

# IMPERIALISM

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Imperialism is the process of forcibly expanding state authority over autonomous foreign territory by means of military conquest. Or, more broadly, imperialism is the complex of practices through which a people establishes and maintains instrumental control over the spaces, resources and everyday lives of another. Or imperialism is the ideology through which a population is persuaded to support its domination of another, and persuades that other to accept such domination.

There is no single and authoritative definition of empire, and it could even be claimed that any attempt to assert such a definition would itself be an imperializing act. Despite this, differing conceptions of imperialism and its root cognate – empire – do converge upon certain principle geopolitical characteristics. Most broadly, imperialism entails the usurpation by an alien power of other's territorial autarchy. This usurpation commonly takes the form of conquest by force, albeit to varying degrees depending upon place and time. The specifics of alien rule are highly contingent upon the cultural practices and material needs of both the rulers and those they rule, yielding multiple varied and complex “imperial regimes of rule.” One very general illustration of this would be the predilection of European empires for acquiring territory, as contrasted with Southeast Asian empires' focus on the capture and mass relocation of populations. Further, within those European empires there are significant differences between those beholden to monarchical versus republican models of internal governance, or those established chiefly through state military exercises versus those outsourced to private adventurers and *plunderbund*-type mercantile enterprises.

Variations notwithstanding, imperialism understood as the practices by which empires are formed, expanded and maintained produces (or at least grossly exacerbates) a consistent, asymmetrical geography. Core regions, and their metropolitan centers in particular, are greatly enriched through the expropriation of wealth from subjugated peripheries. It may even be argued that this is the

central dynamic of imperialism, and that empires are brought into being as a means to establish and exploit mandatorily dependent, ever more distant markets and labor forces while simultaneously disciplining those in the core. It is also debatable, however, whether this explanation is as readily applicable to empires based outside the space of Western Europe and the time of the Second Millennium's latter half.

In its constitution of sharply differentiated and dependent core-periphery relations, imperialism is inextricably conjoined with colonialism. The tightness with which the two are coupled, however, is again highly variable and open to debate. Most narrowly defined, and hearkening back to classical Greek city-states and the agricultural *coloniae* of Imperial Rome, a colony is an imperial possession established on empty (or, more commonly, forcibly emptied) peripheral territory that is occupied by settlers from the core and subject to more-or-less direct imperial rule from the core's metropolitan center. This definition, however, tends to underemphasize other, equally significant types of imperial territorial possessions in which pre-existing populations are too sizeable or well-entrenched to readily expunge preparatory to resettlement. Such possessions tend instead to be subject to administration by coöpted indigenous intermediaries overseen by functionaries imported from the imperial core, commonly with the intent of gradually absorbing the conquered population into the empire. Further, the diverse spatial manifestations of different empires complicate the definition and identification of colonies. In the case of dispersed empires predicated upon a distinct homeland and far flung conquests, imperial possessions can be more plainly evident as colonies by virtue of their territorial discontinuity. But such recognition can be much more equivocal in the case of peripheral territories held by contiguous empires characterized not by detached possessions, but by successive waves of accretive growth just over their own frontiers. Finally, imperialism in and as practice includes both the resettlement of some number of its core personnel within all its subordinated peripheries and, barring out-and-out genocide, the continued exploitation of even putatively expunged populations. Thus, while colonization through thorough dispossession is inherently an on-the-ground practice of imperialism, it is not a necessary one – imperial standing does not depend upon possession of colonies in the strictest, narrowly defined sense of the term. Rather, empires deploy in varied combinations a spectrum of colonizing practices that range from the most direct forms of military occupation to more subtle insinuations

of hegemonic influence, all inflected by local conditions in targeted peripheries and attenuated by the exercise of foreign rule over increasing distances.

Imperialism thus entails that ever more distant and distinct peoples will be subsumed within the boundaries of any given empire. Further, this subsumation over time tacitly encourages migration to the metropolitan cores and across the empire back along the same routes initially established to logistically expedite peripheral conquest, occupation and extraction. Therefore, over the course of their developmental trajectories all empires become inherently multicultural. As an ideology, imperialism facilitates social cohesion and continued expansion under such conditions. Working through media such as religious artifacts and their allied rituals, literary and topical communications, popular entertainments and public commemorations, the ideology of imperialism effects a colonization of the mind whereby empire-building is valorized and the conquered are given incentive to embrace, and even try to pass as, their conquerors. Thus, even empires without clearly determinable colonies necessarily strive to colonize the most intimate terrain that is their subjects' psyches. The inclusivity of imperial multiculturalism, however, is also heavily disciplined by the state's differential and strategically selective extension of suffrage rights. Strong incentive to adopt the cultural practices of, and even identify with, the imperial core is therefore frustrated by the establishment of elaborate social hierarchies that restrict the extent to which different subject peoples may assimilate into imperial society. Some peoples may never be permitted to rise any higher than the rank of subaltern, whereas others may be regarded as too ineffaceably alien to rise at all no matter how well they mask themselves in the likeness of the conqueror.

The capacity of imperialism to establish and promulgate cultural hegemony, while at the same time delimiting who is considered fit to participate and to what degree in that hegemony, operates not just within empires but between them as well. By way of example, the military, economic, legal, infrastructural, architectural and even sartorial reforms instituted in times and places as far apart as Petrine Russia, Rama V's Siam, the Tanzimat-era Ottoman Empire or Meiji Japan all reveal a consistent propensity amongst then-waning and aspirant empires alike – self-conscious emulation of the practices of Western Europe's rising imperial powers, as much to stave off being conquered by those powers as to pass as one and reap similar rewards. Imperial triumphs thus work both to

absorb populations internal to empires, and also to entrain external populations far beyond the territory of the empire and its prospective conquests.

In its expansive influence, imperialism produces a global space divided into a ranked order of triumphal cores with peripheral dependencies. Further, it simultaneously projects this mapping onto time. The peripheral is conflated with the traditional and the backward, and denigrated in juxtaposition with the core's presumptive forward-looking modernity. The everyday life practices of peripheries thus become hidebound holdovers of a benighted past, and imperialism takes penultimate form as civilization's solemn duty to progressively eradicate primordial savagery for the alleged good of the conqueror and the conquered alike. This is not the case for all times and places – empires founded by nomadic pastoralists like the Mongols or Osmanli Turks, for instance, tended to see empire less as a base for the export of civilization than a crossroad at which civilizations might best be collected and cherry-picked. But as a guiding geopolitical dynamic of the latter half of the Second Millennium, especially its terminal two centuries, imperialism colonized space itself and, through it, both time and consciousness. Indeed, treatises from the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> centuries go so far as to assume tacitly 'the empire' as a natural increment of geographical scale, situated firmly and irremovably between 'the nation' and 'the world'.

Of course, it has been proven empirically over time that the empire is far less an inevitable and inextricable scalar metric than had been previously assumed. Every empire to date has succumbed to imperial overreach, the invariably fatal penchant for conquering more territory than can be ultimately held. And over the course of two world wars and a prolonged, lingering third (the 'Third World' War, as waggishly christened by Mexico's Zapatista insurgents), the larger global system of de jure imperialism itself suffered similar collapse. Extant empires ripped one another apart, all the while attempting to salvage themselves as repackaged commonwealths and coprosperity spheres. Concurrent with this, subjugated territories took up the task of liberating themselves as newly-minted nations, more often than not following the prescription to vomit up the colonizer – and by means of violence verging on the cathartic, if necessary. Ironically, such programs of national liberation were often aided and abetted, or even sown outright, by adjacent empires seeking to deploy nationality as a tool for destabilizing their competition.

It can be argued that in a decolonized and nationally-reformulated global arena, blunt projections of imperial power can no longer be legitimized. Rather, a different sort of domination is necessary, one attained through the enactment of 'soft-power' that persuades others to cooperate willingly with a hegemon's agendas. Past empires, however, have been no strangers to persuasion, to indirect rule, and to the dissemination of beliefs that domination will serve the best interests of the dominated. Nor does hegemonic soft power remain so soft – current hegemons have demonstrated a growing propensity to assert 'unipolar preponderance' through massive shows of force against uncoöperative foreign states. Hegemonic soft power, then, may be less a kinder, gentler new technique for dominance in a more polite postcolonial age than a temporary shift of emphasis within an arsenal of previously well-established imperial practices. This suspicion, in turn, has resulted in a growing body of literature examining the imperialist characteristics of such self-declaredly non-imperialist, or even anti-imperialist, state formations as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United States of America, the European Union or the People's Republic of China. More radically, it has been claimed that empire has taken on a new and largely despatialized form, enacted via globally diffuse networks of electronically-linked state functionaries, business elites, and such conjoined transnational institutions as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. Such claims for aspatiality, however, must contend with the persistent financial, technological, mass-cultural and military preeminence of core regions and their long-established metropolitan centers in configurations substantially similar to those of a century ago. Empires do indeed rise and fall, but imperialism continues to prove far more durable in its self-servingly opportunistic ordering of space, time and consciousness.

Imperialism, then, is something that must be defined multiply and flexibly (although not so open-endedly that, in its pervasiveness, it ends up meaning both everything and nothing). It is the more-or-less involuntary absorption of populations under expanding alien rule, the continued domination at a distance of the spaces and conditions of other's everyday lives, the extraction and exportation of material resources from subjugated peripheries to conquering cores, and the means through which these programs are legitimized. Imperialism is all of these things in varying and complex articulations, at different times and in different places, the here and now included.

Further Reading:

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