

Empires

Concept: Empires

Author: John Weaver , McMaster University

Date Entered: 2005-03-04

Description This account of empires looks at the concept from a comparative historical perspective, concentrating on early-modern (1500-1800) and modern European empires (1800-1950), and on the American overseas formal and informal empire (1895-present). The discussion excludes ancient and medieval empires, including Assyrian and Persian empires, Chinese dynastic empires, the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire, and the Aztec and Inca empires. Early empires must not be dismissed as insignificant. On the contrary, the apparent cultural, political, and linguistic (Mandarin) unity of China, for example, resulted from waves of conquest and campaigns to eliminate heterogeneity that had already enforced significant political unity by 221 BCE. China did not become Chinese by accident. By 1250 CE, the Mongol empire occupied more territory — from the China Sea to the Dnieper River — than any empire before or since, and it brought disparate civilizations into continuous contact by establishing safe conduits for trade. Bridging Asia and Europe, Mongol invaders formed a land-based empire, but failed to achieve a routine succession of leaders. Seaborne European empires, however, reached beyond Eurasia and Africa and generally survived succession crises. They traded territories among one another on a global scale, moved large numbers of people (slaves and convicts) by force, enabled many more people (emigrants) to colonize voluntarily, installed powerful ideas about laws, rights, religion, and economic development on many continents, and mingled biological material — human, plant, animal, and disease — from ocean-separated continents.

The following account of empires breaks with conventional chronological or geographical arrangement. There will be little mention of dates, names of territories, references to decisive battles, or lists of conquerors. This discussion proceeds by topics, fleshed out by examples selected to show the temporal and spatial scope of the particular concept under review. Histories of individual empires can be encountered in textbooks on world history, while only an analysis of empires can illuminate the genesis of globalization and a few of the normative issues that animate recent discussions about globalization. As we shall see, controversies about the nature of empires resemble debates over globalization. The topics covered here include a theoretical definition of empire, problems with definitions and theoretical understandings, a series of hallmarks of empires, an explanation for the territorial conquests achieved by Europeans, indirect rule and informal empires, critics of empire, selected consequences of European empires, a comparison of European empires with that of the United States, and parallels and connections between empires and globalization.

Empires embody the domination of people of another culture without general acceptance of that situation by those people. In a strictly theoretical understanding, this domination robs an entire society of its historical line of development; in a practical understanding of how empires function, this dominion rarely occurs. Around the world, indigenous people have nurtured cultural integrity against acts of depredation by individual empire-builders as well as against imperial schemes. Agents of empires were universally unwilling to grant cultural, economic, educational, and political concessions to subjugated societies unless detecting advantages to handing out small benefits. Spanish silver mine operators in Mexico and Bolivia-Peru repeatedly had to adjust arrangements with their indigenous labourers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. New Zealand's white settlers extended limited political rights to Maori after uprisings in the 1850s and 1860s. On these occasions and many others like them, true equality was not in the nature of the concession, rather acts of resistance and persistence denied empires hegemonic control. Imperial authorities acting for their governments used force to stem opposition and private individuals seeking wealth used violence to eradicate people who stood in their way. All empires had individuals who committed atrocities.

European empires have been labelled Portuguese, Spanish, French, British, Russian, and German. It is common, therefore, to think of these empires as ruled by particular kingdoms or states with participation from merchants, planters, soldiers, and missionaries who originated from that state and engaged in overseas exploits. That is one reason why the age of empires may be treated as distinct from the age of globalization, for globalization is assumed to erode national sovereignty. This distinction between empires and globalization is inexact, because empires were not just exclusive national entities. They protected traders, employed mercenaries, and sometimes tolerated missionaries from many lands. The Dutch East India Company in the early seventeenth century employed warriors from Bohemia and Japan; the company's soldiers in Cape Town in 1806 included Hungarians and Africans. In the West Indies, the descendants of Jewish families driven from Spain in the late fifteenth century provided trade links among Dutch Curacao, the Dutch Republic, and Iberia. The Dutch allowed Danish missionaries into their enclaves in southern India. When businesses required capital in the nineteenth century, funds flowed across political boundaries. British trading houses operated in Portugal; French investors aided Russian expansion; British aristocrats invested in American ranches.

Empires were not static. They surrendered territory to one another. From the vantage point of European or American history, empires were products of treaties negotiated in European cities after European wars. The allocation of territories among European empires attests to the fact that empires consisted of more than settlement colonies and more than just useful places for consumption and production, for they included places of strategic value such as Gibraltar, Singapore, and Cape Town; they

included places to be exchanged to achieve dynastic alliances and to resolve European conflicts. Caribbean islands, for example, changed hands often over four hundred years. The region remains a remarkable palimpsest of old empires. Some examples of territorial swaps illustrate the global connections involved in territorial interchanges among empires. In 1660, the Dutch surrendered New Amsterdam (New York) partly to compensate Britain for the Dutch slaughter of British nutmeg traders in the Banda islands in 1627. The British captured Martinique from the French in 1760 who signed over New France at the Treaty of Paris to recover it. The United States bought the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917 to prevent purchase by Germany. Seaborne empires, which originated in the ruthless initiative of opportunistic adventurers and grew through the auspices of chartered companies, became branches of government. "Imperialism," wrote Jürgen Osterhammel, "is planned and carried out by chanceries, foreign ministries, and ministries of war, colonialism by special colonial authorities and men on the spot" (1997, 22). These territorial exchanges are distinguished from a number of reassignments of territory after 1919 due to the bilateral character of the former, whereas in much of the twentieth century the League of Nations and United Nations supervised certain conquered regions as mandated territories.

From the perspective of most imperial subjects, changes in imperial masters directed by distant ministries were secondary, because one empire might be much like another. What is significant is the condition of being an unequal subject in one's own land. Sometimes the changes in rulers could be significant for indigenous people or at least local elites. The Dutch (1652-1796; 1803-6) and then the British endeavoured to control the peoples of southern Africa, including the European Boers. Spaniards (1580-1898) and then Americans (1898-1946) governed Filipinos. While rule from abroad remained a constant in these several cases, the British and America imperial administrations installed new legal and political systems that had consequences. The British and the American empires had greater robustness and purposefulness than predecessors. They attempted reforms which are important, because reforms presupposed modern bureaucracies toiling to disrupt social arrangements, to instil self-styled improvement projects that included education, land reform, irrigation, railway building, and efficient taxation. India was Britain's paramount reform laboratory. The ideas of English classical economists and utilitarians, because of their accent on efficiency, appealed to the East India Company which, by the early nineteenth century had transformed itself from a merchant-warrior enterprise into a de facto government. The company experimented with land reform to increase the revenue collection necessary for maintaining the empire in India.

Why did Europe spawn so many empires with far-flung claims to territorial dominion? There are proximate political and ultimate ecological-biological theories. An ultimate explanation would claim that the numerous domesticate plants and animals of Eurasia gave the civilizations of that huge land mass great advantages. The horse alone counted for much in

military and agricultural realms. Eurasian diseases and some immunity from their full impact may also have been significant when Europeans landed in America and Oceania. China had the ship-building technology and navigational skills, so that the ecological advantages could also have enabled China to colonize abroad. However, China withdrew from seaborne long-distance trade and diplomatic expeditions around 1430, but expanded westward overland. The example of China points to the significance of proximate causes for overseas empires, because they could not have been established — or in China's case, foregone — without political deeds.

European imperial successes occurred despite the limited amount of resources available to the governments and adventurers who spearheaded European forays onto other continents. Fragmented and constantly at war within itself, Europe could not initiate well-funded expeditions. Rather, the trading companies and trading expeditions that characterized early European expansion resorted to a haphazard blending of royal assistance in the form of company charters, sometimes with limited royal funding, with high-risk venture capital provided by merchants, and with the muscle and weapons of temporarily-underemployed soldiers. Early European expeditions were ragtag affairs of desperate men whose expeditions compensated for their lack of resources by using bold and ruthless tactics. Europe's many conflicts had elevated the continent's arts of war, and created a class of men acquainted with pillage. Only after 1600 with the organization of the Dutch East India Company, and after 1650 with the formation of the (British) East India Company did this begin to change, but these more structured and better capitalized entities had ruthless leadership too. Both had large scale capitalization and considerable government backing; both were trading companies which were also instruments of state policy. They provided hints of much greater European expansion to come.

Another factor assisted European territorial expansion, namely the political situations that the soldier-adventurers and soldier-merchants found in Africa, the Indian Ocean, and America. Where they found political authority well-established, legitimate, and undivided, they were sent packing. Where they found small states or tribal divisions — much like the military and diplomatic situations they knew in Europe — they experienced initial success. Historian Alfred Crosby compared European invaders to weeds; where they found disturbed soil, they established themselves. Thus, the Portuguese and Spanish had momentous successes in the Canary Islands in the fifteenth century and soon thereafter on islands and in enclaves along the west and east coasts of Africa. Crosby regards the conquest of the Canary Islands as prototype for later assaults on indigenous peoples and as a stepping stone for the trial-by-error navigators who headed south along the coast of Africa and west to America. Once the Portuguese rounded Africa and entered the Indian Ocean, they experienced early triumphs in planting trading forts along the Swahili coast of east Africa and in South Asia, because of an abundance of city states which could not

organize a concerted resistance. The Spanish were able to divide the tribes of Mexico, and had comparable success in the Philippines. Europeans took advantage of local disputes and indigenous knowledge. The British East India Company extended its rule in India during an age of turmoil for the Mughal Empire. European trading companies could not do the same with a united China or Japan, but they could make commercial inroads in those places because of New World silver, and because of the shipping services they provided.

By 1700, Europeans knew how to organize private, large-scale, sustained commercial and manufacturing enterprises, namely big trading companies and sugar plantations. The management of far-flung commerce and production fostered new skills. Europeans had discovered how to channel wealth into long-term investments that left management in the hands of professional overseers. This occurred through the development of the joint stock company, the forerunner of the modern corporation. It permitted small investors to own a part of a venture — say the East India Company or the Hudson's Bay Company — and be free of the management. Merchants in an empire now did not have to be part of a specific trading community to participate in a major business; individuals in many important cities could invest in a business managed elsewhere. Capital was becoming liquid, not fixed to a place. It was possible for a widow of Bremen to invest in a sequence of transactions that would take her money around the world, and deliver her profits and dividends deposited with her local banker. Networks functioned because of European concepts of joint-stock companies, and contracts supported by judicial systems that invariably accompanied empires. In addition to their early establishment of the joint-stock company, the Dutch pioneered the development of stock exchanges, banks, warehousing, and the development of a legal code that serviced commerce. Capitalism has its roots in the Dutch Empire. Companies functioned within empires and the legal sanction of a home government; some received government subsidies, but they also admitted non-nationals and outside capital.

Empires had law codes and courts based on domestic models, and these attributes provide a potential contrast with globalization. Empires attempted to impose laws, especially criminal laws, which signified power in emergent European states. Globalization, when defined as supra-territoriality, involves trans-national codes and courts with jurisdiction in fields of commercial and criminal law. Empires, it can be argued, imposed and sustained national codes in distant places; globalization assails national codes and sovereignty. This heuristic distinction between empires and globalization, however, cannot provide a bright-line boundary. On the one hand, local imperial administrators and jurists had to practice discretion and compromise to achieve order. On the other hand, the globalization of civil and criminal law, though advancing remarkably in recent decades, has a long way to go and the state continues to be the principal enforcer of laws. In commercial law, empires showed flexibility and adaptation, accepting at first for practical reasons the laws and conventions employed

in newly acquired territories and then introducing changes by statutes. There were adjuncts of empires that retained their own law codes. During the nineteenth century, British financiers, merchant houses, manufacturers, and diplomats acquired such influence in China, Argentina, and the Ottoman Empire that these places have been described as parts of an informal empire. In some places, for example Nigeria in the late nineteenth century, the British enlisted indigenous leaders in a process known as indirect rule.

Critical analyses of empires allege that they consisted of resource-consuming metropolitan centres and resource-supplying peripheries, and that labour exploited at peripheries produced surpluses that stimulated metropolitan economies. Such generalizations and the accompanying argument that imperialism left colonies prostrate after independence have been trimmed on several sides. Metropolitan economies — for example those of sixteenth century Spain, the seventeenth century Dutch republic, or the nineteenth century United Kingdom — appear to have gained slightly, not greatly, from the production or markets of their empires. Dutch merchants profited from the long-distance spice trade that originated in the East Indies, but their management of trade in grain and timber from the Baltic to Western Europe was at least as significant. It is even possible that there were instances when colonies harmed the metropolis. The great silver mines of America have been credited with precipitating disastrous inflation in Spain. Some studies of production at the periphery have found that indispensable indigenous workers — mine labourers, plantation labourers, food producers, and fur trappers — could arrange terms. The East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made fortunes for a handful of Europeans, but also proved profitable to Bengali bankers.

These several accounts of complexity within empires challenge the picture of immense, unalloyed economic advantages flowing to Europeans, or of the European core alone benefiting from exchanges managed within empires. The debate is extremely well-developed for India where nationalist historians have alleged that Indian resources were drained to Britain. India, however, imported gold and silver coin and ran a trade in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the participation of elites in India and elsewhere in the imperial economy has led to a claim that by B.R. Tomlinson that "there was no such thing as an entirely subordinate economy within the British Empire — every country's economy contained both dominant and subordinate groups" (1993, 23). This proposition leads to an associated argument that the underdevelopment of South Asia may be a consequence of both the impact of empire which did skew economies and of local cultural factors. The many-sided debate about the economy of South Asia during the British Raj, therefore, can contribute pertinent background for understanding the issues in recent controversies about the global economy with its North and South contrasts of wealth.

The analysis of the economic costs and benefits of empires is not a settled matter. More data is being discovered and assessed, and it is recognized that certain colonies yielded more to the metropolis than others, and that circumstances could change. What is essential to note, however, is the fact that participation in the empire by local lenders, merchants, and landowners did not mean power-sharing. On balance, empire may not have always enriched metropolitan powers, but they were definitely organized to benefit principally Europeans, not subject peoples. Disturbance caused by metropolitan imposition disrupted the structure of local economies, so that old trades suffered. In India in the nineteenth century, the demise of the Mughal court diminished luxury crafts. The French incursions in North Africa in the mid-nineteenth century and the Russian occupation of Central Asia in the late nineteenth century implanted colonies and assailed established land and water allocation practices. Empires yielded benefits to specific European families and trading houses, gave employment for Europeans paid out of local revenues, and provided indigenous soldiers for imperial armies. There is no final verdict on whether they alone explain economic underdevelopment.

A thematic description of empires could leave the false impression that empires were similar. They were not. Imperial centres each had unique designs, expectations, and distinct capacities. Once the Spanish Crown had wrested control of American colonies from the heirs of the conquistadors, it installed a highly centralized and bureaucratic administration that attempted to control the movements of people and goods. A weak European state, Portugal had little control over its overseas territories and relied on cordial relations with the British Empire. The idea of empires as extensions of European powers weakens with the example of Portugal. The most significant features of the British Empire, in its settlement colonies, included its lack of rigid control and its capacity to cheaply allocate land and enforce property rights. Not only did empires vary due to differences in ideology and resources available from the metropolis, but they also differed due to shifting metropolitan ambitions, the actions of indigenous peoples and imperial agents "on the spot," the outcomes of wars and treaties, and ecological factors. These complicating aspects led to empires acquiring an assortment of colonies with distinctive places in their empires. The Spanish empire of the sixteenth century worked to wrest control of Mexico and Peru from mercenary conquerors and to establish planned towns and to extract mineral wealth for the benefit of the Crown. The Dutch empire in the seventeenth century accumulated trade enclaves around the world, including the coasts of West Africa, India, and present-day Brazil and New York, and on the Islands of the East Indies. In the nineteenth century, the British Empire had great diversity among its colonies. There were strategic colonies like Gibraltar and Cape Town, plantation colonies in the Caribbean, non-settlement colonies like India which provided incomparable prestige, trade enclaves like Hong Kong, and settlement colonies which included Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

From 1500 to 1850, European seaborne empires played havoc with local cultures and ecologies. The slave trade exacerbated inter-tribal conflicts in West Africa and Angola, and Africans contributed to the cultural diversity of the Americas. Missionaries had an enormous impact on Africa and South America, and some influence in Asia. The position of missionaries within empires defies short summary. Civil authorities did not always permit them in colonies, because some missionaries interceded on behalf of indigenous people. Whether sanctioned or watched with suspicion, Christian Churches made irreversible inroads that connected people across oceans. Meanwhile, many transfers of biological material also transpired through private agency, not government action. European traders, soldiers, and settlers disseminated horses, pigs, horned cattle, and numerous other creatures; Europeans introduced sugar from plantations off the coast of West Africa. From the Americas, they carried into Europe potatoes and maize. By the mid-nineteenth century, the transfer of biological material often proceeded under imperial auspices through networks of botanic gardens. The Dutch and British empires had notable successes with transplanting and hybridizing rubber, quinine, and sugar. From at least the early sixteenth century, navigators in the seaborne empires began collecting practical information about the globe, refining celestial navigation, and preparing charts and maps. Imperial authorities later commissioned land-based expeditions to collect and classify information on plants, animals, indigenous peoples, languages, antiquities, and diseases. The first information revolution involved a massive accumulation of global facts.

If some transfers within empires were deliberate and organized by governments, others were uncoordinated and accidental. Diseases accompanied Europeans, although in the case of Africa, malaria checked Europeans. Empires mixed people of diverse cultures. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea of British imperial citizenship faltered over the prospect of the free movement of people of different races within the empire. Despite resistance to the movement of Asians and Africans to the imperial centre and to settlement colonies, the United Kingdom and France today have cultural and religious diversity on account of their imperial past. Diverse religious connections span continents, not only because of Christian missionaries and their linguistic and educational activities, but because of late migrations within empires. Some movements within the British Empire occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century in the form of Indian indentured labour destined for Guiana, Trinidad, and Fiji. However, the greatest movements from the colonies to the metropolis occurred as free migrations after World War II.

In the winter of 1884-5, the European great powers, joined by a few smaller states, met in Berlin in an attempt to reach an agreement over the trade matters, navigation, and the boundaries of European imperial interests in West Africa and the Congo. The conference was the zenith of European power in global affairs. Japan was not invited, although it was a modernizing state that followed Europeans in a pursuit of modernization.

The United States attended the conference, because trade was a topic. Russia came, although its interests were in Asia; it arrived as an ally of France against British interests in Africa. Within three decades, a short time in world history, Europe would be engulfed in a war of unprecedented destruction. Another three decades and the demise of European power was complete; the continent's fate was in the hands of Washington and Moscow. The multi-polar world of many European empires was replaced by a bipolar world.

At various times, the United States of America had been an anti-imperial power. The American Revolution was principally a war of independence against the British Empire. Toward the end of World War II (WWII) and into the 1950s, the United States put pressure on European imperial powers to shed their colonies in Africa and Asia, a process that was largely completed by the early 1960s. President Ronald Reagan is popularly credited with bringing the Soviet empire to its knees. In contrast to this sequence of empire-breaking initiatives, at several junctures in the late twentieth century Americans have been described unflatteringly as New Romans. The American engagement with empires and imperialism is complex, for the US had an internal empire in western North America, acquired a conventional empire, resisted empire building, and developed an informal empire.

The settlement of the Louisiana Purchase territory and marginalization of first peoples qualify as empire-building exercises. Surviving its Civil War, the United States by the late nineteenth century reaped the wealth of industrial and westward expansion. An evolution of technologies that could develop the country's resources enabled its rise as a power; railways and cheap food made possible a stunning transformation. By every index of growth, the United States was a modern power. The economy gave its leaders a sense of power, even if they disavowed empire building. By the mid-1890s, the republic practised an assertive diplomacy against European states. In 1895, it interfered when Britain had a boundary dispute with Venezuela; in 1898 it went to war against Spain over Spain's suppression of rebellion in Cuba. Along with muscular diplomacy, the US acquired an overseas empire. This was a departure for the republic had previously expanded only within North America. The acquisitions occurred largely to secure a string of naval bases, although an ideological mission accompanied American imperialism at the turn of the century. Supporters of territorial acquisitions believed America would improve allegedly backward places.

The first territorial acquisition was Hawaii where American sugar planters overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy and sought to have the islands annexed by the United States. Just a few months before the annexation of Hawaii, Spain declared war on the United States as a consequence of the American support for a liberation movement in Cuba; the United States had placed Cuba under a ship blockade. The United States not only pursued the war in Cuba and Puerto Rico, but destroyed a Spanish Pacific fleet and

invaded the Philippine Islands and occupied the country to secure naval bases. For the same reason, it held onto a base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. The republic protected its international trade lanes. The decision to stay in the Philippines was fateful, because it put the United States for the first time in a conflict with indigenous revolutionaries. Filipinos had declared independence in 1899 and started an insurrection against the United States. The annexation of the Philippines and their retention until 1946 amounted to a clear act of imperialism; so was the annexation of Puerto Rico and the 1917 purchase of the Virgin Islands. The republic also supported a separatist movement in the Columbia province of Panama, to have a client government that would accept the American construction and management of the Panama Canal, another manifestation of American naval strategy. Cuba and Panama became informal parts of an American empire.

At the turn of the century, Americans debated the costs and benefits of territorial acquisition and restricted their appetite to holding onto strategically important territories or in the case of the Virgin Islands to minimize European involvement in the Caribbean. After its wave of acquisitions from 1898 to 1917, the United States avoided traditional imperialism and pressed instead for a policy of an Open Door through which America's economy could dominate. The United States had a large portion of a continent to exploit; it did not need colonies for reserves of raw materials. American governments wanted only a few scattered, strategically important areas to protect the channels of trade leading to Open Doors around the world. The Open Door idea would guide American foreign policy from World War I (WWI) to the Cold War. From 1900 on, China was given special attention as a potential market. Latin America was also made a part of the Open Door approach. The United States made it clear to other states that it would insist on free access to the world's markets and this included loans and investments.

A new type of imperialism took shape. In the 1920s, the main government agency steering an indirect global empire was the Department of Commerce which had agents collecting information on trade and business opportunity information around the world. The American empire of the first half of the twentieth century was a more complete empire of business than European empires. America's great material success led to its forming an informal empire at odds with its revolutionary roots. During the remainder of the century, American designs on leadership in the world economy and in geopolitical affairs fostered supranational agencies (the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank) which the United States attempted with mixed results to steer. As well, militarism and alliance formation accompanied the aspirations of the United States to international leadership. On the one hand, the ambition behind these activities and the resources devoted to military missions exceeded anything attempted by European empires. On the other hand, the American empire eschewed direct rule which generally characterized European empires. Other empires had exported their languages and features of their culture; however,

American developments in mass entertainment and mass consumption made unprecedented inroads around the world. In common with the home states of other empires, the United States attracted diasporas from its empire. Refugees and exiles arrived in the metropolis from Latin America and South East Asia.

Empires fostered globalization by mixing people, ideas, plants, and animals across oceans. They had more in common with globalization than might be supposed, because they were not sealed systems impervious to people and capital from outside the managing European power. At the same time, however, they aspired to control through lines of authority backed by men in national uniforms under national flags; the more zealously intrusive empires, for example the British and French, practiced patriotic indoctrination. Empires attempted to maintain more or less uniform law codes within their jurisdictions, but everywhere there was adaptation to local circumstances and customs. The attempts of empires to extend metropolitan laws resemble the efforts of transnational bodies in recent decades to initiate judicial bodies. The difference is that transnational bodies attempt to harmonize laws across boundaries while empires attempted to codify or impose laws mainly within imperial boundaries. Apologists for empires accented the legacy of law, but then a great contradiction of empires must be that imperialists relied on coercion and generally failed to bring justice to indigenous peoples. Empires rank among the foremost antecedents of globalization and consequently will figure centrally in a history of globalization which has yet to be written.

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