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Empire, History and the Contemporary Global Order

DOMINIC LIEVEN

Fellow of the Academy

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AGO Elie Kedourie appointed me to a lectureship in the Government Department of LSE, the department and institution to which I still belong. Elie and I were both interested in empire: *inter alia* he converted me to the benefits of Ottoman empire in the Middle East. As historians in a politics department, we shared a common interest not just in history for its own sake but also as a means to understand contemporary world politics. I hope Elie would have enjoyed this lecture. I am certain that he would have rejoiced in the renewed interest in empire evident not just in academia but also in public debate.

A generation ago empire was an unfashionable topic for historians and a marginal one for students of politics and international relations. Now it has returned to the centre of the academic agenda. As regards politics and international relations departments, in large part this reflects contemporary political realities. Problems of government, security and development in many ex-colonies have given retrospective legitimacy to certain aspects of empire. Behind the politically correct terminology of global governance and humanitarian intervention lurk some of the old (and in principle often benevolent) aspirations of empire.¹ More important, the collapse of the Soviet Union has allowed the United States to exercise an unprecedented degree of geopolitical and ideological dominance across the globe. The relative decline of the Japanese and German

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¹ A good example is the article by Robert Cooper entitled 'The Next Empire' in *Prospect*, 67, October 2001, 20–6.

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economies in the 1990s, coupled with an American boom, at least temporarily ended the debate on American decline and ‘overstretch’ which was fashionable in the 1970s and 1980s.² Meanwhile, the administration of George W. Bush has proclaimed and exercised American power with less restraint than its predecessors. These factors explain why academics in international relations departments have become interested in empire as a means to conceptualise and understand the contemporary global order.³

The renewed interest of historians in empire is often owed to rather different factors. Hard power—economic, geopolitical and above all military—remains a relatively unfashionable area for research in history departments. But ‘imperial history’ has expanded to include not just these traditional fields but also new areas such as ecology, gender and identities. As Linda Colley rightly argues, ‘empire’ has benefited from adopting this broader angle on history.⁴ Quite apart from the importance and topicality of these new areas of research, the study of empire has taken on something of the legacy of ‘universal’ or global history. In so doing it has also partly met a public demand for broad-scale history which seeks to integrate the ever-growing range of narrow specialisms and to speak to contemporary concerns. Since history departments in Britain ultimately depend for their survival on public interest and sympathy this seems to me to be an additional reason to rejoice in recent developments in imperial history.

This paper has a number of aims. It seeks to discuss empire in its entirety across the millennia and across all the regions of the world. In so doing it tries to escape from the traditional concentration on modern west European maritime empire, which has tended to skew definitions and approaches to the subject. Though stressing the many meanings of ‘empire’ over time and space and the great variety among imperial polities, the paper argues that power in its many manifestations is the core and essence of empire. The paper seeks to speak to the concerns of both historians and students of international relations. To the debates among

² The bible of this school was Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987).

³ This literature is already immense and has included monographs, academic articles, a swathe of articles in the press and even a special edition (on CD Rom) of *Prospect* in August 2002: perhaps the most interesting aspect of this literature is that some American ‘public intellectuals’ have accepted and even welcomed the term ‘empire’ as applying to the current position of the USA: this is a break with US tradition.

⁴ Linda Colley, ‘What is Imperial History Now?’, in David Cannadine (ed.), *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 135.

social scientists it hopes to bring a degree of historical knowledge, imagination and depth that social scientists often lack. On the other hand, the paper hopes to stress the crucial significance of power—‘hard’ as well as ‘soft’—in a way more familiar to international relations scholars than to many contemporary historians of empire. Above all the paper hopes to show both how important empire has been in shaping the contemporary global order and that it still has much to tell one about the nature of present-day international politics.

Many scholars will see my project as inherently flawed. Trying simultaneously to interest historians and political scientists has always been difficult. With history faculties sometimes moving in the direction of micro-history and cultural studies, and much of American-dominated political science impressed by rational choice and economics-style methodologies, this task has become even more difficult in the past generation. Historians are interested in evidence, context, specificity and contingency. From this perspective, reifying a ‘British Empire’ to include everything from the seventeenth-century West Indies to twentieth-century India and then comparing this ‘British Empire’ to other equally simplified imperial polities is a very dubious project. Nor do most historians take kindly to ransacking the past for contemporary lessons. On the other hand, with few exceptions, political scientists are only really interested in the present: to the extent that the past is studied, this is done just to illuminate the present and the future. Equally, social science is far more concerned than historians with theories, definitions and conceptualisation.

My own view is that broad-ranging comparisons and attempts at typology such as I attempt in this piece can never be any substitute for detailed knowledge and insight into specific problems rooted in exhaustive study of evidence and hard-won local experience. On the other hand, such studies as mine can encourage ‘local experts’ to look at matters from different angles, ask unexpected questions, and query some of the accepted truths in their field of study. Academic fields can become very self-obsessed, concentrating on a narrow range of issues and ignoring much of the possible area of study, not to mention the big picture. Since students, citizens and indeed all human beings crave instinctively for the meaning conveyed by the big picture this has its dangers. Moreover, in reality historians’ opinions and choice of research are often greatly influenced by the present, just as political scientists have no option but to draw most of their assumptions from memory, in other words the past. So there is something to be said for explicitly using the past—in my case empire—to illuminate debates on the contemporary global order.

A pre-requisite for any intelligent discussion of empire is to stand back from the contemporary polemics surrounding the word and the subject. Whatever the contemporary resonance of the term 'empire', it is important to recognise that over the millennia empires often provided major public goods. They sustained order and security across vast regions of the globe. In so doing, empire encouraged long-distance trade and the financial operations needed to underpin it. Though Western (and some other) historians⁵ have tended to stress the constraints that imperial ideologies put on the free competition of ideas, in reality matters were often not so clear-cut. Secure long-distance communications helped the spread not just of goods but also often of ideas. Very many of the world's greatest civilisations and cultural monuments were protected, inspired or financed by empires. It is not yet self-evident that all these public goods can be provided in the long run by non-imperial means.

Although these are important truths, they are not easily accepted in today's world, in which empire is usually a term of political abuse. To describe any polity as an empire is usually to damn it as illegitimate, out-of-date and doomed to disappear. For most of the Third World the word 'empire' conjures up images of European colonisation, cultural arrogance, and imposed alien rule. As is always the case, this image was in part the one drawn by present-day power-holders in order to legitimise their own post-imperial rule. This does not mean that the image did not in many cases reflect historical reality.

Perhaps more important, empire is equally illegitimate in the eyes of the Americans, in other words the only people whose country is sufficiently powerful to be called a true empire. The foundation myth of the USA was an anti-imperial struggle. While subsequently conquering a continent and destroying its native population most Americans imagined that they were creating a nation, unlike their European cousins whose trans-oceanic conquests were perceived by themselves and others as the building of empires. As always, it is the perception of the victorious that matters, rather than that of the defeated and marginalised. Probably even more important is the fact that contemporary American identity is rooted in democratic ideology, American society and the country's official political image having now outgrown its initial Anglo-Saxon and Protestant ethno-cultural shell. Both for domestic political reasons and as leader of

⁵ Not just Western ones: Mao Zedong agreed about the nefarious impact of empire on China, contrasting this to the benefits of European multipolarity: see L. J. Moser, *The Chinese Mosaic. The Peoples and Provinces of China* (Boulder, 1985), p. 136.

the global 'Free World' alliance the United States has to proclaim its ideology more loudly than most other liberal democracies.

Empire is by definition the antithesis of democracy, popular sovereignty and national self-determination. All the great historical empires and all sensible definitions of empire entail rule without consent over many peoples, these peoples being for the most part alien in language, culture and often religion to the empire's rulers. It is precisely these aspects of empire which partly differentiate it from a multi-ethnic federation or a nation-state. Empire defined in these terms is also barely compatible with post-Westphalian state sovereignty, at least once the sovereign state came to be defined as a nation-state, with all that this meant after 1789 in terms of popular sovereignty. Most nations usually claim to embody not just a conception of democratic citizenship, but also some degree of ethno-cultural solidarity. Once again this contradicts the essence of historical empire, whose rulers usually rejoiced in and drew legitimacy from the number of diverse kingdoms and peoples whom they had conquered and subjected to their rule. As regards the past, it might be possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' empires. But by the late twentieth century all empires sinned against the hegemonic ideologies of democracy, popular sovereignty and national self-determination and were therefore damned. That was the key reason why the twentieth century witnessed not just the collapse of empires but also (for the first time in history) the disappearance of countries which proudly called themselves empires from the map.⁶

Quite apart from the polemics which surround the word, empire is also a problematic concept because of the many meanings which have been attached to the word since its origins in the Latin term '*imperium*' two thousand years ago. As one might expect of the Romans, '*imperium*' had a clearly defined political-institutional meaning akin to the modern conception of legitimate sovereignty.⁷ Through its link to the would-be universal Roman imperial polity, and subsequently to the Christian universe, the word also quickly came to entail a claim to universal or at least very far-flung power.⁸ During the last two thousand years the word

⁶ A very useful introduction to the theme of nations is Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny (eds.), *Becoming National* (New York, 1996).

⁷ A useful introduction to the Roman word and concept is the entry '*Imperium*', Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 751–2.

⁸ See e.g. R. Folz, *The Concept of Empire in Western Europe from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Century* (Westport, 1969).

'empire' has often retained this sense of a sovereign polity exercising political authority over far-flung dominions.

But empire and its spin-off imperialism have also been given other very different meanings. The important late medieval and Renaissance concept that a king was emperor in his own realm, for example, was designed to legitimise a multipolar, anti-imperial European order.⁹ Jumping many centuries, the Leninist definition of imperialism not merely removed the essence of empire from politics to economics but explicitly denied that modern capitalist imperialism had anything in common with the great aristocratic, military and religious empires of the past.¹⁰ Since this definition of imperialism was at the core of most Cold War polemics on empire and remains influential in left-wing historiography the potential for confusion is great.¹¹ When postmarxism goes postmodern and enters the realm of cultural history it moves so far from mainstream historians' debates on empire that communication almost ceases,¹² not least because the language it uses is so distant from normal English. The most recent bible of this postmodern, postmarxist school compounds confusion by using the term 'empire' almost as a contrast to 'imperialism' in order to conceptualise cultural and economic hegemony in the contemporary global order.¹³

If the English-language word 'empire' has many meanings and many polemical connotations, the picture becomes even more confused in translation. Reich is the usual German translation of 'empire': thanks to Hitler it is a word that has instant recognition across the world. Interestingly, Otto von Habsburg writes that the closest English-language equivalent for 'Reich' is 'commonwealth'. For Dr von Habsburg the true German 'Reich' was the so-called First Reich, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. He is quite correct to note that the Holy Roman Empire was far closer to the British white Commonwealth of the twentieth

⁹ On this and the many other meanings of empire in early modern Europe see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World* (New Haven, 1995); James Muldoon, *Empire and Order. The Concept of Empire, 800–1800* (Houndmills, 1999), and J. Robertson, 'Gibbon's Roman Empire as a universal monarchy: *The Decline and Fall* and the imperial idea in early modern Europe', in R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁰ V. Lenin, *Imperialism. The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

¹¹ Wolfgang Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism* (London, 1981) is an excellent introduction to debates on imperialism during the Cold War.

¹² Or at least becomes a bit acerbic and impatient: see e.g. David Washbrook, 'Orient and Occident: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire', in R. W. Winks (ed.), *Historiography*, vol. 5 in William Roger Louis (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1999).

¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

century than to the overwhelming majority of empires in history: it was a loose confederation in which true sovereignty rested with the individual units but which was united by many common laws and loyalties, a degree of common culture, and some ability to combine in the face of external threats.¹⁴

The so-called Second Reich founded by Bismarck in 1871 was a very different type of polity. It was unequivocally both a state and a German nation. Satisfying the demands of modern German ethno-nationalism was its main source of legitimacy. This nation-state called itself an empire for many reasons. 'Empire' symbolised the fact that the Hohenzollerns and the North German Protestant tradition they embodied had replaced the Habsburgs as leaders of the German people and Central Europe's greatest power. It symbolised a claim to inheritance of the Holy Roman Empire, though less of the loose confederation of recent centuries than of the early empire of the Saxons and Hohenstaufens which German nationalists perceived as a potential national empire ruined by international (i.e. papal) intervention. In a manner that reflects one of the oldest meanings of empire, the Hohenzollern monarch was also called an emperor because he ruled over mere kings—in this case the rulers of Saxony, Bavaria and Wurttemberg.¹⁵ In the age of 'High Imperialism' calling oneself an empire was also simply a claim to a seat at the very small top table of great powers which were dividing up the globe and seemed destined to decide mankind's future. This may not have been a factor for Bismarck in 1871 but it certainly became a connotation of empire for many Germans by the Wilhelmine era as they launched their drive for *Weltpolitik*. For somewhat similar reasons Disraeli proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India in 1876 and the Japanese chose the word 'emperor' to dignify their hereditary high-priest, the *Tenno*, in the eyes of the western great powers.

Hitler's Third Reich inherited some of the Second Reich's imperial attributes. It was a state, a German nation, and a would-be world empire. Hitler codified and made far nastier the often inchoate Wilhelmine longing for global imperial status. The idea of *Lebensraum* for instance reflected a correct sense that the world power of the Americans, Russians and British depended on the continental scale of their territory and also very often on the disappearance from that territory of most of its native population. Hitler turned all the worst elements of European overseas

¹⁴ Otto von Habsburg, *Die Reichsidee. Geschichte und Zukunft einer ubernationalen Ordnung* (Vienna, 1986).

¹⁵ I owe this insight to a discussion with John Rohl.

imperialism into a system of imperial, racist geopolitics and then applied them within Europe.¹⁶ Nevertheless, though it does seem to me to be both truthful and illuminating to place the Third Reich within the context of modern Western imperialism it is also obvious that, much more than most empires, Hitler's polity was *sui generis*.

One good example of this is his regime's worst crime, the extermination of the Jews. Europe's Jews, especially in eastern and central Europe, were natural allies of empire in general and German empire in particular. They had very good historical reason to fear narrow ethno-nationalism, especially among the slavs of east-central Europe. They had been loyal subjects of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Hohenzollern empires under all of which some Jews had flourished mightily and all Jews had enjoyed high levels of tolerance and security.¹⁷ To target the Jews as arch-enemies of a project for German empire over Europe was not only evil but stupid. But national socialism was very far from being merely a rational project and ideology of empire.

German history thus illustrates that very different types of polity could be called empires. Of course this was also true outside Germany and it is an important point. The extraordinary ragbag of inherited provinces that made up the 'empire' of Charles V, for example, was a dynastic accident. In terms of contemporary definitions, it was much more truly an anti-French alliance system than anything resembling a single polity. Charles's relationship with his German or Italian aristocratic and princely subjects was closer to that of George Bush II with the King of Saudi Arabia than to the president's link to the governor of Idaho. The Holy Roman Empire, at whose head Charles V stood, was merely one part of his 'alliance system'. As already noted, it was a loose commonwealth and a maze of overlapping rights and sovereignties.¹⁸

¹⁶ This is clear enough from a reading of *Mein Kampf*. Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards. A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1988) provides interesting insights into the Nazis' view of their empire in the east.

¹⁷ On the Jews in the Ottoman Empire see e.g. S. S. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (Houndmills, 1991). On the Habsburg Jews see W. O. McCagg, *A History of the Habsburg Jews 1670–1918* (Bloomington, 1992). For European comparisons see J. Frankel and S. J. Zipperstein (eds.), *Assimilation and Community. The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 1993). Interestingly, 13 Jewish millionaires (reckoned in pounds sterling) were nobles in Prussia in 1913: all Jewish millionaires were ennobled whereas many Christian 'new' millionaires were not. See Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe 1815–1914* (Houndmills, 1992), pp. 63–4.

¹⁸ Charles V's own views on Habsburg grand strategy are illuminating: see Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (New Haven, 1998), pp. 77–90, and chapter 1 of Mia Rodríguez-Salgado, *The Changing Face of Empire. Charles V, Philip II and Habsburg Authority 1551–1559*

International relations theorists correctly see a sharp break between the European order embodied by this empire and the post-Westphalian sovereign state. Many premodern empires, however, were in most key respects states in the Westphalian sense. That was true of the Roman Empire which had a very clear sense of sovereignty, borders and public authority. Like Rome, the Tang and Sung empires were not quite Westphalian in that they did not see any other polity as their legal equal. That is one way in which they were quintessentially imperial. On the other hand, professional bureaucracies and sophisticated administrative systems are part of the essence of effective statehood and early imperial China perfected them to a level which was not seen in Europe until well into the eighteenth century.¹⁹

A useful way to categorise empires is by their long-term historical significance. The longevity or otherwise of an empire was likely to count here. So too was the extent to which the emperor's own power penetrated into the societies over which he ruled. This penetration to some extent entailed institutions of government. For example, in principle the Chinese bureaucratic empire or the Ottoman empire at its apogee had a bigger impact on everyday lives than was usually the case with versions of indirect aristocratic empire where imperial power was mediated by local hereditary elites and their patron-client networks.²⁰ Obviously, however, an empire's long-term impact entailed far more than the narrowly political and governmental sphere. In this context much depended on the goals of a specific empire. In principle, rulers who sought to convert their subjects were likely to have a bigger impact than those who wished only to skim off a modest financial tribute. Empires which set up settler colonies designed to replace the existing native societies in whole or part were likely to have the biggest impact of all. As always, however, one needs to separate aspirations from results. An empire might try to convert its subjects and fail. The total destruction of native society in European settler colonies might be as much the unintended consequence of diseases accompanying imperial conquerors as of a deliberate policy of ethnocide or genocide.²¹

(Cambridge, 1988), ch. 1. Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495–1806* (Houndmills, 1999) is a useful brief guide.

¹⁹ See e.g. S. E. Finer, *The History of Government*, vol. 1, *Ancient Monarchies and Empires* (Oxford, 1997); Book 2, chs. 5 and 6; vol. 2, *The Intermediate Age*, Part 2, ch. 3.

²⁰ This is a key aspect of S. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (New Brunswick, 1992).

²¹ Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism. The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 1986) remains a classic on all aspects of this issue: see also, Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold. Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples* (London, 1999).

Moreover, one should be slow to write off the significance even of some 'tribute empires'. For example, by any comparative imperial measure the Mongol 'empire' in Russia ought to have been of minimal historical significance. The Mongols were not interested in governing, let alone converting, Russia; they ruled at long arm's length through native princes. The impact of these nomadic and subsequently Muslim rulers on Christian Russian culture was small. Nevertheless, a hot debate continues to this day as to whether the Mongol empire 'perverted' the whole course of Russian history by forcibly turning the eyes of Russian elites eastwards for two centuries and thereby further distancing Russia from the intellectual and cultural currents which led shortly after to the Renaissance and the Reformation. To some extent this is merely an early example of a post-imperial people retrospectively and anachronistically linking all their current woes and obsessions (in the Russian case, the country's European/Western identity) to the legacy of alien, imperial rule. Since empire's long-term significance lies not just in its 'objective' legacy but also in its impact on perceptions the Russian case is, however, a significant one.²²

In some cases the long-term 'objective' impact of empire is unequivocal. This is true as regards contemporary Asia's greatest contemporary polities, India and China. Not just China's borders but to a considerable extent its identity were determined by empire, by the imperial bureaucratic elites, and by the high culture and ideology they and their empire embodied. The Ching and the Mughals both came from the semi-nomadic world beyond China's and India's northern borders. But the Mughals never conquered all 'India', never themselves assimilated to the dominant 'native' religion and culture, while at the same time they oversaw the conversion of significant numbers of 'Indians' to Islam. Nor in any case did the Mughals put down as deep institutional roots in India as was the case with the Ching in particular, and with the Chinese tradition of 'bureaucratic empire' in general. Even before one factors in the British impact on India, it is clear that the country's relatively (by Chinese standards) decentralised political system and ethno-religious heterogeneity owe a good deal to different traditions of empire.

In Europe's case one might argue that the most significant aspect of empire is its absence. Two millennia ago great empires (the Han and

²² On the Mongol impact on Russia see e.g. the contrasting views of Charles Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde* (London, 1985), and Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols* (Cambridge, 1998).

Roman) dominated the opposite ends of Eurasia. It is obviously crucial to this day that whereas empire predominated for most of the last two thousand years in East Asia, a multipolar system became rooted in Europe. Many factors explain this and not least contingency. The first Chin emperor not merely politically unified China but also uprooted the regional vernacular scripts which otherwise might well have led to the creation in continental East Asia of multipolar high cultures and polities. Sam Finer calls the 'First Emperor' the ruler who has had the greatest individual long-term impact on political history.²³

'Structural' factors—geopolitics for example—also mattered greatly, however. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, Napoleon and Hitler attempted to establish pan-European empires. Europe's geopolitics obstructed them. Though it was possible to conquer the Continent's 'Carolingian core', they both then faced peripheral power centres (Britain and Russia) which were geographically inaccessible. Simultaneously mobilising the sea-power to conquer Britain and the military-logistical power to dominate the Moscow-Urals region proved beyond the capacity even of a polity which controlled the whole Carolingian core. In an earlier era political and ideological factors crucially influenced empire's fate in Europe and East Asia. The medieval split between papal and secular pretenders to empire helped the emergence of multipolarity in Europe. In China secular and ideological authority was merged in the emperor and the Confucian bureaucracy. During many centuries access not just to top positions of power and status but even to great wealth was regulated for Han Chinese largely by a civil-service examination system controlled by the bureaucracy. Since empire was crucial to bureaucrats' well-being and was also perceived by them as the only legitimate form of polity, it is not hard to see how this system sustained 'one polity under heaven'.²⁴

Nevertheless, it would be strange to define empire's impact on Europe in purely negative terms. After all, without the legacy of Rome 'Europe' as a separate concept, identity or civilisation would probably not exist. The Roman Empire itself was a Mediterranean not a 'European' polity in both geopolitical and cultural terms. The subsequent definition of Europe's borders, however, had much to do with empire. Early Islamic

²³ Finer, *Ancient Monarchies*, p. 473. For more detail on the First Emperor's policy and impact see D. Bodde, 'The State and Empire of Ch'in', ch. 1, in D. Twitchett and M. Loewe (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *the Ch'in and Han Empires 221 BC–AD 220* (Cambridge, 1986).

²⁴ On the examination system, see in particular Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, 2000).

empire's conquest of the whole southern shore of the Mediterranean and the region's subsequent north/south divide between Christian and Islamic worlds had hugely important geopolitical implications which reverberate to this day. So too, even more obviously, did European empires overseas. For a time Europe's political and cultural hegemony spread across much of the globe. Of course neither the Christian/Islamic divide nor European hegemony was as unequivocal as these bald generalisations suggest: but they are mostly true and hugely significant for the contemporary world. Above all, the British colonial empire was vastly important since the 'New Englands' it created in the Americas and Australasia are the geopolitical base for the current domination of the world by Anglophone political and economic ideologies and institutions. The forcible integration of the New World into a European-dominated trading complex on terms wholly advantageous to Europeans also hugely enhanced European power vis-à-vis the Islamic and Chinese worlds and facilitated the West's subsequent domination of the global economy to this day.²⁵

Is it possible to impose order and coherence on the vast range of politics and events already covered in this paper, not to mention on contemporary debates, by providing some all-encompassing definition of empire? Maybe: what seems to me certain, however, is that the definitions most common in the political science literature are inadequate.²⁶ These definitions focus on the split between imperial metropole and peripheral province or colony. They stress the political domination and, very often, the economic exploitation of the periphery by the core. The popularity of cultural history in recent years has led to an emphasis on metropolitan cultural hegemony as a further defining mark of empire. The point about this definition is that it mostly makes sense when applied to the modern west European oceanic empires. In the British, French or Dutch empires in 1900 metropole and periphery were divided by the oceans, by race, and by a quickly widening level of wealth and economic development. In cultural terms 'Europe' made a far bigger impact on the lives and imaginations of the colonised than was true vice versa, which itself in time

²⁵ This is part of the debate about the origins of Western dominance of the globe. Crudely speaking, one side argues for Western aggression and successful annexation of New World resources: the other stresses aspects of individualism, enquiry and 'rationality' in the Western tradition. Two recent additions to the literature on this issue are John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge, 2004), who stresses the former view, and D. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance* (New Haven, 2000), who stresses what he sees as Europe's unique 'explore-control-utilize syndrome'.

²⁶ The most frequently cited definition comes from Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, 1986), pp. 19–21.

came to be a source of resentment. Perhaps most important, the adult male inhabitants of the metropole were citizens, whereas inhabitants of the periphery in principle were subjects. For all these reasons the British, French and Dutch empires were ‘national’ in the sense that they were dominated by nations.

For most of history’s great land empires the centre–periphery definition makes much less sense, and not only because no oceans separated the metropole from its colonies. Many of these empires could be described as ‘aristocratic’. They were dominated and exploited by a class, not by a community, let alone a nation. Members of the core aristocratic elite identified and allied much more readily with fellow aristocrats (especially from within their own civilisation) than with plebeians of their own ethnicity. In addition the empire often exploited the lower classes of the core more ruthlessly than those of the periphery because it was logistically easier and politically safer to do so. Tsarist Russia from Peter I’s time until the 1860s was a good example of such an empire. It was an alliance of landowning groups around a Russian gentry core, whose own elite sometimes spoke French better than Russian and saw itself not just as members of a Russian ruling class but also as part of a European cosmopolitan aristocracy. Rather obviously, Baltic German aristocrats were much greater beneficiaries of empire than the enserfed Great Russian masses.²⁷

The Ottoman Empire was not an aristocratic polity but it shared some similarities with tsarism. Anatolia, the Turkish heartland, was one of the poorer and most exploited regions of the empire. The Ottoman elite spoke a Persian-influenced language incomprehensible to most Turks and understood the name ‘Turk’ to be synonymous with rural bumpkin. In a manner familiar to the Islamic world, but inconceivable to the west European maritime empires, the core Ottoman elite during the empire’s apogee was made up of converted Christian slaves. The Ottoman polity is in fact a fine example of an empire whose identity was rooted in religion and dynasty rather than ethnicity. Islam and the Ottoman family potentially united Turk, Arab and Kurd elites around a common identity and a common political loyalty. Social mobility into that elite was considerably easier than in aristocratic Europe, though it usually required conversion to Islam.²⁸

²⁷ On inter-ethnic relations in the ‘tsarist empire’ see Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: a Multiethnic History* (New York, 2001); for comparisons, see Dominic Lieven, *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London, 2000).

²⁸ On the Ottoman Empire before 1700 see: H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: the Classical Age 1300–1600* (London, 1973); Suraiya Faroqui, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London, 2004).

In their early days the Ottomans also represented another, very common species of land empire, especially in the Islamic world: the empire created by nomads. The great political thinker Ibn Khaldun is the most famous theorist of such polities.²⁹ In the tradition of nomadic empire, the peoples on a civilisation's periphery preserve the warrior virtues and periodically conquer the urban centres of that civilisation. In time themselves conquered by that civilisation's culture and temptations, they in turn fall victims to a new wave of nomadic warriors. Though many of China's conquerors from the north, including the Manchus (Ching), were at best semi-nomads, a similar pattern to some extent applied. The history of all these empires turns ideas of cultural hegemony on their head. For the Manchu people the price of ruling an empire was ultimately very often cultural assimilation and semi-extinction as a 'nation'.³⁰

It seems to me therefore that the dominant definitions of empire in political science are dangerous because they feed an inaccurate and distinctly 'Western' conception and experience of empire. Offering an alternative definition is difficult. Can any single definition fit even the vast range of polities I have mentioned which actually called themselves empires, let alone polities such as the USA and USSR which strongly resisted having the term pinned on them? Could one indeed not just take the path perhaps suggested in my introduction and simply equate empires with great powers? Such a line would tend to deny any sharp distinction between past and present: the essence of empire is power, above all unequal power: power is eternal and will never be equal: those who have power will seldom fail to use it in their own interests. Therefore the present global order is imperial, as all regional and global orders in this sense to some extent must be. If the present order is more imperial than the nineteenth-century one, that is because instead of a small number of imperial polities of roughly equal power we have one imperial superpower. 'Empire' has therefore replaced 'anarchy' and no more need be said.

I think there is much truth in this view but not the whole truth. A true empire is not just any powerful polity. City states and premodern kingdoms could be very powerful without quite being empires. Perhaps it is my background in Russian history which makes me stress the significance

²⁹ See e.g. ch. 18 of Anthony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 2001).

³⁰ Just what kind of nation the Manchus were is itself an issue: Soviet ethnographers faced similar problems when forced to define Central Asian nations in terms of collective perceptions of lineage. On the Manchus see: Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton, 1990); Pamela Kyle Crossley, *The Manchus* (Oxford, 1997).

of vast territory and its management as a specific aspect and challenge of empire. Since direct control of vast territories is less all-important a source of power than was once the case, this helps to explain why empire has gone out of fashion. It seems to me too that there are other significant differences between the twentieth century and earlier eras and that discussing the concept of 'empire' helps to illuminate them. The doctrines of popular sovereignty and nationalism, the socio-economic changes which have encouraged them, and an international legal order which recognises them as principles have made a very significant difference to the way power is and can be used. Again this helps to explain why empires have disappeared from the map. To rule by initial conquest and without overt consent over a myriad of different peoples was part of empire's essence and pride. It is anathema to a modern era dominated by democratic and nationalist ideologies. For that reason I define a true empire as being a polity ruling over great territories and many peoples without their explicit consent. Above all, however, comes power: to deserve the title of 'empire' a polity needs to be very powerful and to play a key role in the regional or global politics of its day.

Power itself comes in various shapes and forms which require some definition. In attempting to analyse the vast range of evidence essential to this discussion of empire, it seemed to me that Michael Mann's four sources of social power (political, military, economic and cultural/ideological) were of most use.³¹ My own study of empires persuaded me to add two further sources of power, however: geopolitical and demographic.³² Most empires to differing degrees and at different times combined most of these sources of power. Even a single empire, however, could vary over time and from one province to the next as to which of these sources of power was most significant. Looking at the shifting relationships between the many sources of power is a good way to approach the comparative history of empire. It also helps one to think about empire's lessons for the contemporary world.

Take military power, for example. The history of military operations, strategy and tactics is currently extremely unfashionable in academia. On the whole, too, contemporary enlightened opinion tends to see military might as a spin-off of economic power, and thereby also of technological pre-eminence. This appears to be the lesson, for instance, of the two World Wars and even of the two Gulf wars. It is worth remembering,

³¹ Michael Mann, *The Four Sources of Social Power*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1986).

³² See Lieven, *Empire*, pp. 413–22.

however, that for much of history military superiority was by no means linked to economic or cultural superiority.³³ As already noted, that was always true of nomadic empires. Nor even was successful European expansion overseas before the nineteenth century due mostly to military-technological factors.³⁴ But history does offer many examples of how shifts in military technology and organisation led to the rise and fall of polities and of the balance of classes within them. It is improbable but not impossible that the acquisition by non-state actors of weapons of mass destruction would do fatal damage to contemporary western polities and societies. Much more likely, it would fundamentally change the nature of these polities by sharply increasing the costs (political more than financial) of security.

Michael Mann's framework helps one to understand less apocalyptic and less obvious elements of imperial and contemporary power. Take the role of women, for example. Clearly this lies at the heart of conflict both between 'the West' and some other cultures, and within many Western societies. On the whole it seems to me that the vastly enhanced possibilities for women are important factors in American (and in this case Western) ideological and economic power. If the mobilisation of women into factories was an important source of economic power in the Industrial Revolution, how much more significant is the contemporary mobilisation of female brains and ambitions into the 'commanding heights' of the 'knowledge economy'.

Demography is also, however, a source of power. Women in developed societies no longer need to see marriage and motherhood as the essential means to security and status. Combine this with modern technologies and one has an explanation of plummeting birth-rates. It must be of some political significance that whereas people of European descent were roughly twenty per cent of the world's population in 1800, by 2050 their share will have fallen to roughly six per cent. But the precise significance depends on factors other than demography. Perhaps the place of immigration in American history and identity will make it easier for the USA

³³ For a splendidly original long-term view of military history see John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993).

³⁴ For a broad view of this see e.g. Jeremy Black, *War and the World. Military Power and the Fate of Continents 1450–2000* (New Haven, 1998). See also, however, R. G. S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India* (Cambridge, 2003) for a specific war which illustrates how states whose rulers relied on alien mercenary troops for domestic political reasons found it exceptionally hard to resist European power.

to accept and assimilate immigrants than is the case of Europe, let alone Japan. If these immigrants are 'conquered' by American culture and loyalties that will surely be a mark of American social power. To put this in an imperial context, the willingness and ability of the USA to accept and 'conquer' such immigrants would place America in the tradition of the great land empires, rather than of the British or the Dutch. The Roman empire defined itself by culture and gained strength from the fact that even by the second century AD not just senators but even emperors could come from outside Italy. On the contrary, Britain and the Netherlands of the imperial era were ethnically defined nations: their determination not to assimilate non-whites and to maintain a clear racial hierarchy was a source of imperial weakness.³⁵

The central dilemma of modern empire is rooted in the fact that since the mid-nineteenth century geopolitical sources of power pulled in one direction and political and ideological ones in the other. By the 1870s it was a commonplace among political observers that the future belonged to countries of continental scale and resources. Even in the first half of the century Herzen and de Tocqueville had pointed to the future role of the USA and Russia. On the other hand, nationalism was becoming the developed world's most compelling ideology, not least in the eyes of European elites who saw it as a defence against socialism in the new era of mass politics. The nation, embodied in British and French modernity or in German and Italian unification, appeared to be the wave of the future. The multinational Habsburg and Ottoman empires appeared doomed to decline. For the rulers of multinational Russia the key issue appeared to be which of these two groups their empire would join. For them as for all elites, however, the key dilemma was that continental scale implied multi-ethnicity and the latter posed great difficulties in the era of nationalism. As the British historian and imperialist J. R. Seeley put matters, 'when the state advances beyond the limits of the nationality, its power becomes precarious and artificial'.³⁶

³⁵ This is to question aspects of the interesting thesis of Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London, 1997).

³⁶ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1885), pp. 46, 51, 75: see e.g. Peter J. Taylor, *Political Geography. World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality* (Harlow, 1989), and Claude Raffestin, *Geopolitique et Histoire* (Lausanne, 1995) for geopolitical debates and prophecies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: on Mackinder and Mahan, the two leading Anglophone thinkers on geopolitics at the turn of the twentieth century see W. D. Puleston, *Mahan. The Life and Work of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan* (London, 1939), and W. H. Parker, *Mackinder. Geography as an Aid to Statecraft* (Oxford, 1982).

By far the most radical response to the modern dilemma of empire came from the rulers of the Soviet Union.³⁷ By rooting their polity in a new, universal secular religion—Marxist socialism—they hoped to trump nationalism. A new Soviet identity was supposed to emerge from the creation of a successful, modern and socialist society. Growing up amidst socialist modernity and admiring its achievements would transform the mentalities and loyalties of what had been largely a peasant society. The emigration or destruction of the old elites would aid this process. To symbolise that this new Soviet civilisation had broken with the past, loyal citizens called themselves names such as ‘Vladlen’, just as loyal Muslims in the early Caliphate had turned to names such as Muhammad.

The early Soviet regime made no effort to uproot ethnicity. On the contrary, it created ethnically defined republics, promoted ‘natives’ into leading positions, and encouraged vernacular languages and culture. It did this partly to acquire legitimacy among non-Russians but also because it believed that the latter would gain access to socialist modernity more easily through the medium of their native languages. The British and French empires in the twentieth century often preached modernisation and civilising mission but the Soviet Union went far further than them not just in rhetoric but also in practice. Within a generation of the regime’s creation even most Central Asian women were in school. The British and French empires in Africa and Asia seldom penetrated native society very deeply and usually operated through conservative local elites. By these standards, indeed measured against almost any imperial comparison, the Soviet regime’s will and ability to penetrate and transform society was formidable.

Like most empires, the Soviet regime ultimately failed because of a combination of external challenges and internal weaknesses. Soviet ideology explicitly rooted the regime’s legitimacy in overtaking capitalism through the mechanism of the socialist planned economy. The clear failure to achieve this goal by the 1980s was fatal. The Bolsheviks would not have retained power in 1917–18 had the great capitalist states not been at each others’ throats, nor would socialism have spread to east-central Europe or China without the Second World War between the leading

³⁷ The literature on Soviet identity and Soviet nationalities policy is vast: for overviews see: Terry Martin, *The Affirmative-Action Empire* (Ithaca, 2001); G. Simon, *Nationalism and Policy towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, 1991); Y. Slezkine, ‘The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’, *Slavic Review*, 53, 2 (1994), pp. 414–52.

capitalist states. After 1945, however, the external context changed dramatically, with the whole capitalist world united around the USA against its Soviet enemy. In a manner reminiscent of the earlier universal, monotheistic religions, Marxism-Leninism also broke up into rival regional branches preaching their own variation of the ideology. The rooting of a rival, heretical regime in China, which shared one of the world's longest borders with the USSR, put huge additional strains on a Soviet defence budget already terribly overstretched by the Cold War.³⁸

No other polity even dreamed of matching the radical, Soviet response to empire's dilemma. Under their last effective sultan, Abdul Hamid II, the Ottomans did, however, attempt to trump ethnic nationalism by stressing the role of Islam to legitimise their regime and provide a common identity and loyalty for its subjects.³⁹ As territorial losses in the Balkans increasingly made the Muslim provinces the empire's geopolitical core, this strategy made sense as a way to unite Turks, Arabs and Kurds. Since most Muslim subjects even in 1900 had a much stronger religious and dynastic loyalty than any allegiance to ethnic nationalism, the sultans' strategy was doubly realistic. Stressing their role as Islam's shield against the global Christian threat potentially won legitimacy at home and allowed Abdul Hamid to counter the Christian powers' intervention in his domestic affairs by appealing to Muslim sentiment in the British, Russian and French empires. By emphasising his role as caliph Abdul Hamid also elevated the monarchy above the new military and bureaucratic elites who were threatening to turn the sultan into a mere figurehead. In 1908, however, Abdul Hamid's regime was overthrown by the 'Young Turks'. In its last decade power in the Ottoman Empire increasingly belonged to Turkish nationalist leaders. As in all empires, the growing influence of 'metropolitan' ethnic nationalism within the imperial elite served to alienate other nationalities and undermine the empire's legitimacy in their eyes. Well before this process had time to work itself out,

³⁸ Of the already vast literature on the collapse of the USSR, J. Hough, *Democratisation and Revolution in the USSR 1985–1991* (Washington, 1997) stands out. Though an interesting literature has emerged comparing the USSR and its collapse to the fate of other empires, in my view P. Dibb, *The Soviet Union: the Incomplete Superpower* (London, 1988) remains a good way to think about this issue since Dibb both explicitly discusses empire and writes without the benefit of hindsight on the USSR's strengths and weaknesses.

³⁹ Kemal Karpat, *The Politicisation of Islam* (Oxford, 2002) is outstanding on late-Ottoman strategies but see also H. Kayaglı, *Arabs and Young Turks. Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire 1908–1918* (Berkeley, 1997), M. Kent (ed.), *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1996), and S. Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1998).

however, the Ottoman Empire had been defeated and dismembered as a result of joining what proved to be the losing side in the First World War. Given the empire's weakness and its strategic position, however, the Ottomans never had much chance of sustaining neutrality.

The most common response to the imperial dilemma was to try to turn as much as possible of the empire into something approximating to a nation. Tsarist Russia in its last decades is an interesting example of this strategy. As already noted, before the 1860s tsarism was more a dynastic and aristocratic empire than a national one. From the 1860s it began to evolve in the latter direction, however. This was partly in response to Russian nationalist pressure and partly also fitted into a pattern whereby European elites entering the era of mass politics sought to relegitimise themselves in nationalist terms. It was also believed, however, that only nationalism could persuade modern subjects to identify with, and if necessary die for, the state. A key priority of tsarist 'empire-saving' strategy was to ensure that Ukrainians and Belorussians did not acquire an independent high culture and political loyalties as they became literate and modern 'citizens'. Since in 1900 only forty-four per cent of the empire's population was Russian but another twenty-two per cent was Ukrainian or Belorussian the logic of this policy is obvious. Tsarist strategy failed for the same reasons that the 'Young Turk' project collapsed. War in general and the First World War in particular proved a graveyard for empires. In addition, however, the Russian project of 'nation-empire' fell between two stools. The state's policy of 'russification' alienated many non-Russians. At the same time the dynastic state was never responsible to the Russian nation and was widely distrusted in Russian society too. Key cadres (e.g. teachers), on whom any modernising state counts to inculcate national identity into the population, loathed tsarism and did not share its version of Russian patriotism.⁴⁰

The Habsburg polity offers yet further variations on the theme of nation and empire. Between 1867 and 1918 the Hungarian half of the Monarchy offers probably the most spectacular example of how 'metropolitan' nationalism could wreck an empire's domestic legitimacy and its geopolitical position. The fact that the Monarchy could not tap nationalist sentiment is also one explanation for why it was the least efficient of

⁴⁰ Apart from Kappeler, *Russian Empire*, see T. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 1996), and A. Miller, 'Ukraininskii vopros' v politike vlastei I russkom obshchestvennom mnenii (St Petersburg, 2000) for thoughtful discussion of nation-building and its dilemmas in the tsarist empire.

the Great Powers in mobilising economic resources for its military budget.⁴¹

On the other hand, the 'Austrian' half of the empire after 1867 pioneered many of the ideas and policies which later fed into what came to be called 'consociational democracy'. It is perfectly true that Emperor Francis Joseph to some extent adopted this strategy willy-nilly. Since barely one quarter of the empire's population was German, adopting a strategy of national empire was impossible. In any case after 1871 the logical end of such a strategy would have been the unification of the Monarchy's German provinces under the imperial rule of Berlin. As they stumbled into a consociational strategy the Habsburg regime encountered many obstacles. They ruled over a patchwork of peoples at a time when European nationalisms were full of brutal, youthful vigour. Industrialisation, urbanisation and mass literacy hugely enhanced the potential for ethno-national conflict. So too did the onset of mass politics: universal male suffrage arrived in 1907. The state grew exponentially, seeking not just to conscript its subjects but also to educate them and provide them with a range of other modern services. As a result it became ever more important and rewarding for the various nationalities to take control of the local administration. In the pre-modern era, many empires had managed their subjects by concentrating on narrow military and fiscal priorities and leaving control over family, cultural, religious and even economic life to the communities' own leaders. Most famously, this had been the logic of the Ottoman *millet*. Though 'Austro-Marxist' leaders attempted to develop this tradition in a way viable in a modern society, the task was bound to be difficult.⁴²

In these difficult circumstances Habsburg strategy worked reasonably well. No language enjoyed privileged status. Subjects could usually address the administration and courts and educate their children in state schools in their own language. A convention emerged that tricky 'ethno-cultural' issues would be decided by agreement rather than majority *diktat*. In some provinces by 1914 communities had agreed to share office and power. Perhaps the single most important aspect of Austrian 'consociationalism' was that individual and group rights were not just set out in

⁴¹ On the Monarchy as a great power in its last decades see Roy Bridge, *The Habsburg Monarchy among the Great Powers 1815–1918* (Oxford, 1990) and S. R. Williamson, *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1991).

⁴² On the Ottoman *millet* see in particular Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of a Plural Society*, 2 vols. (New York, 1982).

law but also actually and regularly protected by the courts and the police.⁴³

There was, however, a twist to all this. Discussing the white settler colonies, Michael Mann states that the more democratic these polities were, the worse they treated non-whites: the latter's rights (e.g. property rights) were generally trampled underfoot, mass-scale ethnic cleansing was the norm and openly avowed mass murder by no means rare.⁴⁴ One key reason why Austria saw no equivalents not just of the Russian pogrom but also of the Ku Klux Klan or the Australian 'dispersal' of aborigines was because the empire was a *Rechtstaat* but not a democracy. The police, the core administration, the judges and the army answered to the emperor, not to local majorities. In the end, however, ethno-national populism had its revenge. In this first era of liberal globalisation, Vienna was one of the world's most impressive and cosmopolitan cultural centres. It was also the birthplace of Europe's first mass anti-semitic party and the cradle of Hitler. For such people mass immigration of alien and impoverished Galician Jews was noxious. The wealth and status of the Jewish elites who dominated Viennese finance, journalism and culture was much worse. The ultimate result of the collapse of the empire was to be the destruction of its greatest diaspora, the Jews, and the mass-scale ethnic cleansing of Austrian-Germans from most of the Monarchy's former provinces.⁴⁵

Since all the empires discussed in the previous paragraphs collapsed it might be said that comparisons of their empire-saving strategies is somewhat redundant. It is important to remember, however, that it was the First World War which destroyed the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman empires. Germany's defeat doomed its imperial allies and this defeat was far from inevitable. Had German miscalculations not brought the USA into the war at the very moment when revolution was causing Russia to disintegrate, the chances of German victory (or at least of a very favourable compromise peace) would have been high. With Russia dissolving into revolution and Ukraine emerging as a German protectorate

⁴³ By far the best source on these issues are the many outstanding chapters in vol. 3, part 1 of *Die Habsburger Monarchie* published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences under the overall editorship of A. Wandruszka: vol. 3, entitled *Die Völker des Reiches* was published in 1980. See also Ephraim Ninni (ed.), *Otto Bauer. The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (Minneapolis, 2000).

⁴⁴ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 70 but see all of ch. 4, pp. 70–110.

⁴⁵ On these issues see e.g. Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna. A Dictator's Apprenticeship* (Oxford, 1999); S. Beller, *Vienna and the Jews 1867–1938. A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1989).

the European balance of power had swung far in Germany's favour. Given German victory, the Habsburg and Ottoman empires would have survived as junior partners in a German-dominated central and eastern Europe. This region would then have supported a more statist and less democratic and individualist version of successful capitalist modernity than the one which ultimately triumphed due to US victory in the twentieth century's conflicts. Perhaps it would have resembled what is sometimes called Asian capitalism. Certainly it would have been less hostile than American ideology was to empire.⁴⁶

Traditional or overt empire destroyed and discredited itself in two world wars. The world came under the domination of two superpowers both of which proclaimed themselves to be enemies of empire. As non-white, former colonies came to make up the majority of states in the United Nations, 'empire' lost all legitimacy in this major international forum. Any state stupid enough to call itself an empire became subject automatically to UN resolutions on decolonisation.

The three leading powers in today's world all carefully avoid calling themselves empires. Indeed they are correct not to do so since they are at best very eccentric forms of empire by historical standards. Nevertheless, all three of these polities bear some of the hallmarks and face many of the challenges of empire. More important, by looking at them through empire's prism one gains some useful insights into the nature of and challenges to power in the contemporary global order.

Of the three polities, China is the most obviously close to empire. This is unsurprising. Empire has been at the core of Chinese history for two millennia. The country owes its name to its first (Chin) dynasty and the Chinese people is called after its second (Han) dynasty. China's borders are mostly those established under its last dynasty, the Ching, and include for example Sinkiang, finally conquered more than two centuries after the Spanish annexed the Americas. In roughly half of Chinese territory even now, more than half the population is non-Han Chinese. Their consent to incorporation into China has never been asked by a government which remains non-democratic to this day. History gives any Chinese elite a

⁴⁶ Recent interesting contributions to this vast subject include H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment. The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, 2000), which makes a plausible case for the impact of domestic political considerations in German decision-making and R. T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* (Cambridge, 2005) which discusses the failure of German strategy in 1916. Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, 2004) is a useful survey of German pre-war thinking on Weltpolitik but H. C. Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1815–1945* (The Hague, 1955) remains valuable as an overview of German visions of European empire.

strong sense of their country's global importance and its legitimate role as East Asia's natural leader. Given the country's scale and resources, superpower status beckons in the future. At the end of the nineteenth century the American geopolitical thinker, Alfred Mahan, wrote that the world's future depended on the ability of the Anglo-Americans to conquer the Asian middle classes for their values.⁴⁷ The twenty-first-century challenge to integrate China into a US dominated global order may prove no easier than bringing Wilhelmine Germany into the early twentieth-century order presided over by Britain. If one is looking for a traditional conflict capable of devastating the 'American empire' then almost the only (improbable but just conceivable) possibility at present is a Chinese-American war over Taiwan. In a manner familiar from 1914, geopolitical confrontation could be entwined in the dynamics of domestic Chinese and American politics. Still worse, the whole world could become hostage to Taiwanese domestic politics, just as in 1914 Europe went to war as a result partly of the chief of Serbian military intelligence's efforts to undermine his own Prime Minister by arranging the assassination of the Austrian heir.

Nevertheless a brief comparison with the Ching era illustrates why China is not an empire in the full traditional sense of the word.⁴⁸ The Ching gloried in the fact that they ruled by conquest over many peoples. Absolutely the last thing they wished to do was to homogenise their peoples into a single 'Chinese' nation. Diversity was the core both of their legitimacy and of their system of rule. They banned Han Chinese from settling in Manchuria, determinedly legitimised themselves to different subject-peoples in differing religious-cultural idioms, and used Manchus explicitly as a political and military check on the Chinese majority. These policies flatly contradict the modern conception of national solidarity as a source of legitimacy and efficiency. Post-Ching rulers of China sought to use the institutions of a modern state to mould a nation by, for example, inculcating into all subjects a common written language and solidarity against a hostile imperialist 'other', both Western and Japanese. For the current government of the PRC, nationalism is the core of legitimacy and a vital weapon to combat the disintegrative effects of rapid capitalist

⁴⁷ See ch. 1, 'A Twentieth-Century Outlook' of A. T. Mahan, *The Interest of America in Seapower. Present and Future* (London, 1897).

⁴⁸ On this see in particular two recently published books on the Ching: Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror. History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley, 1999), and Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise. Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, 2001).

modernisation. Contemporary China is not an empire: rather, of all the empires, it is the one that most successfully has made the transition to nationhood. But the transition is not complete and a nation born of empire has its own specific characteristics, not least when it retains the core hallmark of empire, which is very great potential power.

The European Union is much less of an empire even than China, though one might perhaps see it as a modernised version of the very untypical imperial tradition embodied by the Holy Roman Empire.⁴⁹ But some of the EU's goals and challenges are distinctly imperial. The Union exists to mobilise and unite the resources of a continent not just to enjoy the wealth sustained by a large market but also for typically imperial aims of power and security. The only sphere of power in which the USA is truly balanced at present is commerce, thanks to the EU. The emergence of the Euro may in time challenge the dollar's financial dominion too. Currently, however, the EU's greatest geopolitical challenge lies to its east. In 1900 there existed a core First-World Europe and a Second-World Europe which included the Continent's western (Ireland, Portugal), southern (Spain, Italy) and eastern (the Habsburg and Russian empires) peripheries. Partly thanks to the EU, the southern and western peripheries since 1945 have become part of the European core. The big issue now is whether this success can be repeated in the eastern periphery of Europe. Since a combination of nationalism and geopolitical (Russo-German) competition in east-central Europe caused two world wars, the current challenge to the EU is particularly urgent. The 2004–5 political crisis in Ukraine was a reminder of how important and potentially destabilising are the geopolitical issues on the agenda. German power is now covered in a European flag and European power itself is economic and cultural rather than military. That does not mean that power or geopolitics no longer exist: with luck, it may perhaps mean that traditional imperial goals can be achieved more effectively in a less confrontational and less zero-sum manner.

In attempting to meet some of empire's traditional challenges the EU does have certain advantages when compared to the empires that existed in 1900. Two world wars have taken some of the stuffing out of European nationalisms. An individualist, postmodern population is unwilling to sacrifice itself for anything, including the nation. The Jacobin and

⁴⁹ Once again, the literature one might cite on these issues is vast. A useful historical introduction on different 'Europes' past and present is Michael Heffernan, *The Meaning of Europe. Geography and Geopolitics* (London, 1998).

Clausewitzian power-political logic of nationalism—the nation-in-arms—has lost its validity in an era when conscript armies are redundant in the First World. A polity needs less legitimacy to persuade its subjects to accept the Euro than to motivate them to fight and die for it in a world war. Nevertheless, given the EU's degree of penetration into key areas of everyday life it does need considerable legitimacy if it is to sustain effective governance. The modern imperial dilemma of squaring continental scale with the demands of popular sovereignty and ethno-national identity has by no means disappeared.

My own definition of empire stresses power and therefore is biased towards seeing the USA in imperial terms. No one doubts that the USA is very powerful. In most of the six sources of social power America is clearly ahead of China, the EU or any other potential rival. At the same time, it is easy also to spot weaknesses inherent in almost all of the USA's individual sources of power. For example, the geopolitical basis of American power is a continental-scale territory bordering on the world's two greatest oceans. The US federal system allowed a brilliant compromise between the geopolitical requirement for continental scale and the ideological commitment to republican self-government. Better than any rival, the USA thereby met the dilemma of modern empire. Inevitably, however, it did so at a price. In a democratic polity of continental scale any consensus between rival interests and values is very difficult. When that country combines in almost Wilhelmine style the most dynamic and destabilising variant of modern capitalism with many communities deeply wedded to traditional values conflict is bound to be bitter. A federal system which sends 'ambassadors' from the states to a legislature uncontrolled by the executive does not make life easier for America's rulers.⁵⁰

One needs, however, to bring some historical perspective to discussions of American imperial power and vulnerability. Empires differed greatly in the extent of their power. Some of the more excitable recent discussion of American imperial power conjures up visions of Roman universal empire and in addition forgets in splendidly Eurocentric style that Rome had a formidable imperial neighbour in Parthia which proved very capable of defending its interests against Roman pressure.⁵¹

⁵⁰ I owe much of this (and in particular the Wilhelmine comparison) to my brother, Anatol Lieven: see A. Lieven, *America Right or Wrong. An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (London, 2004). I will make no attempt to list the vast outpouring of works on US power in the last four years: one book which may well be less ephemeral than the majority is Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire* (Cambridge, Mass, 2002).

⁵¹ e.g. Michael Ignatieff begins his *Empire Lite* (London, 2003) with the statement that 'we live in a world that has no precedent since the age of the later Roman emperors. It is not just the

Even my definition of empire entails more than just power, however. In terms of two of its other criteria, rule without consent over many peoples, the USA is clearly not an empire. Multicultural American democracy has travelled some way from nineteenth-century nationalist visions of the ideal political community. American elites might learn something from modern imperial efforts to sustain an overarching political loyalty in a polity made up of what the empires' rulers described with marvellous political incorrectness as 'warring tribes'. That does not make the USA an empire.

It is useful, however, to look at 'American empire' through the prism of globalisation.⁵² To the extent that global economic and cultural forces easily portrayed as 'American' and beyond the control of almost any government determine a community's fate, perhaps 'consent' has lost its significance. None of us consented to live on earth, nor as yet do we have an alternative planet to which to emigrate. Another way to understand the debate on 'American empire' is to make comparisons between the effects of contemporary globalisation and the extent to which past empires usually penetrated into the societies over which they claimed to exercise sovereignty. The British Raj was in some respects an impressive empire but most Indian peasants never saw a British official and Britain invested less in India in the whole imperial era than the Japanese invested in Manchuria just in the 1930s.⁵³ The contemporary liberal capitalist global economy and US mass culture claim no sovereignty over India but penetrate and challenge its society more deeply. Globalisation also affects responses to the 'imperial challenge'. Radical Islamists attacked the periphery of the Ottoman and British empires. They killed General Gordon in Khartoum and disastrously undermined Ottoman legitimacy by capturing Medina and Mecca in the late eighteenth century. Obviously, however, they could not climb into an aeroplane and devastate the centres of imperial power.

Since globalisation thereby conflates the issue of 'imperial' and domestic security it has an important potential influence on the relationship between 'empire' and democracy. Traditionally, democratic electorates

military domination of the world by a single power . . . ' Actually, Ignatieff's essays are one of the better spinoffs of semi-academic debate on American empire.

⁵² The best historical introduction to this is A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002). Above all, however, see Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World* (Oxford, 2004).

⁵³ See Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Conquered Industrial Societies* (Princeton, 1996), especially p. 109.

were deeply unwilling to spend their blood and money on imperial causes. Partly for that reason, the last overt European empires were the Soviet Union and Portugal, neither of which needed to put their imperial policies to a democratic vote.⁵⁴ Globalisation might therefore play a useful role in forcing democratic electorates to commit themselves to sustaining global security. On the other hand, this commitment is likely to take sharply nationalist forms and metropolitan nationalism now as in the past can very often cut across rational strategies to sustain imperial power.

There are also problems inherent in democratic empire. All polities are sustained by myths about the inherent benevolence and wisdom of the sovereign. In democracies this myth is especially potent because we are creating stories about our own virtue. As already noted, however, the most democratic polities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were among the most ruthless in their treatment of the lives, property and culture of excluded non-white, non-citizens. This was not particularly a mark of Anglophone settler colonies. Algerian natives were usually much better treated under the despotic rule of Napoleon III's military viceroys than under the Third Republic.⁵⁵ None of this would have surprised David Hume or Italian thinkers of the Renaissance era: the latter stressed that it was better to be a citizen than a subject, but that if one had to be a subject then one's interests would be better protected by a prince than by a sovereign republic of citizens.⁵⁶ Democracy exists to protect the interests of its own citizens. The electoral process embodies this principle in the sharpest form and usually ensures that these interests will be defined in the most parochial, short-term sense. To the extent that globalisation means that we live in one interdependent world in which power is very unevenly divided between communities we could even talk of a global 'empire' of first-world citizens and peripheral 'subjects'. Nothing in history suggests that democracy among the citizens will protect the subjects' interests. On the contrary, it is only too easy to predict the willingness of powerful communities to offload the costs of, for example,

⁵⁴ On the revolt against empire in metropolitan and colonial Portugal see Norris McQueen, *The Decolonisation of Portuguese Africa* (London, 1997), and Kenneth Maxwell, *The Making of Portuguese Democracy* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁵⁵ See e.g. ch. 4 of Ian Lustick, *State-Building Failure in British Ireland and French Algeria* (Berkeley, 1985).

⁵⁶ See e.g. Saul R. Epstein, 'The Rise and Fall of Italian City-States' in M. H. Hansen (ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* (Copenhagen, 2000) who cites both Guicciardini and Hume.

ecological crisis on to the less powerful, with all that this may entail as regards global instability.

Ultimately, however, the historian is not much better equipped to gaze into the future than anyone else. From the most obvious imperial perspective the USA today is roughly where Britain was in 1830.⁵⁷ The period 1860–1991 (Civil War, World Wars, Cold War) are the equivalents of 1640–1815, when the English consolidated their domestic power-base and then defeated their French rival in the competition for overseas commercial and imperial hegemony. In such periods during which empire is being created, military power matters hugely. For a century after 1815, having achieved this position of power, the British enjoyed empire on the cheap and military power took something of a back seat until a combination of external factors and relative internal weakness raised the price of empire dramatically in the twentieth century. That probably is the likeliest scenario for the USA too, with historical perspective giving events such as 11 September or the intervention in Iraq the same look as the many minor imperial disasters and police actions which occurred in the nineteenth century.

But the history of empire can also be one of uncertainty. In the seventh century AD the Byzantines finally overcame Rome's age-old imperial rival in Iran only for a new and totally unprecedented form of power, Islam, immediately to explode out of a hitherto insignificant region (Arabia) and nearly destroy the empire. More than a millennium later, the Ching dynasty conquered the east Asian steppe and finally routed the nomadic enemy on the northern border which had destroyed one Chinese polity after another. Within a few decades totally unprecedented power erupted into China across the previously safe maritime border in the form of European invasion sustained by the revolutionary power of the Industrial Revolution. In the Chinese case the disaster was particularly poignant since the early Ching emperors were in most ways more able and (of course within the terms of their own value system) more virtuous than almost any other string of dynastic rulers in history.

A present-day optimist might comment that our antennae are more sensitive to revolutionary change than was the case with Chinese or Byzantine imperial elites. A pessimist might retort that we too have our intellectual blinkers and institutionalised vested interests, and that our

⁵⁷ In this sense the Wilhelmine comparison does not work: the G. W. Bush administration may have been truly Wilhelmine in its gratuitous alienation of other countries but contemporary America for the moment can afford far more such mistakes than was the case with a pre-1914 Germany surrounded by rival great powers.

unprecedented assaults on nature are taking human beings into uncharted territory where all sorts of ambushes may lie in wait for us. All the historian can contribute to this debate is the depressed comment that the rulers of empire seldom seem as virtuous to posterity as they did to themselves. In any case, virtue even in Machiavelli's rather special sense is only one key to empire's survival. Among other factors, 'Fortuna' counts for much more than any of us would like to imagine.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Machiavelli commented that *Fortuna* determined the outcome of half our actions: *The Prince* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 84–5 in the edition edited by Quentin Skinner and R. Price.