

Reviews

Empires in world history: power and the politics of difference

By Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 511. 39 illustrations, 39 maps. Hardback £39.95, ISBN 978-0-691-12708-8; paperback £17.95, ISBN 978-0-691-15236-3.

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Presumed for some time to be the normal category of political organization, the nation has suffered a severe battering by scholars in the last few decades. Until recently, many of us felt that the democratic nation-state was the only structure capable of reflecting the diversity of human experience. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's work demonstrates how, intellectually at least, the world has changed. The main theme of this remarkable survey is how empires grew and sustained their power through a 'politics of difference'. The history of empires is the story of hierarchies that governed different people – and different territories – differently. Because, so they imply, difference is the greatest challenge facing human societies, empires have been the world's dominant form of political organization. Nation-states, with their delusory attempt to force everyone to think and act the same, are relatively unsuccessful latecomers to the world stage.

Empires in world history is an achievement. Organized in the form of a dozen chronologically ordered studies of the rise and fall of particular empires, its structure allows space for complexity while offering a coherent set of key themes. A few mistakes aside, it is generally marked by sensitivity to detail, and an impressive tone of intellectual

confidence. Its authors do not impose rigid definitions, but try to identify where patterns emerge, always conscious of the ways in which the shapes of the political order are in continuous flux. This is a book that is easy to read. But it is hard to write about, because the sweep is too broad for a reviewer to say anything meaningful about more than a limited part of the areas the authors cover and because their concepts are not offered as theories that seek to explain. While Burbank and Cooper offer neat typologies which distinguish between different forms of power, their conceptual schemes always seem on the verge of collapsing amid the contingent particularities of specific places and events. Perhaps that is a good thing.

The book opens with the Roman empire and Qin China, two roughly contemporary empires that are treated as important forms for later styles of empire-building. Those styles are summed up in two different ways of dealing with local elites. The Roman empire created an absorptive idiom of citizenship, incorporating local elites, even local gods, into its practices and ideologies of rule. If the Romans created an empire without a bureaucracy, the Qin, by contrast, formed a state held together by a rule-bound, centrally trained, and centrally managed cadre of officials. These Chinese bureaucrats tried to manage different peoples while acknowledging their difference, rather than trying to incorporate their elites into a single political community.

As the book moves through time, its chapters contrast and compare different repertoires of rule, in the process asking why some forms endured in some places and not in others. The danger is that differences are drawn too sharply, provoking the reader's mind to turn to cases which do not fit the dichotomy. Thinking about the Rome/Qin contrast, for example, one wonders about situations where officials became local elites, obeying the commands of central power to begin with but going on to build

independent authority locally. It is hard to see where Bourbon France would fit into the authors' scheme, with nobles who possessed both a local following and a central office; or the Mughal empire, ruled by a corps of men bound together with a highly specialized idiom of statecraft, but who often used their connection to the imperial centre to create autonomous fiefdoms.

Similarly, before the nineteenth century, it is hard to find a stark dichotomy between empires based on the personal relationships of a ruler and rulers who relied on broader social structures and institutions to govern, as Burbank and Cooper propose in Chapter 5. There, the Ottomans are described as ruling through the patrimonial power of the sultan's household, distinct from the rest of society, whereas the empire of Habsburg empire is conceived as having at its core a class alliance between a culturally, religiously homogeneous ruling elite. Certainly, the sovereign's household seems to have been managed differently in each case, but both regimes relied on the crown's capacity to grant land to retainers, and in both these retainers sometimes tried to escape and sometimes tried to affiliate themselves with the aristocratic elites.

The greatest, and most problematic, dichotomy is perhaps between empire itself and the nation-state. The difference, for Burbank and Cooper, boils down to regimes that acknowledge and rely on difference, and those which aim to annihilate it. Yet, as the framing Roman case study indicates, empires often aggressively assert homogeneity, at least over some of their subjects. And nation-states may contain within them tendencies towards differentiation. Canada, Germany, and India are now undoubtedly nation-states with ruling national (sometimes nationalist) debates and ideologies. Yet each is constituted through its formal recognition of federated diversity, and through the centre's governance of different people in different ways. In practice, every state creates hierarchies and deals with difference. Does that make every regime an empire?

The point, surely, is that the boundary that marks what is or is not an empire is a matter of political contestation, never agreed at any one moment but subject to massive fluctuations over time and space. Ontologically, every polity (just like every person) is always free and is always bound to others. Autonomy and interconnection, freedom and domination are always relative and always debatable. To understand empire, one needs to think about the relationship between the claims made in political language ('this realm is an empire', 'the nation awakes') and the practical, often material forms of power and types of relationship that bind

people at particular moments. After reading *Empires in world history*, one is left wondering whether it is possible to do that over a span of two thousand years.

To give a recent example: the Scottish Nationalist Party is currently trying to establish Scottish independence following (from their perspective) three centuries of English imperial rule. Wanting to retain both the crown and the pound sterling, they propose a kind of national self-determination that anti-colonial nationalists in the 1960s would have seen as the most abject form of imperial subjugation. The point is that the crown's meanings as a signifier of sovereignty and Britishness have vanished, and an independent currency is less valuable within a more globally integrated economy: political idioms and material practices of power have changed. The shift is one that a history of 'nation' and 'empire' would not pick up.

The greatest weakness of *Empires in world history* is the limited attention that it gives to the material idioms and practices of power that connect and divide. There is not enough on the practical operation of tax-collection systems, the everyday working of imperial law courts, or techniques of military recruitment and discipline. But perhaps there could not be in a book with a global, two-thousand-year sweep. My concern is that those contexts are too important to be ignored in such a broad history of empire, whose claims risk not standing up under the scrutiny of particular, often global, historical moments.

The world that trade created: society, culture, and the world economy, 1400 to the present

By Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik. Third edition. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2012. Pp. xiii + 329. Hardback £64.50, ISBN 978-0-7656-2354-6; paperback £21.50, ISBN 978-0-7656-2355-3.

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In this book two historians offer a lucid account of how trade connected and changed the world over the last few centuries. Avoiding the narrow interpretation of trade by economists and economic historians, the authors attempt to incorporate political, socio-cultural, and environmental implications into the main framework of their discussion. Since its first