

Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference

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In 2001, Frederick Cooper wrote that ‘globalization talk is influential – and deeply misleading – for assuming coherence and direction instead of probing causes and processes’.⁽¹⁾ Burbank and Cooper heed this warning and focus very clearly and ably on the causes and processes of global empire building in this new book. They join a flurry of recent books linking empire, imperialism, and global or world history. Building on the ground-breaking works in this genre ⁽²⁾, this book differentiates itself by beginning in ancient Rome, rather than the 15th or 16th century, and expressly stating that it does not want to explain ‘the expansion of Europe’ (p. 5). While this may be strictly true, the traditional ‘expansion of Europe’ has here been replaced with ‘the expansion of Eurasia’ and the book does not really touch in great detail on the African empires (with which Cooper is undoubtedly familiar), or the pre-Columbian American empires. However, the book is successful in expanding the traditional story to encompass a wider Eurasian scope, drawing, undoubtedly, on Burbank’s expertise in Russian history. The authors’ unique contribution is that they ‘focus instead on how different empires emerged, competed, and forged governing strategies, political ideas, and human affiliations over a long sweep of time’ (p. 2).

The book is divided into 14 chapters, and one of its great strengths is in its structure. It focuses on specific empires or comparative examples from the same time frame, rather than dividing chapters into the different themes of rule and looking for examples from throughout history. This gives the reader a real sense of depth and the ability to take away their own understanding, rather than being spoon-fed examples. Throughout, the book balances detail about the various empires it covers, providing enough to keep the reader interested and reveal the particularities and contingencies of each empire's development, but not focusing on so much detail that the wider themes and processes are obscured.

Chapter one outlines the themes and sets out the argument that 'for most of human history empires and their interactions shaped the context in which people gauged their political possibilities, pursued their ambitions, and envisioned their societies' (p. 3–4). The authors list their themes as difference within empires, imperial intermediaries, imperial intersections, imperial imaginaries, and repertoires of power. Repertoires of power, while a somewhat vague term, emerges clearly as a concept throughout the book, playing a large role in the differentiation of imperial experiences. In essence, it is the different means by which imperial authority is legitimated and practiced. For example, in areas under Mongol control, military ranks were only given to Mongols, while other elites incorporated into the empire could rise through civilian offices (p. 107). Meanwhile, in Habsburg Spain, composite monarchy – made up of 'a web of dynastic and material linkages' (p. 122) – was the system by which Charles V and Phillip II claimed imperial authority. The idea of repertoires of power has a number of different aspects beyond pure systems of rule, and these are adaptable across empires. First is the importance of 'governmentality' in administering empire – enumerating, classifying and regrouping conquered peoples, collecting taxes, mapping new territories, and creating imperial bureaucracies to carry out these functions. Second is the adaptability and ultimate reification of imperial projects. Within this fall a few sub-themes. The authors are clearly interested in what subjects and elite collaborators get out of empire and how empires respond to these demands. They also explore the inadaptability of linking universal religion to claims for universal rule. The third aspect of these repertoires of power is the response to tensions between centralizing and decentralizing impulses. Finally, while an unstated aspect, the role of ongoing military conflict in fuelling imperial expansion continuously recurs as a theme through the choice of comparisons put forward by the authors. The focus on these repertoires of power and governance reveals the reasoning behind the choice of empires described in the book: the authors are arguing for a particular Eurasian set of imperial repertoires beginning with Rome and China and from which subsequent empires drew inspiration, adapting as they saw fit.

Although the authors declare that they do not set out to relate a narrative, the story does move chronologically, from 'Imperial rule in Rome and China' (chapter two) through to 'War and revolution in a world of empires: 1914–1945' (chapter 12) and the 'End of empire?' (chapter 13). Chapter two outlines the origins of imperial patterns in Europe and Asia, highlighting the formative role of Rome and China in developing lasting repertoires of power. It investigates the comparative question 'why was the Chinese empire repeatedly put back together in roughly the same area, while Rome – as a state – never revived?' (p. 54).

Chapter three moves to the period after Rome's fall, focusing on the dramatic change brought about by the 'linkage of imperial power to monotheism' in Byzantine, Carolingian, and Islamic empires (p. 61). Burbank and Cooper highlight this issue throughout the chapter, identifying monotheistic religion as both a powerful cultural homogenizing force and a granter of universal power, as well as a potential agent for internal dispute and imperial fracture.

Chapter four, on the Mongol Empires, looks at the particularities of the rise of Chinggis Khan and his successors in Yuan China, the Golden Horde, the Il-Khans of Persia, and the Chagatai Khanate in modern Uzbekistan. As with earlier empires, the adaptability of Mongol repertoires of power – their tribe alliances and the supreme authority of the warrior khan – both helped to build the empire and ultimately led to its disintegration.

Chapter five, 'Beyond the Mediterranean: Ottoman and Spanish empires,' takes up the comparative

dimension of the study again. In choosing these rival powers, Burbank and Cooper contrast 'class hierarchy' and 'patrimonial' models of empire. In the class hierarchy model, the emperor gains his authority through the horizontal allegiances of each class and in particular, the strong aristocracy, who are able to support the emperor by collecting taxes and providing military support. In the patrimonial model, the emperor derives power from his personal relationships. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, through concubinage and the use of Christian Janissaries, the emperor was able to create rule through personal dependency.

Chapter six examines the rise of 'Oceanic economies and colonial societies' in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. It covers the differentiated rise of Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French and British Empires in this period, particularly the different styles of expansion and rule used by each empire. The metropolitan political realities – such as Dutch independence and Portuguese fragility – are discussed in reference to the success or failure of rule. The authors note that the reason for Britain's dominance at the end of this period was that 'the British had developed a range of different ways of interacting with, governing, and exploiting indigenous populations, settlers, and slaves' (p. 178). This leads to a fairly long description of the impact of the 'slavery-empire nexus' on Africa (p. 179).

Chapter seven looks at empire-building in the land-based empires of Russia and China. Here, the history of the Mongol khanates picks up again and the history of the Russian and Chinese empires weaves together the legacies of Mongol rule and new strategies for maintaining authority. The Russians, for instance, formed marriage alliances as they conquered new territories, which 'grafted whole families onto the dynasty and gave them a vital interest in it' (p. 193), and established a new system of clans and clan leaders (boyars). They also tied Orthodox Christianity to their universal rule, imitating the Roman successor states. China, meanwhile, experienced a period of contraction after Mongol rule, but managed to retain its status as an empire through 'a powerful imperial tradition and self-conscious, sophisticated statecraft' (p. 200). Here the focus is on the 'Eurasian origins' of both empires – universal emperors, bureaucracy, patrimonial land granting, diversity of ruled peoples – whether they were acknowledged by the emperors (as in the case of China) or not (as in the case of Russia).

Chapter eight investigates the changing power dynamics of empires in the revolutionary age of the late eighteenth century. The picture that emerges is one of dynamic competition and conflict fuelling 'questions about which forms of political and economic behaviour were normal and legitimate' (p. 222–3). It explores the disruption of the British Empire in the American Revolution, the challenge to the notion of French citizenship posed by the Haitian Revolution, and the rise of Napoleonic European Empire. This is also the beginning of the self-critique of empires, as certain Enlightenment figures – both in the metropole and in the colonies themselves – challenged the legitimacy of colonization.

Chapter nine looks at the rise of continental empires – the United States and Russia – in the 19th century. The contrast is between a new form of incorporation through statehood and the traditional, pragmatic Eurasian model of rewarding elites and accommodating religious diversity, inherited from 'their mixed Mongol, Byzantine, and European past' (p. 251). The inclusion of these continental empires reveals the authors' emphasis on empire as a practice of rule, rather than a territorially defined idea. In both cases, repertoires of rule are constrained within territories that now exist as nation-states, but are clearly 'imperial' in their incorporation of elites and the differentiation of populations under rule. New aspects of this imperial repertoire that emerged in the US in contrast to the older style of rule in Russia included the appeal to law, and particularly law regarding private property, and the rise of capitalism.

Chapter ten, 'Imperial repertoires and myths of modern colonialism,' explores the idea that 'modern' colonialism was somehow different from older imperial models. The authors argue that rather than a 'new type' of imperialism, by looking at the period of the 19th century through the lens of 'repertoires of power', similar patterns of imperialism are easily discernible. Although they acknowledge that the growth in wealth and technology gave European powers an advantage, they point out that these same empires still had to respond to the demands of governance and administration – themes that were altered by the rise of the language of human and citizenship rights, but which continued to fall into a category of responsive rule.

Chapter 11 examines the competitions between and within empires in the 19th century, focusing on Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Germany, and the Habsburgs, as they adapted to wars within Europe and dynamic economic change. The rise of a transnational European elite who demanded ‘modernity’ – bureaucratic transparency, legal reform, equal rights and representative institutions – resulted in attempts to reform in all of these empires, with differing success in adapting their power structures to the new demands or conscientiously rejecting ‘Europeanization’ (p. 364).

Chapter 12 surveys the period 1914 to 1945, arguing that ‘World War I revealed and did nothing to resolve the instability of the European system of empires’ while ‘the outcome of World War II put an end, it seemed, to an unstable array of empires that had struggled repeatedly for dominance in Europe from the age of Charles V through Napoleon to Hitler’ (pp. 369 and 370). This chapter offers a history of these wars from a different perspective than the classic Eurocentric narrative, focusing on the colonial independence movements erupting in the wake of the First World War – particularly in Southeast Asia – and on the rise of new types of empire in the USSR, America, Germany and Japan. The period of world wars exhausted many of the resources and appetites for European empire, as well as propelling the United States and USSR into new roles as imperial nation-states. America’s repertoire of imperial power included military, economic, and cultural tools, but relied less on colonialism, while the USSR used more traditional territorial expansion in Eastern Europe.

Chapter 13, ‘End of empire?’ argues that ‘the mid-twentieth century was not a self-propelled movement from empire to nation-state’ (p. 413). The authors argue that it was the imperial metropolises’ very openness to ideas of reform and adaptation that left it vulnerable to nationalist challenges and critiques. French colonialism receives a bulk of the focus of this chapter, as the authors explore the contradictions inherent in a more expansive definition of citizenship and a more nationalist vision of Europe. Again, the treatment of the USSR’s dramatic expansion after the Second World War focuses on repertoires of power, focusing both on the particularities of Soviet-style economic monopoly and on the more general politics of personal, patrimonial rule that emerged first under Stalin and then was replaced by a more stable rule by party elite and their families. The choice to end this chapter looking at China’s re-emergence – and redeployment of traditional repertoires of power, leaving ‘most productive activities in private hands while retaining its right to regulate all aspects of social life’ (p. 441) – brings the Eurasian imperial story full circle.

Finally, the concluding chapter, ‘Empires, states, and political imagination,’ provides a summary of the preceding chapters and presents new ways of thinking about future states, arguing that thinking about empire allows us to see that the current model of nations is not as straightforward or as durable as it may seem, and suggesting that the current state of affairs is simply the latest in a series of post-imperial periods of reformulation.

This book adds to our understanding of empires by framing new comparisons and asking new questions about the management, expansion, and feasibility of empires throughout world history. One criticism that should be noted is the hasty definition of empire in the first chapter (a definition Cooper uses elsewhere [\(3\)](#)) which does not suit the complexity of the empirical examples and nuanced themes that emerge throughout the book. Burbank and Cooper offer the definition that ‘Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people’ (p. 8), only distinguishing between empires and nation-states with the equivocating declaration that ‘the empire-state declares the non-equivalence of multiple populations’ while ‘the nation-state proclaims the commonality of its people’ even if they are not equivalent in practice (p. 8). These definitions beg a number of questions: what is a ‘memory of power’ and how does it help to isolate empires as political units? Does the real existence of intrastate hierarchy and non-equivalence of multiple populations mean that the nation-state is really purely a politically correct name for an empire-state? The problem with these definitions is that they limit the experience of empire without providing clarity. Given the range, scope, and scale of the empires discussed, it seems that a more appropriate definition of empire would focus on the themes that arise from comparing empires, and which form the original argument of the book. The United States, for instance, is recognised as an empire within the book (chapter nine), even though it

declares itself a nation-state using exactly the definition granted by the authors. Since the citizenship and power arguments were, as they argue, ‘worked out in the space of ... empire’ (p. 223), these do not seem adequate to differentiate nation-states from empire-states. Chapter 11 also presents a nuanced argument about the rise of the nation as ‘less a solution than a claim’ (p. 367). Therefore, it seems that trying to define an abstract theoretical ‘empire’ and ‘nation-state’ weakens what is otherwise a convincing empirical definition, arrived at through a careful survey of centuries of accumulated evidence.

This minor theoretical critique illuminates the greatest strength of this book: its nuanced presentation of case studies and comparisons. One of the most compelling aspects is its treatment of imperial decline. Although they do not deal in any detail with non-Eurasian empires, which is somewhat disappointing in a book claiming to be ‘world history’, their comparative framework allows for a transportable model of imperial development, governance, and the inherent flaws in all empires, which can be applied beyond those described in detail in the book. Burbank and Cooper provide some direction for these extra-Eurasian comparisons. For example, in the sixth chapter, on the development of early European overseas empires, they note that the Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Incan empires was not as simple as technological and immune system superiority, but that ‘thinking about the endemic vulnerabilities of empires helps us understand the situation’ (p. 163). By looking at the rise and fall of numerous empires in their particular historical contexts, patterns of expansion, rule, adaptation, and ultimately, decline, become evident and act as convincing models for other empires not discussed at length here.

This book offers a compelling series of comparisons that help to flesh out more fully the extent of the role of empires in world history. While it cannot claim to be a comprehensive global history of all empires, it does achieve what it sets out to do, offering ample evidence that ‘empire was a variable political form’ (p. 16) with a deep and adaptable repertoire of means of incorporating, excluding, and ruling.

Notes

1. Frederick Cooper, ‘What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian’s perspective,’ *African Affairs*, 100 (2001), 189.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (London, 2007); Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), p. 27.
[Back to \(3\)](#)

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