dated back to the Persians and to Alexander the Great. Peter Bang shows that, although the Mauryan empire emerged in a region beyond even Alexander's reach, it was in part the result of geopolitical shockwaves which he caused. In more general terms, this era witnessed the creation of a number of great empires with universal aspirations rooted in some common fundamental features. Bang traces connections and makes comparisons to support this argument. Two thousand years after Alexander's death, he still had a hold on the European imagination, felt by Napoleon himself and exploited in his propaganda. This was despite the fact that no true empire had existed in Latin Europe at least since Charlemagne and in reality since the fall of Rome. The link between Alexander and Napoleon is a very weak variation on a central theme in this book, namely the role of imperial genealogies which linked one empire to those that followed within specific regions and cultural and religious traditions.

None of these empires were universal in the sense of genuinely ruling (or even really aspiring to rule) over all mankind. What unites them is a sense that they stood at the pinnacle of their great civilization. They recognized no equals. In that sense

these universal empires were very different from the European colonial polities of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Even after the latter took to calling themselves empires they still accepted the basic reality and ideological foundation of international relations in Europe, namely multi-polarity and the formal equality between European sovereign states. These European empires were also national, unlike most but not all of the universal empires covered in this book. By that I mean that the rulers of European empires by 1900 were responsible to metropolitan nations, whose identity was largely defined by ethnicity and citizenship. There was a clear distinction between citizens in the metropole and subjects on the periphery.

A key to the success of the universal empires covered in this book was that – as most of the authors emphasize – no such sharp distinction usually existed. Facing the enormous challenge of ruling vast areas and many peoples on the basis of primitive communications, these empires used many subtle weapons to hold their realms together. Force was essential but far from sufficient. The attractive power of a great imperial high culture was crucial to holding the allegiance of elites. So were a range of rituals, symbols, and interpersonal relations. As long as elites could be bound to the emperor, they themselves would preserve the loyalty and exploit the resources of the regions which they controlled on the monarch's behalf. One central aim of the book is to compare how this common imperial goal was refracted through the differing cultures, religions, and dynastic traditions of the empires it studies. Another is to show how all these empires were hybrids, drawing inspiration from the many peoples and cultures over which they ruled. The precise form taken by the empire's hybrid nature differed, of course, but the essential principle was the same.

Given the vast potential scale of the topic, it is inevitable that the book often asks questions without providing answers. It is also inevitable that there are gaps. One important issue beyond this book's range, for example, is the impact of cultural and religious systems on the role of women, reproduction, and inheritance. At this point politics, culture, and religion come together over the crucial issue of succession. One or two essays in the book just touch on this question but it deserves to be pursued in greater depth in another work. Nevertheless, this is not in any way to diminish the great interest and splendid scholarship of Peter Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk's volume.

Colonialism and beyond: race and migration from a postcolonial perspective

Edited by Eva Bischoff and Elisabeth Engel. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013. Periplus Studien 17. Pp. 128. Paperback €29.90, ISBN 978-3-643-90261-0.

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Postcolonial theory has become an established part of academia. As a result, there have inevitably been ongoing attempts to evaluate its influence, discuss its shortcomings, and assess whether it continues to have relevance when it no longer unsettles conventional academic wisdom, as it once undoubtedly did. These conversations now constitute a mini-academic industry of their own. Postcolonial theory has come under sustained attack from some quarters, while others have sought to extend its approach to broader academic frameworks and to reconfigure its theoretical underpinnings for the twenty-first century. As historians of various guises have been central to this debate, we can only welcome a volume which promises to turn its gaze to postcolonial theory and issues of race and migration in historical contexts. In *Colonialism and beyond*, the editors Eva Bischoff and Elisabeth Engels seek to frame questions of race and migration in a postcolonial perspective, thereby contributing to the debate on the location of postcolonial studies, and asking the question 'Where can postcolonial studies go from here?'

In foregrounding how we look at questions of race and migration in the twenty-first century, and the new 'politics of racialization' (p. 8), the authors in this volume outline an interesting number of case studies which raise important questions about the new configurations of racialization that have emerged over the last century. The editors highlight a framework of 'thinking *across*' to visualize 'new spatial formations of race and migration which don't fit into older geographies' (p. 11). This is an admirable aspiration. The book contains many strengths, but it is ultimately let down by the unevenness of the contributions.

The opening chapter by Olaf Stieglitz, which looks at the 'national culture' of swimming in Australia, seeks to explore the story of the Australian crawl, a fascinating example of gendered, racialized