

What Empires Can and Can't Do

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Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World, by Krishan Kumar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Russia's Empires, by Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference, by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

We are living through a, perhaps the, golden age for scholarly studies of empire. Krishan Kumar attributes the current interest in empires to globalization, with authors looking to history for lessons in the dynamics of globe-spanning polities and in some instances for models of “the management of difference and diversity over large areas” (Kumar: p. xii). The turn of the twenty-first century also is the era of American decline, and the effects of that entity's fall upon its domestic well-being and the stability of the global economy and geopolitics also lead a number of authors to look at past empires and hegemonies in search of patterns that can allow us to distinguish what is unique and what is a repetition of past declines. I will return to this point at the end of the essay.

The three insightful and learned books under review are exemplars of the current direction in the analysis of empires. They share, and in their own ways develop, four important realizations:

First, empires were quite successful at managing diverse populations and allowing different identities and cultures within empires to survive and sometimes to thrive.

Second, imperial rulers, functionaries, and ideologues learned from counterparts in other empires and from their predecessors, and especially modeled themselves in various (often historically inaccurate) ways on the Roman Empire. This learning and imitation was partly cultural and partly a response to rivalries and threats from other empires. Imperial dynamics, thus, were the combined result of internal forces, cultural influences, and geopolitical pressures.

Third, empires remained the dominant political form well into the twentieth century. Many entities that we consider nation-states (Britain, France, Russia, the United States) really were empires of one sort or another.

Fourth, the decline of modern empires after 1945 or 1989 was not inevitable. Rather, it was contingent, unexpected, and sudden, and as such was mourned and resisted by some, perhaps many, of the ruled as well as the rulers.

DEFINING EMPIRES

Kumar, Kivelson and Suny, and Burbank and Cooper have remarkable agreement on the definition of empire. For Kumar, an empire is a political entity that controls the political sovereignty of another political entity, or a number of them. In other words, the peoples within an empire do not share an equal status, such as citizenship. That means that empires bring within a single polity various different and diverse social groupings. Politically and legally, empires are patchworks in which individuals, corporate bodies, religious, status, and ethnic groups, and other entities hold varying rights and obligations in relation to each other and to the ruler. However, we need to remember that each empire was run by humans, and so “behind its façade (in every place and time) stood a mass of individuals, a network of lobbies, a mountain of hopes: for careers, fortunes, religious salvation or just physical safety” (Darwin 2012: xi).

Burbank and Cooper also see empires as “polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.” They contrast empires with nation-states on this basis: “The empire-state declares the non-equivalence of multiple populations ... the nation-state tends to homogenize those inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong, while the empire reaches outward and draws, usually coercively, peoples whose difference is made explicit under its rule” (p. 8). Kivelson and Suny draw a similar contrast between empires and nation-states: “The more a state institutionalizes difference and maintains a hierarchy among its people between the ruling group or institution and the rest of the people, the more it approaches the ideal type of empire. The more a state attempts to homogenize its population, reduce difference and hierarchy, and bring the rulers in line with the people, the more it approaches the ideal type of a nation-state” (p. 77).

Lack of uniformity and equality distinguish empires from nation-states, or at least from the ideal toward which nation-states claim to aspire. The authors present this as a special quality of empires, but in fact such historically accumulated welters of different statuses are typical of all premodern polities, a point that Kivelson and Suny acknowledge when they note that states like France were more empire-like before they underwent the long process of homogenization. Yet France and other nation-states in formation were not empire-like simply because they were backward; their rulers sought to produce and maintain inequalities as a strategy of rule. For example, in seventeenth-century

France each elite's authority came to rest upon royal grants of "privileges which were subject to differing interpretations and which were defined in reference to the king" (Beik 1985: 219). Skillful rulers figured out how to use overlapping and ambiguous rights to make both powerful and weak subjects dependent on the monarch and to use that dependency to extract revenues and elicit loyalty.

RULE BY DIFFERENCE

All three books focus their analyses on the methods by which rulers expanded and sustained their empires. Yet, the authors all are careful to show how past decisions created institutions and identities that limited later rulers' abilities to deepen their authority or expand their empires. What pulls together each book's analysis is an attention to rulers' awareness of their positions vis-à-vis the multiple peoples in their domains and the rival empires with which they were in military, ideological, and economic competition. That led rulers to adopt strategies grounded in the fact that their dominions contained different peoples, and that drew upon imperial practices borrowed from past and contemporary empires.

Burbank and Cooper express this idea elegantly when they write at the outset of their comparison of empires: "empires improvised, they also had their habits. What leaders could imagine and what they could carry off were shaped by past practices and constrained by context—both by other empires with their overlapping goals and by people in places empire-builders coveted" (p. 3). Empires are like all polities in that they rely on intermediaries who can carry out orders from above and funnel resources from below, but in empires intermediaries usually were from different groups than the emperor, so rulers had to create incentives or use threats to make their agents serve imperial interests.

Burbank and Cooper examine a very broad range of empires, from the two greatest ancient ones (Rome and China) to the Mongols, Ottomans, Habsburgs, and the European empires that lasted from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, with Russia and the United States thrown in for good measure. Burbank and Cooper's inclusive approach serves two purposes. First, their accessible style means the book can be used in courses on empires, although the authors assume a level and range of historical knowledge few American undergraduates, but hopefully more U.S. graduate students, command.

Second, this extreme *longue durée* approach allows the authors to identify moments when rulers achieved transformational jumps in their capacities to increase the reach and depth of their empires. Burbank and Cooper highlight four such transformations: monotheism, which provided a new "restrictive idea of legitimacy basis for rule—one empire, one emperor, one god" (p. 17); nomads' development of armed and mounted warriors, which led to a jump in the ability to seize territory; the "discovery" of the Americas; and Britain's industrial revolution, which allowed vast increases in resources and then created new forms of global competition among industrializing empires.

These innovations all were extrinsic to empires, and had different sorts of effects. Burbank and Cooper are inconsistent and unsystematic in analyzing how they mattered. They assert that monotheism created both unity and schism, but do not clarify how religion affected the dominant imperial strategies of incorporating difference and relying on clients and slaves in both the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Though they note that Charlemagne's use of preexisting aristocrats meant his empire was less enduring, the aristocracies themselves were as long-lasting as any empire.

Burbank and Cooper's admirable and analytically fruitful focus on external forces leads them to slight the role of centrifugal forces in empires, which leaves them unable to explain, rather than merely describe, the quick disappearances of Charlemagne's empire or the Mongol Empire. Indeed, they tell us that the Mongol empires of Chinggis Khan or Tamerlane only matter for having introduced horse-riding armed warriors who were able to conquer vastly more territory than previous armies. How the Mongols' accomplishment differed from Alexander's many centuries earlier is not specified. Nor, and more crucially, do we learn why these empires came apart so quickly. More broadly, by lumping together brief but large empires with ones of varying sizes that endured for centuries, Burbank and Cooper make it difficult for themselves to address the problem of longevity.

The Americas matter, presumably, because they provided the terrain and resources to allow small and peripheral European polities to outflank older Asian and Middle Eastern empires and eventually to bring more resources to the commercial encounters that became military confrontations when European merchant/warriors went to Asia in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries. Industrialization, like the Americas, makes only occasional and unsystematic appearances in Burbank and Cooper's accounts of a parade of empires and imperialist ventures over the past five hundred years.

These overarching shifts, highlighted in Burbank and Cooper's opening chapter, become less significant in their accounts of the ongoing ebb and flow of empires seeking to manage difference among the peoples they rule. Thus, *Empires in World History* ends up being a smart historical survey, chock full of useful insights about the various ways in which rulers used difference to control their subjects. As a result, Burbank and Cooper's book is a very different sort of metahistory than Michael Mann's four-volume *Sources of Social Power* (1986; 1993; 2012; 2013). Of course, Mann sought to analyze different forms of rule along with empire, but his consistent attention to the interactions among his four types of power allowed him to provide a clear explanation for each jump (and for some contractions) in the depth as well as the extent of rulers' capacities to control land and subjects.

Difference therefore bears much of the analytic and narrative weight in Burbank and Cooper's book. They incisively show how rulers' strategies for incorporating different elites into imperial governments were shaped by

preexisting hierarchies. For example, aristocracies prevented Habsburg rulers from creating patrimonial systems of governance in Europe, which would have enhanced monarchs' abilities to control subjects and extract resources, while in the Americas, a slate blanked by disease and genocide, the Habsburgs were able to impose a patrimonial system similar to the effective one the Ottomans created in their empire. Spain, on the other hand, was unable to prevent the emergence of *de facto* aristocracies in the Americas (as Burbank and Cooper accurately point out) and so the flow of revenue to Spain rapidly fell off, creating an opening the British used to assert commercial and eventually informal political control.

Here is a point where the role of industrialization should enter the analysis, both as a moving force in Britain's creation of its informal empire and (as Eric Hobsbawm long ago argued in "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century [1965 (1954)]") as the beneficiary of a "forced draught" of demand from the rest of the world. Instead, Burbank and Cooper, as we will see, attribute nineteenth-century imperial expansion to competition among rival great, and not so great, powers.

Difference is central to Kivelson and Suny's analysis of how the Russian and Soviet empires managed to assume such a vast scale. They show that Russian rulers' acknowledgement of difference allowed them to construct hierarchies that recognized the particular strengths of local elites in each region incorporated into the empire. They shrewdly point out that pre-imperial Rus itself was an amalgam of peoples and polities that saw themselves as distinct and separate from each other and from their ruler. Thus, the czars had a template for incorporating ever more groups into the empire.

Czars' skill in enhancing their own power depended upon keeping elites off balance and at odds with one another. Those goals of disorder depended upon preserving and enhancing different identities and autonomies among the empire's regions, religions, ethnicities, and groups. Most simply, regions with religions different from the rulers' Orthodox Christianity were left under the control of elites who shared local peoples' religion and ethnicity.

Degrees of autonomy and concessions were determined by Russian rulers' capacities and the degree of cohesion between local elites and their retainers. Czars' ability to tighten the reins and expand their territory depended on their ability to innovate organizationally. The key development was serfdom, which at first guaranteed common people access to land, while also creating a way for the cash-poor state to "pay" military men with land and laborers and to fob the work of law and order onto landlords. The enlarged armies made possible by serfdom allowed Russia to incorporate peoples of different religions and with established identities.

The Russian Empire, like the various empires Burbank and Cooper compare, was affected by war. Kivelson and Suny argue that repeated foreign invasions and resistance to occupation created the sense of being a

people. But just what people that was remained contested. Top military officers and civilian administrators took on a mission of converting and Russifying the other peoples in the empire. This slow, uneven, centuries-long process was boosted by an unanticipated effect of the abolition of serfdom: the elimination of the main source of conscript soldiers. This forced a reform of the army. "In 1874, the draft became the most egalitarian and universal institution in the realm: at the age of twenty almost every male, from noble to peasant, was eligible to be called" (p. 191). The Russian army, like armies in many other countries, became the most powerful generator of collective, though not fully national, identity.

Nationalism was limited by countervailing forces. As "migration created mixed populations, highly integrated economies, and shared historical experiences and cultural features" (pp. 229–30) it became impossible to assert Russian nationalism without bringing down the entire empire, as Kivelson and Suny argue happened in the 1917 revolutions (and also in Kemal's Turkey and Yeltsin's Russia). In retrospect, difference worked to hold together these empires only because strong nationalist sentiments and institutions were absent in the core.

Kumar presents the Ottomans as the masters of managing and utilizing difference, in part because the empire was not majority-Muslim until the seventeenth-century conquest of the Middle East. Throughout, the Ottoman ruling elite was not an ethnicity, but rather a service nobility drawn from various communities. Similarly, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was multiethnic without a leading ethnicity. Nationalism, especially Hungarian nationalism, was blocked by the reality that nobilities were creations of the crown and so elite positions depended on the success of the empire rather than on claims to largely unformed national identities.

Like Kivelson and Suny, Kumar shows that Russia had no clearly defined core. Indeed, as with China, the capital moved over time, meaning that the czar rather than a geographic location was the administrative and ideological center and provided imperial continuity. Peter the Great's efforts to convert Muslims were reversed by Catherine and never resumed by future rulers, who saw nationalism not as a program but as a threat to their multinational and multiethnic empire. Czars saw themselves as above or outside of any Russian nation, and invited elites of any nationality to enter the service nobility. Top czarist officials were multiethnic to the end of old regime.

Pan-Slavism, in Kumar's analysis, was conceived as the unity of Slavs in alliance against the West, not as Russian nationalism. Kivelson and Suny see it as directed mainly against the Ottoman Empire rather than toward Europeans. Regardless of its target, Pan-Slavism developed in the nineteenth century when the contours and policies of the czarist empire, including the emancipation of the serfs, already were set. Pan-Slavism was tempered and limited because Russia always saw itself as Asian as well as European. This realization led

political elites to limit Pan-Slavism to spiritual and cultural renewal. These contradictory pressures were not special to Russia. Kumar argues that imperial nationalism or missionary nationalism cannot stress national identity since that would separate the leading nation from others in the empire and thus “threaten the integrity, perhaps even the survival, of the empire” (p. 287).

LEARNING AND COMPETITION

Nationalism was limited in Russia and other empires because those polities existed in a world that, at least until the end of World War I, was one much more of empires than of nation-states. Kumar’s book is a sustained study of the ways in which empires learned from each other and positioned themselves in relation to Rome, which all regarded as a model. Kumar writes about the “legacy” and “spell” of Rome. Above all, Rome bequeathed to later empires the idea of a civilizing mission and the notion that all empires, no matter how powerful, are destined to fail.

Kumar traces the ways in which all empires hosted debates on the degree to which universality and the welcoming of outsiders really were the practice in Rome and should be norms for them. Of course, it did not matter if those empires’ versions of Roman history were accurate. Rather, their beliefs—like French delusions about their resistance to the Nazis, or twenty-first-century U.S. Republicans’ notions of the causes of the Civil War—mattered because they guided and justified behaviors.

Kumar is clear on how rulers and their minions clothed themselves in metaphorical Roman togas. He could have added that imperial capitals, especially the nineteenth-century redesigns of Paris and Vienna and the overall plans and many of the government buildings in Washington, D.C. and Edwin Lutyens’ New Delhi, were intended to evoke Rome. Kumar argues that Roman historical inspirations really mattered, that they provoked some behaviors and restrained others that diverged from what Marxist and other economic theories of imperialism would predict. He shows that the Spanish looked to Roman precedent for guidance on how to rule Native Americans, but then saw religious conversion as their civilizing mission. Similarly, the French explicitly modeled their civilizing mission on that of the Romans, claiming that because the Romans civilized the Gauls, the French as the Gauls’ descendants had a similar obligation to the peoples they had conquered.

No doubt the Spanish and French believed they were noble and worthy successors to the Romans. Yet neither Kumar nor Burbank and Cooper explain how colonial rule was affected by Christian morals, such as they were, or by the Catholic Church’s institutional presence. Their assertions that culture matters remain claims that need to be tested to determine just how these matters counted in setting colonial policies.

All three books do offer evidence that civilizing missions transformed the self-images of local collaborationist elites. This mattered in many colonies

because it channeled elites' aspirations toward careers in their European conquerors' civil services, and it also played a role—which these authors and other scholars have yet to specify—in natives' decisions to fight bravely on behalf of Britain and France in the two world wars. Finally, Britain, France, and Portugal all offered some of their colonial subjects citizenship in the metropole, which has transformed the culture and politics of those countries over the past half century and promises to be a significant factor for the foreseeable future.

One way in which all these modern empires differed from Rome was that they competed with multiple rival powers. What Kivelson and Suny write about Russia and the USSR was true for all empires from the sixteenth through twentieth centuries: each should be seen “not as a security state, but as an ‘insecurity state,’ reacting to multiple exposures, foreign threats, and domestic instabilities” (p. 8). Insecurity came both from resistant and rebellious subjects and from rival empires. Each of these books makes valuable contributions to understanding how those multiple pressures shaped colonial rule.

Burbank and Cooper contrast the ways in which Roman and Chinese rulers sought to entice restive populations at the edges of their empires with citizenship or the opportunity to take civil service exams. They show that, as Rome weakened, provincial elites found they could combine Roman culture with political autonomy by breaking from the empire. In contrast, Chinese elites benefited from bureaucratic positions whether the imperial center was strong or weak. This view of Chinese empires as relatively static contrasts with that of Dingxin Zhao's *The Confucian-Legalist State* (2015). Zhao builds on Michael Mann's four sources of power to show how Chinese imperial rulers worked to suppress economic and military bases of power that could have challenged, and in European empires did challenge, the empire's strength in Confucian ideological and political-bureaucratic power. For Zhao, the Chinese dynamic is organizational and ideological rather than a relation between center and periphery.

Burbank and Cooper, in a chapter comparing the “maritime empires” of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, assert, “The most dramatic changes ... were not in the depth of rulers' control over a given territory but in the extent of space over which power was exercised” (p. 182). That claim lumps together differences within and among European empires. Breuille (2017) is more precise (in a nineteen-page article): he contrasts the cores and peripheries of empires and, drawing on Mann's terminology, identifies increases in infrastructural power in some empires' cores, while despotic power remained the main mechanism for coopting existing local elites and subduing resistance in imperial peripheries (something Burbank and Cooper also contend).

Burbank and Cooper are much more convincing at describing the ways in which Europeans overwhelmed the weak polities they encountered in Asia and the Americas than they are at accounting for why the great expansion happened

when it did. Kumar, and Kivelson and Suny, share a focus on techniques for maintaining empires while they slight the ways in which imperial competition might have propelled expansion.

All three books acknowledge that various European rulers as well as the Ottomans were sending merchants and armed men over the same routes to the same lands. They differ in the ways in which they analyze how such confrontations affected how people within different empires conceived of their relationship to each other and to their rulers. The books also vary in the extent to which they trace how the pressures of economic and military competition affected the viability of each empire.

For Kumar, conquest and expansion mattered, first, because they changed the mix of groups within an empire, which offered rulers new opportunities to elicit loyalty from subjects in the imperial core as well as from newly incorporated peoples. Kivelson and Suny show how foreign invasions had the double effect of creating and deepening Russian identity while relegating populations conquered during eras of czarist and Soviet military success to subordinate positions. Burbank and Cooper see Russian expansion as creating opportunities to offer lands and offices to conquered elites, thereby bringing them within an imperial service nobility.

Burbank and Cooper recognize that eighteenth-century wars among the great powers led metropolises to make fiscal demands on their colonies that sparked rebellions, most famously in the thirteen North American colonies. Unfortunately, war never becomes an analytic focus in any of these books, even as accounts of wars punctuate all the narratives and are used to inform their accounts of imperial and national identity formation.

During wars, rulers or governments have to quickly come up with resources—both money and men to arm. Politics that fail to mobilize enough lose wars and in extreme cases are absorbed into bigger politics. That is the mechanism that leads to the formation and expansion of empires. Most studies of wars and imperial competition concentrate on what the winners do right. Structuralist accounts, like those of Charles Tilly (e.g., 1990), ask how rulers take money and men from their subjects. These three books complement attention to states' material and institutional capacities with their culturalist attentions to how empires elicit feelings of identification with rulers and the broader collectivity. Kumar, especially, closely analyzes empires' careful attention to identity and, for the last two centuries, citizenship.

The *longue durée* of these books serves to highlight the gradual building of identities and loyalties. However, the demands of war forced rulers to make quick and substantial concessions that abruptly transformed social relations and identities within empires. That is what happened to the settlers in Britain's American colonies when they were asked to pay higher taxes and then stripped of self-governance when they refused. American identity developed as much in a boycott that politicized material culture (Breen 1988) as in explicit

manifestoes. Or as Breuille puts it, “The American Revolution was not nationalist; rather, the coordinated resistance itself generated increasingly national sentiments to set against British imperial ideology” (2017: 17).

None of these books makes war (as opposed to the fact of conquest and the incorporation of new peoples and lands) central to their analyses. Instead, war plays an episodic and less theorized role. Kivelson and Suny note the effects that the creation and abolition of serfdom had on the czarist state’s ability to mobilize officers and enlist men, but they do not trace how the pressures of war pushed those institutional changes forward. The other two books do not use the leverage their multiple cases could provide to explain how the sudden and intensive demands of war forced rulers to offer greater rights to classes, strata, or ethnic groups in their empires, and thereby shifted the political forms and self-images of those polities.

MODERN EMPIRES

Empires underwent a new wave of expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burbank and Cooper are clear in their rejection of Lenin’s interpretation of those expansions, observing that Africa drew little commercial investment. Instead, they view the scrambles for Africa and China as motivated by great power competition, although they acknowledge that the great powers did cooperate and use treaties to divide up those lands. Kumar, and Kivelson and Suny, identify the ways in which empires shaped economies, and highlight the rise of intra-empire commerce and migration, although Kumar argues that colonies made only a minor contribution to the French economy. While not Leninist or even Luxemburgian in their analyses of those processes, Kumar and Kivelson and Suny explain how empire provided Britain and Russia/USSR room and time to maneuver around the rising German and U.S. economies and fend off their military might.

The enduring imperial character of Europe’s great powers requires us to reconsider the story of nation-state formation. Kivelson and Suny point out that those entities we characterize as nation-states engaged in imperial practices and empires pursued “nation making practices” (p. 12). That certainly was true for Russia, but much less so for Britain or France in their empires. This is in part the difference between what Charles Maier (2006) labels “being empire” and “having empire.” The Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman land empires were not nation-states, and even the reformist movements within them aspired to recast the empires in more egalitarian and democratic forms, not to carve away national homelands. Those empires were vital enough that they, and their Napoleonic, Holy Roman, and Roman predecessors, rather than the British Empire, were the models that the German Kaiser and Hitler sought to copy and surpass.

Empire, all three books argue, disrupted and delayed national identities and institutions within metropolises. Britons, even as they exploited their

colonies, dreamt of creating a commonwealth within which Britain would have shared the making of foreign policy and the regulation of currency and trade with people who they hoped would become ever more British in their identities, interests, and loyalties. The French wanted to make Algeria a full part of their republic, even as citizenship was offered to very few Algerians. The end goal was a polity within which ethnic lines would be overcome with shared allegiance to and participation in the glorious French culture.

All of the books under review see the USSR as an empire, and Kumar and Kivelson and Suny detail with precision how Stalin's policy fostered nationalism in the non-Russian Soviet republics. The stunted nature of Russian nationalism up to 1989 was a result of Russia's place in the czarist and Soviet empires. Only when the empire was shattered in 1989, and briefly in the interregnum between the revolution and the consolidation of the Soviet regime, did Russian identity find expression in the goal of creating a fully Russian nation-state.

IMPERIAL DECLINE IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

Empires remained ideologically vibrant and institutionally stable until their sudden collapses in the wake of the two world wars, and in the case of the USSR in 1989. These books all make well-supported and convincing cases for the vitality of twentieth-century empires. They show that elites and intellectuals in the core were committed to reforming their empires and that nationalism was a secondary part of political expression. Elites in colonies organized their careers and more than not shaped their self-images in terms of their places within empire rather than as participants in liberation struggles.

Kumar rightly identifies Ho Chi Minh as exceptional. Certainly Ho's commitment to communism and his grounding in Marxist theory is what separates him from the more self-serving and ideologically mushy colonial politicians who were his contemporaries. The authors of these books have little to say about communism. Instead, they develop a subtly double-revisionist argument: for the primacy of nationalist over class interests and ideology, and to show how nationalism was limited by and refracted through imperial ideologies and practices. Kivelson and Suny, because they write about the USSR, have to analyze where communist ideas and parties fit into and mold nationalism and imperialism. The other authors do not have to address that question in their cases, but their work nonetheless provides templates that future scholars can use to show how communism really mattered in struggles for independence and in the development of post-independence governments.

If communism was secondary except in a few places (a conclusion that Jeffery Paige reached in his 1975 comparative analysis), then how did empires collapse so quickly? All the authors note that imperial breakups followed the world wars, but they do not work out the connection. As noted

above, wars require that governments, whether nation-states or empires, come up with resources quickly. This gives subjects enormous if temporary bargaining power. Britain and France got help from their colonies in return for promises of greater autonomy. As Burbank and Cooper rightly observe, the costs of those promises, especially the expanded citizenship that colonial subjects would have received in reconstituted British and French empires, were unacceptable to citizens in the metropole. The aftereffects of even the limited deliveries of citizenship still roil French and British politics. The presence of citizens from the colonies are gifts that keep on giving to the Front National and a series of far right British parties that, most recently, propelled the Brexit campaign.

Kumar, too, is attentive to metropolitan qualms about extending citizenship to colonials. He notes that France was under pressures from the postwar superpower, the United States, to surrender its colonies, and he could have made the same point about Britain. Yet the French and British did not surrender all of their colonies easily or quickly. Rather, the fates of each colony were separate decisions, albeit ones overshadowed by America's commanding global position, which Darwin (2007) and Porter (2006) both see as the decisive determinate. In some cases the decision to withdraw was nudged, or shoved ahead, by the Soviet Union's support for Third World nationalists who would have challenged their former colonial masters' remaining interests far more decisively than the nationalists the European imperialists and their American allies ended up backing.

Hendrik Spruyt (2005), in his study of British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese decolonization after World War II, offers a useful template for understanding when imperial powers sustain their colonial presence and when they withdraw. Spruyt finds that "the more fragmented the decision-making process in the core, the greater the resistance to change in territorial policy and decolonization" (p. 6).

Multiple elites, especially if they commanded "veto points," were able to block majority preference for compromise with nationalists or secessionists in colonies. The elites with the potential to block decolonization were "business interests with direct investment in the contested territories and settler populations" (p. 8). Corporatist or autonomous militaries were veto players in authoritarian states, and militaries exercised that power because they could and did lose resources and prestige when colonies were surrendered. Thus Britain, whose army was under civilian control and where executive and legislative power were united in a parliament with two strong parties that alternated in power, decolonized more easily than did the other European powers. That decision reflected the civilian government's judgment about its resources and postwar geopolitical standing and the view of British investors that the best way to save their colonial assets was through concessions to moderate native forces.

The French Fourth Republic was divided among actors commanding numerous veto points, multiple parties in the National Assembly, and a weak

executive. Colonial military forces and settlers enjoyed strong enough autonomy to block efforts to decolonize, which led to wars in Vietnam and Algeria. A similar situation in the Netherlands would have resulted in a prolonged war in Indonesia except that the United States, seeking to bolster its anticolonial image, forced the Dutch, on pain of losing their Marshall Plan aid, to grant Indonesia independence.

The last empire to fall, the USSR, commands attention in all three books. Kumar notes that Stalin fostered national identities in the regions outside the Russian SSR. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, and indeed up to 1989, many citizens in most of the republics held strong Soviet identities. Kivelson and Suny remind us that 76 percent voted yes in the March 1991 referendum on whether to preserve the Soviet Federation of Republics. Only the three Baltic republics, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova, voted no (p. 355). They argue that the failed coup against Gorbachev quickly changed opinions. Burbank and Cooper assert that viewing the USSR as an empire explains its demise and also the loss of its Eastern European allies/satellites. Still, in the few pages where they make this claim they mainly recount events and do not develop an explanation. Kivelson and Suny are more convincing when they argue that Gorbachev's political errors led to the breakup of the USSR by weakening party and central state power, which allowed underlying national identities to gain full expression. More significantly, elites organized within the republics on ethnic lines appropriated full control of the republics' governments and the state firms within their borders.

All these insights are valuable, but they beg the question of why Gorbachev's reforms failed. John Padgett's (2012) comparison of Russia and China begins with an analysis of the ways in which elites occupied positions, controlled political and economic organizations, and interacted with each other at the national and regional levels. This is the structural context in which nationalities developed identities and the base upon which "entrepreneurial provincial first secretaries made quick political calculations about whether they were communist or popular nationalists" in 1989 and after (*ibid.*: 308).

Nationalism certainly is part of the explanation for the Soviet collapse, played a role in how previous empires broke apart, and shaped what emerged from the wreckage of those empires. We owe a significant debt to these authors for analyzing the torturous paths nationalism took and for bringing it to the center of empire studies. That said, the work of melding cultural studies of nationalism with analyses of contingent structural change remains to be done. Structure appears repeatedly in all of these books, but because it does so episodically and in ad hoc ways that do not build theory, we will need to look to authors like Spruyt and Padgett, and hopefully to future scholars who will be inspired by both the achievements and shortcomings of these books to work out convincing explanations for imperial declines, both gradual and sudden.

WHAT ABOUT THE AMERICAN EMPIRE?

The United States only partly fits these authors' definitions of empires. Whether or not we accept that the United States is an empire or analyze America as a hegemon, imperial studies can teach us things about America's current trajectory that we cannot learn from the dynamics of the world system or the prism of international relations.

Kumar certainly is correct that Rome left us a legacy of decline that shapes the ways in which Americans think about their current predicament. (Lachmann and Rose-Greenland [2015] directly compare ancient Roman and contemporary American accounts of decline.) More often, recent authors have compared the United States to Britain. For Niall Ferguson, Britain remains an example of discipline and sacrifice that America's ruling class could emulate by forgoing corporate wealth for careers "trying to turn a sun-scorched sandpit like Iraq into the prosperous capitalist democracy of Paul Wolfowitz's imaginings" (2004: 204). Ordinary proles, in Ferguson's view, can make their contribution by sacrificing retirement and medical care on the altar of the defense budget.

The willingness of elite or common Americans to pay the human and financial costs of empire will be determined in good part by the level of those costs and who is forced to pay them. The former will be shaped by the global economy and geopolitics and the later by internal U.S. politics. Thus we need to follow Julian Go's advice and "think harder about the wider international or global context in which the American state had to operate and compare it with the global context in which the British state operated in the nineteenth century" (2011: 135). Certainly world systems theory offers one way to compare the contexts within which hegemonies or empires rise and fall, with Giovanni Arrighi's (2007) work the highest achievement from that perspective.

Yet, hegemonies or empires more often than not failed to take advantage of openings in the world system or opportunities created by geopolitics. The books reviewed here focus on how ideology and identity affect polities' ability to unify and mobilize, and they can help us recognize factors that will determine whether Americans will identify with and support the exercise of hegemony or instead will take an isolationist and exclusionist turn. But we must recognize that empires also are collections of institutions. These books acknowledge and give some attention to that, but as I have pointed out, they do not undertake enough structural analysis to account for many of the shifts in imperial power and modes of rule that they so ably trace.

Empires, in the final analysis, are particular sorts of geographic and ideological terrains upon which actors of divergent and often opposed interests maneuver for advantage. Those actors bring particular resources to the table, among which are the historical traditions and memories and cultural claims

to which these books give the bulk of their attention and causal priority. Those claims were made within institutions that need analysis on their own terms. Even more, they need to be understood in relation to each other in the shifting structure of individual empires and in a world once inhabited by multiple empires but now dominated by a single, declining American hegemon.

We can best understand America's current trajectory by identifying the tensions and contradictions within and across institutions. Michael Mann (2003) shows one way to accomplish that in his effort to analyze how incoherence shapes and undermines U.S. strategies to conquer countries and to maintain control over global markets and institutions. Bernard Porter (2006) makes a convincing counterintuitive argument that the United States is a weaker empire than Britain was because its far greater military advantage over rivals leads it to embark upon wars that conquer territories it cannot administer and that provoke guerilla counterinsurgencies that produce casualties and commitments that too few Americans are willing to sustain.

Even though America's empire is unlikely to survive, U.S. power and decline have provoked new attention to empires past and present. Our understanding of empires will develop as we recognize their complexity and dynamism, and acknowledge that imperial ideas mixed with material interests to create institutions and practices that undermined the empires within which rulers and subjects lived and fought.

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Abstract: I review and critique three important recent books to clarify the ways in which empires amass territories, dominate the peoples within them, and sooner or later decline and disappear. I review definitions of empires and contrast empires with nation-states. Empires succeed to the extent to which they manage differences among subjects, and I examine explanations for empires' varying strategies for accomplishing that necessary task. I examine how empires both suppress and inadvertently foster nationalism. Imperial dynamics were influenced by competition with rival empires even as empires learned from each other's successes and failures. Throughout the modern era ancient Rome was a model and a caution. I identify the ways in which wars led to imperial expansion and moments when wars weakened or fatally undermined empires. I contrast ancient and modern and European and Asian empires. Finally, I look at the nineteenth-century expansion and twentieth-century collapses of modern empires and speculate on the extent to which those trajectories hold lessons for the contemporary United States.

Key words: empire, nationalism, war, imperialism, colonialism, United States, Great Britain, France, China