

CHAPTER

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1 Who's an imperialist?

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Abstract

‘Who's an imperialist?’ examines the meanings of the word ‘empire’, which has been intertwined with several other equally contentious words: imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization. Ideas about empire have changed across the past century from general approval to near-universal distaste. Defining something as imperial or colonial today almost always implies hostility to it, viewing it as inherently immoral or illegitimate. The terms ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’, at their most general, have been used to refer to any and every type of relation between a more powerful state or society and a less powerful one.

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The very word empire, as we shall see, has had a complicated history and many different, fiercely contested meanings. It has also been intertwined with several other, mostly newer but equally contentious words: imperialism, colonialism, and latterly neo-colonialism, globalization, and others. A great range of compound terms has also been thrown into the stew at different times and places: informal empire, sub-imperialism, cultural imperialism, internal colonialism, postcolonialism, and many more. All these labels tend to come attached to heavy luggage: a great weight of history and ideology, sometimes of elaborate theorizing, sometimes of raw emotion. To make everything

just that bit more difficult still, the relationships of these various terms to one another are also all much debated, and sometimes much confused. One indicator of that might be that there has been hesitation over what the very title of this 'Very Short Introduction' should be: 'Empire', the plural 'Empires', 'Imperialism', or perhaps 'Colonialism'. The difficulties involved are not just conceptual but political and emotional. Defining something as imperial or colonial today almost always implies hostility to it, viewing it as inherently immoral or illegitimate. If someone calls, say, American actions in Afghanistan, British policies in Northern Ireland, or Chinese ones in Tibet 'imperialist' or 'colonialist', they may or may not be alluding to some

p. 10 weighty theory about the causes or character of those actions. They are, though, almost certainly telling us one thing quite clearly: they very much dislike whatever it is they are talking about.

The idea that empire is a Bad Thing suffuses almost all our imaginative worlds too: in the literature of science fiction and fantasy, in popular cinema, in video and computer games. In the *Star Wars* films, the bad guys are the Evil Empire. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the wicked Sauron controls an empire and schemes to rule over all. Noble Gondor, by contrast, is a 'realm' or a kingdom – even though some analysts of Middle Earth's historical sociology would doubtless call Gondor's large, multi-ethnic political system an imperial one. Hobbits, meanwhile, live in a small republic with no monarch and indeed hardly any government at all. The oddest twist to this is that the Shire of the Hobbits is so obviously England, although when the book was written, its author's 'England' still ruled a global empire. And in J. R. R. Tolkien's youth, the mass media, popular culture, and much of the art of the day would have reflected an image of empire seemingly almost the opposite of today's. To be an empire builder was to be an adventurer, a hero, a selfless labourer for others' well-being. Such approving imagery dominated depictions not only of modern Britain but of ancient Rome. It extended far beyond the empire-owning countries, across Europe, the Atlantic and even the globe. In countries like Ireland and Poland, which not only possessed no colonies but were seen by many as the victims of others' colonialism, writers and artists were nonetheless enthralled by visions of imperial greatness. Pioneer Indian or Egyptian nationalists, Pan-Africanists, and Pan-Arabists raged against the European empires which ruled their lives. But, far more often than is usually now recalled,

they were also led on by ideas that in the mists of the past, they too once had empires of their own – and might in future have them once more.

p. 11 Ideas about empire have not only changed across the past century from general approval to near-universal distaste; they have also seemed to spread and multiply beyond all limit or control. 'Imperialism', as a word, has gone imperial; 'colonialism' has ↪ colonized our languages. They do not only span the galaxies and the parallel universes of science fiction. They have come to be used, at the extreme, to describe anyone's, any group's, or anything's supposed superiority, or domination, or even just influence, over any other person, or group, or thing. Some of these uses are clearly metaphorical; others seem to be intended literally. Our everyday lives are 'colonized', in a wide range of current rhetorics, by technology, by bureaucracy, or by the advertising industry. Almost any large organization in commerce, finance, media, or even sports is an 'empire' to those who dislike it. For some fans of rival British football clubs, Manchester United is 'the Evil Empire': and the label is not *entirely* a joke nor, perhaps, *only* a metaphor.

Even leaving aside such rhetorical excesses, the political uses of these words may seem quite unmanageably wide and various. The same people, at different times or according to different viewpoints, could be seen as imperialists and as victims of imperialism, as colonizers, colonized, and postcolonial. In the later 18th century, white settlers on the eastern seaboard of North America, after mostly destroying the earlier inhabitants and enslaving Africans, began to see themselves as victims of domination from England. They were colonists – and, in a slightly later language, colonialists – who also mounted the world's first successful anticolonial revolution. White Australians are clearly heirs to a colonial project of British expansion and settlement. In some eyes, they remain colonialists vis-à-vis Aboriginal Australians, who are still underprivileged, marginalized, and deprived of many of their ancestral lands. Yet many Australians see themselves, with some justice, as coming at least as much from an *anticolonial* political tradition, which struggled for and won effective independence from Britain. In so far as that struggle was successful, Australia today is – at least by some definitions of another much-disputed word – a *postcolonial* society. Others again argue, though, that Australia remains tied to the remnants of British imperial power, at least in that it is not a

fully sovereign Republic, but formally subject to the British Monarchy –
p. 12 or even because social attitudes are still ↪

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influenced by what a former Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, called a 'cultural cringe' towards the old imperial masters. To complete the circle, certain conservative Australian politicians raise the alarm that their country risks being 'colonized' by large-scale Asian immigration, or subject to a 'new imperialism' from Japanese and other Asian economic powers.



2. Resisters: Skeletons with battle injuries, excavated at Maiden Castle, Dorset, England. These were most likely British defenders of the Durotriges people, killed fighting against the Roman invasion in c.45 CE.

The terms 'empire' and 'imperialism', at their most general, have been used to refer to any and every type of relation between a more powerful state or society and a less powerful one. In order to arrive at a more

usefully specific understanding, we need to delve a little into the histories of the words.

The word 'empire' comes, of course, from the Latin *imperium*: for which the closest modern English equivalent would perhaps be 'sovereignty', or simply 'rule'. For the Romans, it denoted a dual capacity: to wage war, and to make and execute laws. An 'emperor' was originally a victorious general, later a supreme magistrate – though the military overtones of the title never disappeared. But it also came, even in later Republican Rome, to have a further connotation: size. *Imperium* came to mean rule over extensive, far-flung territories, far beyond the original 'homeland' of the rulers. As the term was taken up again in the early-modern period, by European Christian monarchs and their publicists, it usually – indeed increasingly – carried this connotation; though some rather petty rulers, like Anglo-Saxon kings in parts of England, also occasionally and vaingloriously called themselves emperors. But it carried also two further, and for some time probably more important, associations. One was of *absolute* sovereignty, acknowledging no overlord or rival claimant to power. When Henry VIII of England had his realm proclaimed an 'empire' in the 1530s, the main intention was to assert that he owed no allegiance to, and would tolerate no interference from, either the Papacy or the secular power with which it was aligned, the Habsburg domains. The other was found especially in the most explicitly religious uses of the term: an aspiration to universality.

p. 14 Christian empire was in principle boundless, as the Roman *imperium* to which it was partial heir had claimed to be. Everyone outside was a barbarian (an idea Rome had adapted from the Greeks).

With the advent of a universalist, Christian monotheism, the notion was added that all these outsiders were by definition not only uncivilized but ungodly. A very similar idea, though expressed of course in different language, came to be held by early Islamic rulers; while a more distantly related belief was espoused also by Chinese thinkers. Thus for such inferior peoples to be brought under the sway of universal empire by conquest would also be to bring them access to civilization and true religion – though Christians and Muslims differed on whether this meant they should be converted by force. Conquest was therefore morally justified, even divinely ordained. A new, perhaps more intense drive for expansion, peculiar to the Christian and Islamic West, was thus created. This whole complex of ideas also eventually

became associated with two further notions; those of nationality and of race. The association was complex, and is much argued over, though most historians tend to see nationalism, and racialized thought, as much more modern additions to the ancient and medieval core.

Moving from early self-understandings to modern attempts at definition, these have been extremely numerous and various: some notably vague, others immensely elaborate, indeed ponderous. A kind of basic, consensus definition would be that an empire is a large political body which rules over territories outside its original borders. It has a central power or core territory – whose inhabitants usually continue to form the dominant ethnic or national group in the entire system – and an extensive periphery of dominated areas. In most cases, the periphery has been acquired by conquest. But sometimes, especially in the medieval world, expansion comes about by the intermarriage of ruling families from two previously independent states: historians have used such labels as ‘composite monarchy’ for the resulting units. And in some modern instances, the people of the peripheral territory may have chosen willingly to be brought under the control of the imperial centre. Nineteenth-century British governments, for example, claimed – not always honestly – that new areas coming under their control did so because their inhabitants positively begged to be protected by British power. Thus such places were not conquered colonies, but ‘Protectorates’. Later, and with more justification, Britain and France argued that the scattered, mostly small overseas territories which remained under their rule in the early 21st century did so in part because the people of British Gibraltar or the Falklands islands, or French Martinique, wanted it that way.

Empires, then, must by definition be big, and they must be composite entities, formed out of previously separate units. Diversity – ethnic, national, cultural, often religious – is their essence. But in many observers’ understanding, that cannot be a diversity of equals. If it is, if there is no relation of domination between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’, then the system is not an empire but deserves a title such as ‘commonwealth’. So 20th-century British governments argued that they were engineering a gradual transformation from a London-dominated empire to a Commonwealth, a free association of equals. In somewhat similar fashion, the rulers both of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet Russian federation insisted that these were not imperial

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systems, because all their component parts had equal rights – at least on paper.

Empires always involve a mixture of direct and indirect rule. The central power has ultimate sovereignty, and exercises some direct control, especially over military force and money-raising powers, in all parts of its domain. But there will usually be some kind of decentralized, 'colonial', or 'provincial' government in each of the empire's major parts, with subordinate but not trivial powers of its own. These authorities may be – indeed in most imperial systems, usually are – headed by men sent out from the dominant centre. But their leaders, and certainly their more junior administrators or enforcers, may also be

p. 16 'locals', drawn from the ranks (often, indeed, ↳ from the pre-conquest ruling orders) of the dominated people. In many empires, ancient and modern, there was a general tendency over time for imperial rulers to devolve ever more power to such groups. In the long run, of course, this might lead to the gradual breakup of the empire itself. But, as we shall see, many historians argue that the key to understanding empire lies in the bargains struck between imperial centre and local 'collaborators'. No empire could last for long if it depended entirely on naked power exerted from the centre outwards. The different kinds of collaboration – it's a word often carrying hostile overtones, especially from Second World War Europe, but will be used here in a more neutrally intended sense – will therefore be a major theme in these pages. In almost all empires, local intermediaries might enjoy much autonomy within their own spheres, and command considerable wealth, power, and status, in return for delivering their people's obedience, financial tribute, and military services to the centre.

The emphasis on intermediaries, collaborators, bargains, and decentralization should not, however, be pushed too far. Empire was also often, indeed perhaps typically, established and maintained by violence. Sometimes extreme violence: some historians would say that most episodes of genocide and mass murder in world history have been associated with empire-building. We shall explore this link below. In the modern world, the idea of empire has also usually been associated with European, white rule over non-Europeans, with 'racial' hierarchies and racist beliefs. Some analysts, again, build this association into their very definitions of empire and colonialism. But this causes some obvious problems. If neither conquerors nor conquered are 'European' –

or if both are – should the resulting system be called imperial? Should we say, for instance, that the polities ruled by Ming emperors, or by Ottoman ones, were somehow not ‘proper’ empires? Or that they may have been empires, but their activities were not ‘imperialist’ or ‘colonialist’ because those labels are stamped ‘whites only’? Not many historians feel comfortable with such manoeuvres. It is more sensible, surely, to say that the modern European colonial empires

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were special kinds of imperial system, and that ideas about ‘race’ were part of what made them special – and explore the implications of those differences. Further on, we shall try to do just that.



3. Collaborators: Roman ceremonial cavalry helmet found at Ribchester, Lancashire, England, 2nd century CE. The wearer was probably a Sarmatian Slav from the Danube basin – recruited from one of the empire's extreme peripheries, serving at its other extremity.

Most analysts, then, seem to agree that an empire is formed, most often by conquest, out of a dominant ‘core’ and a dominated, often

economically exploited 'periphery'. These are usually geographically separate, clearly bounded places. In modern seaborne empires, they might indeed be thousands of miles apart. In other cases, though, the geographical lines between them might be blurred. Core and periphery might even be closely intermingled, inhabiting the same physical spaces: ideas like 'internal colonialism', which we shall also explore below, were developed to try to explain such situations. And it has not always been at all clear where the core ends and the periphery begins. For instance, for a considerable period Ireland was part of the United Kingdom (as a portion of it still is), and Algeria part of France. But many people in those places came to believe that they were not really treated as members – let alone equal members – of the core populations, but as parts of the colonized periphery. Many of them, moreover, decided that they did not *want* to be part of the imperial centre, even if it would have them: they wanted separation.

Such people, though, did not pursue political independence only – or, they would insist, even mainly – because they were not accepted as equals in London or Paris. They did so, they said, because they were culturally different: different enough to form a clearly separate nationality, which deserved and needed to be self-governing. As this implies, in most – maybe all – imperial systems the distinction between centre and periphery, dominant and dominated, was not just one of physical location, political power, or economic clout: it was seen in terms of cultural difference. 'Culture' is, of course, yet another of those large, baggy, rather shapeless words which this story keeps stumbling over. It is, like 'empire', 'colonialism', and our other key words, far more often invoked than defined. In modern imperial systems (and *perhaps* in many ancient ones too), however, ↪ it was typically believed that the dominant core people were clearly culturally different from, and superior to, the politically subordinate, peripheral ones. The crucial markers of difference might vary widely in different circumstances: including language, religion, physical appearance, types and levels of technology, even sexual behaviour. There was huge variation, too, as to whether imperial rulers tended to emphasize such differences or to downplay them, to see them as fixed for all time or as things that should be gradually erased by educating the colonized in the colonizers' ways. (The standard view, which is *partly* accurate, is that

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ancient Roman and modern French imperialists stressed the latter, the British the former.)

We shall be exploring some of these complexities, at least a little way, in later chapters. But in a place like French Algeria, the dividing lines seemed pretty clear-cut. One side was mainly Christian, French-speaking, light-skinned, comparatively prosperous; the other Muslim, Arabic or Berber-speaking, darker-skinned, and poorer. Some important groups, it is true, did not fit clearly into either camp: most obviously, Algeria's large Jewish population. But they tended to be ignored in much argument about the country's future. Indeed one of the most famous modern analyses of empire, heavily based on Algerian experience – that of Frantz Fanon – saw a total, unbridgeable chasm between the two cultures as *the* defining feature of colonial situations. Its inevitable consequence, in Fanon's view, was extreme violence. As such conflict duly developed during the 1950s, increasingly, one side identified itself as French – even if many of these people's ancestors had actually come from places like Spain or Malta – the other as Algerian. Almost all those in the first group who had lived in Algeria chose to move, or return, to mainland France when Algeria became independent. They did so amidst much bitterness, whose legacies still haunt France, and more violently Algeria, today.

p. 20 In Ireland cultural identities, and the divisions between them, seemed less sharply defined. It was far more common, and apparently easier, to think of oneself as British *and* Irish than it was to be both French and Algerian. To feel forced to choose one or the other, amidst divided affections and loyalties, was for many a painful experience. One can easily imagine a similar pain being felt by many people in Roman Britain as the legions departed. To which culture did one really belong? Where was one's true home? Indeed such a Romano-British dilemma *has* repeatedly been imagined, by literally hundreds of modern writers – especially by British ones in the later years of Britain's empire, when the drawing of parallels with the decline of Roman power became almost obsessive. A little later the theme of feeling culturally divided, even schizophrenic, torn between local tradition and colonial – then global – modernity became perhaps the most constantly recurring preoccupation of African, Asian, and other 'postcolonial' writers and artists.

Empire, it is thus suggested, always involved cultural diversity. It often rested on, and its rulers sometimes justified themselves by reference to, deep cultural divisions and inequalities. But it also inevitably produced many kinds of cultural interchange, of synthesis, mixture, or – in a word that has become exceedingly fashionable among modern students of colonialism – hybridity. For some scholars, such hybridity is its most important continuing legacy.

Others, though, question this stress on cultural legacies, as opposed to the economic or political consequences of empire. We could say indeed that there are two main lines of division and dispute among students of the modern empires: lines which overlap more than a little. One is over how much one should emphasize the power and purposefulness of colonial rulers, as against the degree of autonomy and initiative retained by the colonized. The second is about the centrality of culture to colonialism, and vice versa. Should we see modern empires as first and foremost cultural phenomena, or as political or economic ones?

p. 21 Obviously enough, empire has been all these things. But some would say that another aspect was more important than any of them. Empires did not only involve rulers expanding their power, nor administrators or soldiers travelling from capital to province and money travelling in the other direction, nor even the flow of commodities, ideas, beliefs, or cultural habits from place to place. It also, nearly always, entailed the mass movement of people – even of entire peoples. Our knowledge of such movements in the ancient empires is often very sketchy, and sometimes clouded in myth. Historians nowadays tend to think that some of the ‘great migrations’ and even great invasions of early history may actually have involved quite small numbers of people. A few of them may never have happened at all. When the Vandals and later the Arabs swept across North Africa, or perhaps when Israelites conquered Canaan, it was not a matter of one population replacing another, but probably of a quite thin layer of new rulers superimposed on the existing inhabitants, who later, gradually, took on the culture and identity of their conquerors. At least, this happened with Arabs and Israelites: the Vandals seem to have left little by way of a cultural legacy (perhaps one of them smashed it). The cheering thing about this revised picture of ancient history is of course that, so far as it is correct, many of the mass slaughters that we read about in the Bible and elsewhere may also never have happened.

In and around the great imperial systems of modern times, the mass migrations – and sometimes the mass murders – are clearly no myth. Most obviously, they carried tens of millions of Europeans all over the globe, where they formed settler minorities (usually privileged, dominant ones) in many places, and vast majorities in others. The latter – all of North and much of South America, Australia, New Zealand, and smaller enclaves elsewhere – are sometimes, not inappropriately, called ‘neo-Europes’. They form a big part of the story of modern world empire: in some ways the most important part of all. These were in the main voluntary migrations; but millions of others, especially Africans, traversed oceans and continents against their will, transported as

p. 22 slaves ↪ across the Atlantic – and, in a pattern far less well recorded or commemorated, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Somewhere in between were the vast Chinese and Indian diasporas, spreading around Asia and then the world, including traders and willing settlers but also, later, vast numbers of ‘indentured labourers’ whose condition was often little if any better than slavery. These were the biggest waves of migration that followed and helped form the tides of empire; but there were hundreds of other, smaller patterns. Eventually Armenian communities could be found, often as merchants, right across Eurasia, Lebanese on all the shores of the Atlantic, European Jews yet more widely spread. Since the end of formal colonial empire, the flows of mass migration have been even more complicated and multi-directional; though they have still often followed routes first established in colonial times. And they have mostly reversed the direction of earlier imperial migrancy; going in the main from ex-colonies to former metropolises, or more broadly from poor regions to rich, from south to north, from country to city. Still other kinds of migration are only just now beginning to receive the attention they deserve. Plants, animals, and perhaps most importantly, microbes also went everywhere that empire spread. The environmental systems of the world were transformed by what some now call ecological imperialism. If the word ‘empire’ today usually carries negative overtones, then the same is even more true of ‘imperialism’. It has also been even more variously defined, more fiercely and continuously argued over, than ‘empire’. If an empire is a kind of object, usually a political entity, then imperialism is a process – or in some understandings, an attitude, an

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ideology, even a philosophy of life. That makes it inherently even harder to define than empire. Imperialism is much the newer of these words, first widely used only near the end of the 19th century. Yet entire books – rather large ones – have been written on the history of its different uses, while literally hundreds ↴ of volumes have been devoted to proposing, criticizing, or summarizing numerous rival ‘theories of imperialism’.

The first uses seem, like most recent ones, to have been hostile: but unlike many of them, they were very specific. ‘Imperialism’ initially meant the policies of Napoleon III in France during the 1860s – his ostentatious but feeble effort to revive the glories of his mighty uncle’s reign a half-century earlier. Soon, though, it started to be used to refer specifically to external policies; mainly in relation to the attitudes towards foreign affairs of British Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and his successors. The stress on *attitudes* is important here: for most late-Victorian users of the word, imperialism did not mean the *facts* of dominance, conquest, or overseas expansion, but a policy, a philosophy, or just an emotional attitude of enthusiasm for such things. For some British critics, the label was interchangeable with ‘jingoism’ – a word adapted from a belligerent music-hall song and used to mean thoughtlessly aggressive patriotism. (Later an Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter, was to build a whole theory round the idea that imperialism stemmed from mindless aggression, expansion as an end in itself.) It was thus entirely self-consistent to say that one was opposed to imperialism, but a great friend of the British empire: many British liberal and early socialist politicians said exactly that.

Around 1890–1900, though, in Britain and elsewhere, the word started to be used by supporters as well as opponents of expansionist colonial policies. For the first and (as it soon turned out) last time, lots of people happily called *themselves* imperialists. Because of the popularity of such views – and because the period saw the rapid expansion of various European empires, especially in Africa – slightly later historians often called this the era of ‘the New Imperialism’ or even ‘*the Age of Imperialism*’. Such terminology was further encouraged by a variety of arguments, coming mainly from radical and socialist thinkers, about the relationship between colonial expansion and industrial capitalism. The most enduringly fruitful of these arguments came from the British

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radical-liberal ↴ J. A. Hobson. A century later, scholarly debate on the

economics of modern empire still revolves around his claim that European expansion was driven by the search for new fields of investment. Even more globally influential, though – at least so long as world Communism was a dynamic force – was Lenin's view that 'imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism'. Imperialism wasn't just linked to monopolistic capitalism, nor even a consequence of it – they were really one and the same thing. This had two rather pleasing implications for Communists: that by definition, only capitalist countries could be imperialists; and that, also by definition, the imperialist stage of capitalist development must be the last stage before its collapse.

Lenin's theory (or in hostile critics' eyes, his terminological conjuring trick) was widely persuasive, even for non-Marxists. This caused enduring confusion, for it was repeatedly muddled up with notions of 'imperialism' as meaning the policies of European colonial powers, or of the United States, or of any allegedly expansionist power – or just plain simple, general-purpose aggressiveness. Some writers, in slightly more discriminating fashion, use the word to mean all kinds of domination or control by one set of people over another, but especially by one state (or group of them) over others. Thus one could speak of 'formal' and 'informal' imperialism: the first meaning physical control or full-fledged colonial rule, while the second implied less direct but still powerful kinds of dominance, like Britain's 19th-century hegemony in Chile and Iran, or the USA's more recent role in much of central America.

That broad, and admittedly fuzzy-edged, definition will be used here; though we will have regularly to remind ourselves that its employment in any particular situation is always potentially contentious. What those who use the word in and about the present usually mean, however, is something like the following. A small group of powers today dominates and exploits the rest of the world. You can think of those powers in terms of states, or of economic actors (transnational companies, financial institutions, etc.) or even ↪ – in the style of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – as a singular new world empire. Equally, according to ideological taste, you can characterize them as first and foremost capitalist, or as Western, white, Christian, Judaeo-Christian, secular, liberal-democratic, and so on. However described, they do form an entity, an 'it', whose undisputed leader, symbol, and greatest force is the

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United States. For some contemporary critics, indeed, as for orthodox Communists in the Cold War era, 'imperialism' is effectively a simple synonym for American foreign policy. It has, on this view, important continuities with the formal colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries – indeed may share the same essential, exploitative aims – although it now operates mostly not through direct colonial rule, so much as through local client regimes, and through less formalized, less obvious economic, diplomatic, cultural, and other means of control. But when it feels its interests are threatened, it *will* intervene directly, and with massive, vindictive military force: from Vietnam in the 1960s, through Kuwait and Kosovo, to Afghanistan in 2002.

A minor oddity of modern academic – and political – language is that the word 'imperialism' has undergone a sharp decline in popularity, while 'colonialism' has zoomed up the citation charts. There are various possible reasons for this. One is that although most of the writers concerned are politically on the left, they want to distance themselves from the Marxist overtones which many understandings of 'imperialism' had accumulated – and especially from the orthodox Soviet definitions that had entered circulation via Lenin. Another might be that 'imperialism', as we've just seen, is a disagreeably muddled and fractious term, while 'colonialism' is potentially a more precise one. If that were so, it would be rather a good reason for the change. The trouble is, it *isn't* so: colonialism is being used just as variously and contentiously as imperialism ever was. Its younger relative 'postcolonialism' seems even more elastic. To some people, it's an all-purpose label for the entire state of the contemporary world. To others it's just the tag for a few Professors of English Literature, their books, and courses. Like most 'post' words, it seems to involve coming after something – so some view its use as dangerously misguided, for implying that colonialism is utterly dead and done with. On the other hand, it's often unclear just what comes after what: a recent book of literary studies is rather mind-bendingly entitled *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, whilst another literary scholar suggests (admittedly with tongue slightly in cheek) that '*Beowulf* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* could be read as postcolonial texts'.

We shall come back to the idea of the postcolonial in the final chapter – and hopefully in a less murky fashion than that. In the meantime, if we're to treat the current ubiquity of the label 'colonialism' as more than

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just an indication of how nerdishly many academics follow fashions and repeat each other (it is that; but not only that) we need to scratch a little around its roots too. 'Colony', 'colonist', 'colonial', and by extension the much more modern 'colonialism' derive, like 'empire', from Latin. Originally, a 'colony' just meant a farming settlement; then later a place – increasingly, a distant place – to which agricultural settlers migrated. In English before the 19th century, a 'colony' was a place to which people migrated, and in which they farmed: the word 'plantation' also carried the same meaning and was used interchangeably. Thus not all overseas possessions were called colonies: only ones where there was substantial British settlement (which also tended, of course, to mean places where the previous inhabitants were slaughtered or expelled). New England and New South Wales were colonies, Bengal or Bathurst were not.

p. 27 During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though, the meaning shifted and widened. All distant areas subject to political rule or control by other, mostly European, states began to be called colonies, whether or not Europeans settled permanently there. This remains the most common usage, and is one which this book from now on will broadly follow. But just to uphold the general rule that nothing in this field is straightforward, some 19th- and even 20th-century writers carried on using the older meanings. The words ↩ spawned an 'ism' only more recently still. Unlike imperialism and the other related words, it seems to have been used with almost exclusively hostile intent right from the start. Moreover, not only were those early uses mainly polemical, they also tended to be, deliberately, rather selective. That is, colonialism was thought of not as a system of conquest and rule, but as being a term to apply to such systems where, and only where, the conquerors were European or North American. This tendency has often been carried over into more recent, academic, and analytical uses of the word. Sometimes this is done deliberately and explicitly, by way of arguments that European or Western forms of colonialism are not just the most important kinds in modern history, but the only ones to which the term should be applied. This might be because instances of non-European countries invading, occupying, or denying rights to others are seen mostly, if not entirely, as side effects, consequences, or mere inept imitations of European and US actions. Alternatively, it might involve an argument that colonialism properly so called is a global system,

whereas oppression of one Asian or African people by another has only localized consequences. Thirdly, it could be because colonialism is seen as necessarily linked to ideologies of white racial superiority or domination, which are naturally absent or very weak in 'South–South' or 'intra-Third World' conflicts.

None of these, clearly, are trivial or foolish arguments: though the first surely becomes harder to sustain the further the old European colonial empires recede into history, while the second is less plausible when the parties to 'South–South' antagonism have nuclear armouries, as with Indian–Pakistani confrontation. As for the third, there might be merit in following the suggestion of Charles W. Mills and thinking in terms of 'global white supremacy as a political system' rather than 'imperialism' or 'colonialism'. Such a description, for all its ponderousness, would capture the implied argument more accurately and less confusingly than is done by bending the concept of colonialism in yet another ideologically overburdened direction. As we shall be suggesting later, systems of colonial rule and schemata of racial thought have often been

p. 28 closely ↪ linked in the past few centuries – but they are not Siamese twins. They can, and often do, exist apart from one another. Indeed one lively recent book about the British empire argues that its rulers were always more concerned with social status than with race.

Most often, in any case, modern studies of empire and of colonialism do not exclude non-European conquerors on account of any of those arguments: rather, they simply forget them. For example, the frequent repression of the Kurds by the various states who have ruled them is almost never discussed using the category of colonialism. But what distinguishes the actions of the Turkish army against rebellious Kurds in the 1930s and again the 1990s, or those of Iraq in 1988, from British or French colonial-era punitive expeditions to beat up dissident tribes? The only important difference is that the Turkish and Iraqi efforts appear to have been considerably more brutal than almost any campaign on the British North-West Frontier or French West Africa; to the point of being, so many analysts have charged, genocidal in intent. To take a yet bloodier example, where again is raised the spectre of genocide, as well as the full repertoire of classic colonial justifications including the rhetoric of the 'civilizing mission', what could be a more direct descendant of 19th-century colonial conquests than Indonesia's invasion of East Timor?

The ghost of pre-modern ideas about colonies, seeing them as places of agrarian settlement, still hangs around the modern debates. Quite often, and quite confusingly, it seems to be assumed that colonial rule necessarily involves large-scale migrancy and settlement of European populations in non-European regions. In some places, of course, it did – especially the ‘neo-Europes’ of the Americas and south Pacific. In many others, notably most of colonial Africa and Asia, it did not. In such places, colonial domination was often exercised by a tiny handful of European soldiers and bureaucrats, plus a few traders and missionaries, none of whom intended to become permanent residents in the colony.

p. 29 Just as not all racism was colonial, and not all colonialism racially defined, so by no means all colonialism involved settlers – and far from all mass migration, even within the boundaries of empire, should necessarily be called colonialist. The large post-1945 movement of people from British and French colonies into the cities of the ‘mother countries’ is, rightly, hardly ever described in that way. And the unique, almost uniquely complex, unendingly embattled case of Palestine–Israel should remind us, if nothing else, of how complex these relationships could be.

In almost all that we have said so far, the focus has been on *states* as empire builders. Nearly always, the expanding and conquering body was indeed a state. But sometimes – especially with early-modern European overseas expansion – non-state organizations took the lead. Trading companies became conquerors and even, in effect, turned themselves into governments, maintaining armed forces, raising taxes, making and enforcing laws: the most spectacularly successful example was the British East India Company in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Yet such companies were hardly ever freelance agents: their position depended on government-granted monopolies, their functions and personnel often overlapped with or blurred into those of the state itself, and they often relied on their countries’ armed forces for their ultimate defence. Most obviously, the great British colonial companies were dependent on the protection of the Royal Navy.

In the much more recent past, something rather similar has happened again, if on a smaller scale. In war-torn parts of Africa, private companies, especially those involved in mining, have become the effective rulers of substantial territories, even recruiting their own armed forces or employing mercenaries from private ‘security’ firms. In

early 2002, the British government even floated the idea that international peacekeeping operations might be contracted out to such private bodies.

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Some clarity ... and its limits

We have been following a sometimes tortuous path through a maze of arguments and definitions. We have come out, though, with what should be a set of usable, if rough-edged, concepts.

An **empire** is a large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest, and divided between a dominant centre and subordinate, sometimes far distant, peripheries.

Imperialism is used to mean the actions and attitudes which create or uphold such big political units – but also less obvious and direct kinds of control or domination by one people or country over others. It may make sense to use terms like cultural or economic imperialism to describe some of these less formal sorts of domination: but such labels will always be contentious. Some analysts also use terms like **dependency** – closely associated with economic underdevelopment – to describe these relationships. And they are clearly bound up with ideas about the newest of all these words: **globalization**. The ‘anti-globalization’ protestors who have confronted police forces in numerous world cities over the past few years evidently see globalization and imperialism as just two names for the same thing. Theories and rhetorics which express more positive views of the phenomenon, conversely, often tend to exaggerate the newness of the trends which they describe: the growth in transnational flows of goods, money, ideas, information, and people, with the allegedly resulting decline in the powers of the nation-state. All these have a much longer history, which scholars are only just beginning to trace. Much of this is, of course, the history of empires, which were the great transnational forces of earlier ages and the main engines of what some are now calling ‘archaic’ and ‘early-modern’ global society.

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Colonialism is something more specific and strictly political: systems of rule by one group over another, where the first claims the right (a ‘right’ again usually established by conquest) to exercise exclusive sovereignty over the second and to shape its destiny. Usually, this

political domination is 'long-distance': the rulers of one bit of land exercise rule over another, separate one, whether the latter is a neighbour or on the far side of the world. But in a few cases – perhaps including apartheid-era South Africa, and parts of Latin America – the rulers and the ruled occupied the same physical space. Terms like **internal colonialism**, though again highly contentious, may be appropriate here.

Colonization refers to large-scale population movements, where the migrants maintain strong links with their or their ancestors' former country, gaining significant privileges over other inhabitants of the territory by such links. When colonization takes place under the protection of clearly colonial political structures, it may most handily be called **settler colonialism**. This often involves the settlers entirely dispossessing earlier inhabitants, or instituting legal and other structures which systematically disadvantage them.

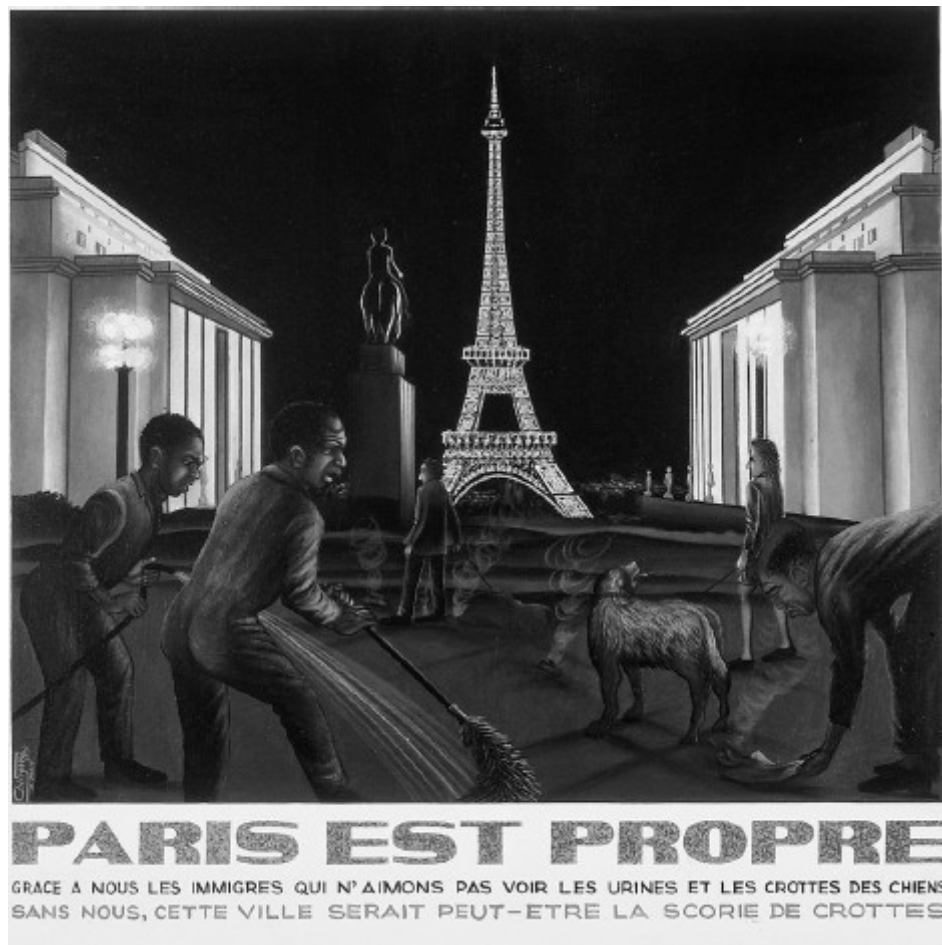
Finally, after the end of colonial rule, its effects still persist in innumerable different ways – though there is, of course, constant wrangling over how far various 21st-century miseries, especially in Africa, should be 'blamed' on the colonial legacy. A great range of terms has been used as collective designations for the parts of the globe once subject to colonialism: the Third World, the Less Developed (or, more optimistically, the Developing) Countries, the South, and more. The most popular today, and seemingly the most straightforward, is simply 'the **postcolonial** world'. But the straightforwardness is rather deceptive, for as we've already noted and will explore further, 'postcolonial', with its various -isms and -ities, is also employed in a bewildering variety of other ways. Another, once popular tag for what came after colonial rule is **neo-colonialism**. The term has fallen out of favour, and was always widely abused in Cold War polemics, but might still be quite useful for postcolonial situations where an outside power – usually, but not always, the former colonial ruler – still exercises very great, though half-hidden influence in ways that greatly resemble the older patterns of more open domination. France's role in some of her former African colonies comes readily to mind here.

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For all these categories and concepts, there will be borderline cases, and contentious ones. For example, the indirect or informal political control exercised by the former Soviet Union over Poland, or by the United States over the Philippines, might (or might not, according to political

preference) be described as imperialism. But it is not colonialism, since Poland and the Philippines retained formal political sovereignty. Nor is it colonization, since Russian or American migrants did not settle in Poland or the Philippines in significant numbers or exercise domination there. Much earlier, of course, large parts of Poland and the Philippines experienced both colonialism and colonization at the hands of Germany and Spain respectively. To take some still more controversial instances: the modern conflict in Northern Ireland is a colonial one in the eyes of Irish Republicans and of many international observers, emphatically not so in those of British governments and of Ulster Unionists. In the view of many Serbs, what happened in Kosovo in the 1990s was first a kind of creeping, but aggressive colonization by Albanians in historically Serbian land, then – when Serbs tried to defend themselves – full-scale imperialist war by the USA and its allies against Serbia. To Albanians, Kosovars, and most outside commentators, the case was entirely the reverse: the colonization, the regional imperialism, the aggression, and the guilt all lay with the Serbs, not their opponents. The Islamic militants who attacked New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 believed they were striking a blow against imperialism. To most Americans and Europeans, such a claim seemed utterly grotesque. But many people in poorer countries, even if they did not approve of these murderous acts, seemed to understand very well what the attackers said they were about. Quite obviously, defining ‘empire’ or ‘colonialism’ more precisely than these rival political forces do ↪ won’t help much in resolving their conflicts – though equally, a bit more clarity would certainly do no harm.

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4. *Paris is Clean* – thanks to postcolonial African and Asian migrants literally doing the dirty work. The same could have been said of almost every Western European and North American city.

Therefore, even after all these attempts at clarification, the reader should beware! These are *my* stabs at definition, though naturally they draw on the ideas of many other writers. Other works, including most of those highly recommended at the end of this one, offer a huge variety of different ways of understanding the crucial concepts in the field. (And there are other books, aimed at students, with titles like ‘Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies’, which seem to me to suggest quite unhelpful and confused terminology.) Indeed ↪ no two authorities seem to agree on even the most basic issues of definition. Perhaps they never will, for the subject is so highly charged with political passions and emotion. That can make the historical study of empires frustrating, but is also part of what makes it ever-mobile and exciting.

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