

# The Revival of Empire

The term “empire” has recently gained new currency throughout the world. The books of that name by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, and by Niall Ferguson; Andrew Bacevich’s *American Empire*; the full-throated endorsement of “American empire” by the influential *Weekly Standard*; Michael Ignatieff’s more hesitant embrace of it in the *New York Times Magazine*; and an extended treatment in the *Wilson Quarterly* are among its most prominent recent instances in American public and academic discourse. They are also suggestive of the diversity of meanings and associations this term now carries. For some it is a denunciatory word, for others a hortatory one. Some consider empire as an accurate and evocative description of American unipolarity, while for others it describes an emerging global order that no single nation directs.

The revival of empire as an organizing idea for evaluating contemporary institutions and policies raises important questions. Some of these are conceptual: What does “empire” mean in terms of social arrangements or relations among political societies? Does it have a unified and coherent meaning, or is it a “blur”—a vague and messy concept that runs together several distinct ideas and often carries misleading associations? Is it purely descriptive, so that we can identify empires

without passing judgment on them? Or does the correct application of the term, like coercion, democracy, and liberty, depend on evaluative judgments? Other questions relate to the utility of the concept of empire, such as whether it provides a helpful framework for understanding and evaluating present global institutional arrangements. Does empire help us to understand the foreign policies of powerful states, or does it simply invite confusion and obscure important normative issues? It also raises questions concerning justification, such as whether social practices that are commonly claimed to constitute empire can be justified, the kinds of arguments that could be offered for and against these practices in different social contexts, and whether there are feasible and attractive alternatives to empire.

In this special section of *Ethics & International Affairs*, we aim to broaden and clarify a discussion that has often been parochial, unimaginative, and full of bluster. Our contributors explore the recent historical developments that have made the idea of empire seem perhaps less objectionable after a long period in which it was used as a term of insult or as an argument stopper. They also assess the range of definitions of empire to determine whether the concept is helpful analytically or normatively in approaching practical challenges in today’s world.