

5 Studying and judging empires

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192802231.003.0006>

Published: 22 August 2002

Abstract

‘Studying and judging empires’ argues that ideas about imperialism and colonialism have become crucial themes in almost every field of academic and cultural debate. Studies of the history of empires have posed questions about the relationships between knowledge, identity, and power. It is increasingly widely recognized that historical understanding, if it is kept within narrow national boundaries, will not equip the citizens of the twenty-first century anywhere on earth to understand their world. We are world citizens, more fully than our ancestors ever were, and to understand what that means, we will need to know something about the global empires of the past.

Keywords: [British Empire](#), [Canary Islands](#), [Dutch empire](#), [French empire](#), [Edward Gibbon](#), [Ottoman Empire](#), [Portuguese empire](#), [Spanish empire](#), [will](#)

Subject: [Colonialism and Imperialism](#)

Series: [Very Short Introductions](#)

Collection: [Very Short Introductions](#)

We are now, maybe, just distant enough from the multiple decolonizations of the 20th century to begin to see them in properly historical, and comparative, perspective. We can try, with more clarity than was possible before, to judge what was distinctive about European empire-building. Why did the states of Western Europe – first Spain and Portugal, then the British, Dutch, and French – rise to global dominance? What made their expansion different from, and so much

more far-reaching than, the creation of continental empires by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, or by the Arabs, Turks, and Chinese? Why did these Western European empires, far more than any others in history, succeed in transforming almost everything right across the world, from political systems to ecologies? Why did such empires persist into the mid-20th century, and why did they eventually collapse with such remarkable speed? We may even be able, by now, to attempt some kind of ethical judgement about empire, a balance sheet of its crimes and its achievements. Were the European colonial systems, on balance, destructive or creative forces?

Historians have taken the rise and fall of empires as one of their great themes ever since there has been such a thing as historical writing. Most ancient Greek and Roman chroniclers wrote, in a sense, imperial history. Probably the most famous and widely read pre-modern historical work in English is Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In more recent times, ideas about imperialism and colonialism have become crucial, apparently almost ubiquitous, themes in almost every field of academic and cultural debate: most obviously now in literary and cultural studies, but also in political theory, economics and 'development studies', anthropology, theology, and of course history. And they have done so carrying a weighty conceptual and political baggage, including, at the present moment, a major influence from postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. They have intertwined – sometimes productively, often explosively – with issues of nationalism, community, and ethnicity, of gender, class, and perhaps above all those of 'race'. In some hands, the idea of empire has come to be seen as synonymous with modernity itself. At every step, these enormously varied attempts to study, and sometimes to judge, the history of empires have posed questions of the relationships among knowledge, identity, and power.

In recent years the greatest focus of attention has been on cultural studies of empire, looking at the imagery, literary representations, beliefs, and ideologies which empire builders, and their opponents, produced. Some historians argue that there has been too much concentration on these subjects, which may not be quite so important as they are often now thought to be. Imperial ideologies, such critics suggest, were often just window-dressing, rationalizations for acts of conquest and forms of rule which were actually driven by quite different

forces. Expansion was perhaps often opportunistic, improvised, or a response to crisis, rather than motivated by grand ideologies or powerful cultural forces. Understanding empire may sometimes be furthered more by looking at its *means* – notably the technological inequalities, especially in military hardware, which for a time made it comparatively easy, cheap, and risk-free for some societies to dominate others – than by investigation of culture and ideology. There was, on this view, rarely a grand plan for empire.

p. 124 We might also, some warn, be wary of overstating the power of ↵ empire. A substantial body of recent writing has stressed how dramatically and totally colonial rulers reshaped the societies they dominated. This included the widespread ‘invention of tradition’ there: for instance, it is suggested, Indian ideas of ‘caste’ and African ones of ‘tribe’ were entirely transformed if not simply fabricated by colonialism. Such views, however, might greatly overestimate the inventive capacity of European rulers and understate that of their subjects. They might make colonialism sound too much like a single, conscious, cohesive, and all-powerful entity. And they might tend to ignore or downplay important continuities between precolonial and colonial history – and indeed between colonial and postcolonial times too.

This is not to deny that, in some circumstances, the colonial impact was literally catastrophic and even genocidal. This is most evidently the case with those settler-colonial conquests, in parts of the Americas and Australasia, where indigenous peoples were reduced to a fraction of their former numbers or even disappeared altogether under the onslaught of dispossession, disease, and massacre. But there were other episodes of utter destruction which have been almost entirely forgotten, like the disappearance of the Guanche people of the Canary islands under the European impact. Few, if any, modern tourists in the islands are likely to be aware that they are visiting a place that was once the site of mass murder. Still today, there are small indigenous peoples in the Amazon basin and in Antarctica which are threatened with total extinction. Most historians are sceptical about whether the European conquerors really *intended* the complete elimination of those they conquered. Some would therefore doubt whether words like genocide are really appropriate. But that was the undoubted *effect* of European actions in some places.

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Even in Africa, where the direct colonial impact was generally later, more short-lived and, so many analysts would concur, more superficial than in most other parts of the colonial world, there were instances of populational and/or cultural collapse. Thus in German South-West Africa (now Namibia), the Nama and Herero people were subjected to a deliberate, and largely successful, military campaign of mass extermination. And the extreme physical repression and scorn for 'native' life pursued in the rainforests of Equatorial Africa by French, German, and especially Belgian occupiers resulted, in the view of the region's most distinguished historian, Jan Vansina, in the almost complete breakdown of indigenous tradition. This was 'an apocalyptic conquest', which killed approximately half the area's total population and left the remainder as 'cultural schizophrenics ... bereft of a common mind and purpose'. Vansina's, though, is an unusually stark view of an unusually traumatic colonizing process. In general, colonial conquest was nearly always partial, the processes of social and cultural change it sponsored or unleashed still more so. The ideologies of colonial expansion and rule, too, were far more varied and ambiguous than is routinely suggested in much current writing. To recognize and explore this is not to 'rehabilitate' the colonial record, nor to excuse or downplay the violence, oppression, and exploitation that marked almost all its passages.

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The modern emphasis on the cultures of colonialism may also sometimes lead to relative neglect of economic and political forces. In many ways empire was very specifically a political phenomenon, a matter of the state. A key part of what defines it, I have suggested, is the way in which the colonizing state took complete power over the government of the territory which it had annexed. This clearly distinguishes colonial polities from those which have internal self-government, such as British Dominions, and from formally sovereign states subject to various forms and degrees of influence or control from outside (though the latter, by the definitions we have adopted, may well be instances of *imperialism*). We should, this implies, be giving more attention to the political and legal systems of empires, and their rulers' ideas about law and order. It is important to see how interest groups, religious bodies, business firms, educational institutions, and so on acted under colonial conditions, but this must include thinking about their relationships to colonial state power. Part of this is a need

always to ask ourselves: what was *different* about religion, education, law, economic activity, and all the other spheres of life under colonialism? What, if anything, did all the immensely varied colonial situations have in common which marked them out from others? Might it even be that on a wider and longer-term view, looking at interactions between human groups across the sweep of history, then we might see cultural interchange, export, and expansion as more important than empire? We might even see colonialism itself, in any strict or coherent sense, as a mere effect of all those processes of cultural diffusion, export, copying, fusion, mongrelization or interaction. Some historians suggest that the most important consequence of empire was the way it spread originally European state systems and economic patterns to cover the world. But others think most of this would have happened anyway, with or without colonial rule. Japan, to take the most obvious and most successful example, was never colonized, but still effectively copied those systems and patterns.

Arguments over how *important* empires were in human history are not at all the same as *moral* evaluations of their records and legacies – though some influential writers do seem to confuse the two. Most historians, meanwhile, feel uncomfortable with explicit moral judgements: but may nonetheless often smuggle them in undercover. The modern consensus view is to judge the legacies of empire, especially of the modern European empires, very harshly. The racism which usually suffused them, and their assaults on their subjects' human dignity and self-esteem, are held especially guilty. Empire, moreover, is seen as inherently incompatible with democracy, and of course with self-determination.

p. 127 There are arguments the other way. We have seen that a case can be made for seeing modern empire as economically progressive, and generally beneficial even to the colonized. Politically too, it can be proposed that at least some great modern empires – the British, French, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and even the Ottoman – had virtues that have been too readily forgotten. They provided stability, security, and legal order for their subjects. They constrained, and at their best tried to transcend, the potentially savage ethnic or religious antagonisms among their peoples. And the aristocracies which ruled most of them were often far more liberal, humane, and cosmopolitan than their supposedly more democratic successors. The rivers of blood

undammed by each empire's fall, from the partition of India to the current fate of Chechnya, should make us think again about the alleged virtues of 'national democracy', in whose name so much atrocity is sanctified.

Transcending or sidestepping such emotionally charged arguments, some historians would now want to ask: 'What was so special about Europe anyway?' The idea of fundamental, absolute differences between 'East' and 'West', Europe and the rest, has been one of the most constantly renewed clichés of world history. It is, some think, at least as old as the Greek–Persian wars of 2,500 years ago – and as new as febrile current debates about the 'clash of civilizations'. Yet the argument has perpetually changed its form, and the boundary between Us and Them has been unendingly fluid. It has never been clear where Europe ends and Asia starts, geographically or culturally. In one sense, that's what Greeks and Turks, Serbs and Croats, even Russian presidential candidates, fight each other about. The dominant approach has been to start from the assumption of Europe's uniqueness – above all, as sole birthplace of capitalism – and then seek to explain it. A long tradition, unfortunately by no means defunct, used the categories of race to account for divergent historical paths. Nowadays, the concept of cultural difference, just as all-embracing and almost as meaningless as race once was, is employed to the same ends.

p. 128 That still powerful picture has had to undergo a whole series of ad hoc adjustments. First Japan's rise had to be fitted to it. This was usually done by arguing that it was possible because Japan, uniquely in Asia, had a European-style feudal tradition, or a ↵ successful 'bourgeois revolution', or entrepreneurial cultural values, or because it was never under colonial rule. But as country after country in east Asia moved into economic take-off, the original assumption became ever harder to sustain: too many exceptions disproved the rule. We must, some suggest, take a much longer historical view, which reveals that the differences which are supposed to have determined European economic dynamism and Asian stagnation either don't exist, or can't explain what they are alleged to. It is not true that Europe developed unique forms of rationality, of business enterprise, of individualism, or attitudes to work or property: or not true enough to mark out an essential East–West division. Even something as mundane but crucial to the emergence of capitalism, and supposedly distinctive to Western

Europe, as double-entry bookkeeping has close parallels in medieval India, China, and Egypt. Reasons for global success or failure must be far more contingent than has been thought.

Finally, some important trends in the world of the early 21st century give the history of empires a renewed relevance, and enable new perspectives on it. Globalization today underlines the value of thinking about the global systems of the past. Historians during the 20th century tended overwhelmingly to write about single countries – almost always their own. Outside the academic world, popular historical consciousness and the teaching of history in schools was, and still is, almost entirely national – and indeed nationalist – in focus. Among the very first actions of most postcolonial states, on or even before achieving their independence, was to revive or create ‘national histories’ like the European ones. Today, it is increasingly widely recognized that historical understanding, if it is kept within those narrow national boundaries, will not equip the citizens of the 21st century anywhere on earth to understand their world. They may, or may not, be citizens of a new world empire – perhaps an economic, cultural, or media empire, if not a political one. They may even be barbarians, outcasts, or refugees knocking vainly at the gates of such an empire. ↵ But they will be world citizens, more fully than their ancestors ever were. To understand what that means, they will need to know something about the global empires of the past.

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