EMPIRE: RISES, FALLS, RETURNS, AND DIVERGENCES

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Over the past decade, a veritable outpouring of monographs, comparative studies, surveys, and essays have deluged the field of «empire». The production is accelerating at a dizzying pace and shows no signs of relenting. Some books have been fruits of years of research by academics with a keen sense of topicality, while others consist of reflections of seasoned scholars, who, drawing on decades of experience, have taken advantage of the boom. Provocative bestselling works have appeared, timed with television series.[1] As many have observed, social science's preoccupation with «globalization» in the 1990s has been replaced by «empire» during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This review essay will try to get a hold on this ballooning field by focusing on the «imperial re-turn», large histories that have revisited geo-political, economic, and ecological questions such as the rise of the west, the morality of imperial rule, and the costs and benefits of empire. Whether the United States is an empire or not, and what sort of empire it is, represents a new frontier in the field. The focus of this review article will be on the British and North American academy where debates have been particularly lively and divisive.

From «Imperial Turn» to «Imperial Return»

Much of the literature on empire appearing in the last decade or so represents a challenge to a dominant approach that has been in vogue since the 1980s. The field broadly known as «colonial studies» has been concerned with the construction and exercise of power in imperial spaces. This was, in turn, a reaction against traditional histories that almost exclusively featured metropolitan actors. It was also a methodological revision of materialistic (Marxist) approaches of the 1960s and 1970s,

1. Niall Fergusson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); and *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004). These books were designed to appear in tandem with the television series *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (UK Channel Four, January-February, 2003), and *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (UK Channel Four, June-July 2004).

which were preoccupied with exposing enduring relationships of economic dependency, ignored meaningful but subtle forms of everyday political dissent, boiled oppression down into the Manichean distinction between colonizers and colonized, and airbrushed middling actors out of the picture. The inspiration behind colonial studies –a cross-disciplinary field combining history, anthropology, and literature– came from leftist theorists of the postwar, who influenced scholars of the generation of 1968, who in turn spawned a new generation of graduate students who staff history departments in the United States today.[2] Considered revisionist in its day, colonial studies is now facing a re-revisionist critique.

Before addressing this critique, it is helpful to begin by summarizing the most salient characteristics of the colonial studies paradigm. Although the theorists who inspired the field are well-known, their names and theories are worth repeating: Franz Fanon theorized that colonialism not only left behind economic relationships of dependency but psychological feelings of inferiority among Africans who were brought up in a world in which they were felt conscious about their physical appearance, habits, family customs, and even smell. Simone De Beauvoir convincingly showed how hegemonic male, capitalist discourse stigmatized women –and by implication those who were not male, white, and heterosexual– as Hegelian «others». Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) analyzed how pioneering nineteenth-century British scholars endowed the stereotype of slothful, exotic, corrupt, and despotic «Orientals» with scientific currency. Michel Foucault's work on sexuality and «biopower», paired with his critique of the Enlightenment, was refashioned to explain how minds and bodies were ordered in colonies. The Subaltern Studies movement inveighed against liberal and Marxist historical traditions; infused with a Whig idea progress and Western European patterns of development, histories of colonialism (dependent on the archives of governing authorities) were said to come clothed in the garments of colonialism itself.[3] These thinkers stressed that decolonization had not removed the shackles of empire. Legacies remained. Thus interpreted, colonial studies became infused by «postcolonial theory», an inter-disciplinary body of critical thought that sought to break down binary oppositions between colony and metropole, between colonizers and colonized, between colonialism and decolonization, in order to write a new global history of power.[4]

2. This story has been told nicely by Frederick Cooper, «The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Colonial Studies» in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 33-58.

3. This canonical literature is well known. Since multiple editions and translations are easily available, I only list titles (in English) and the dates of original publication: Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949); Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988). For the reinterpretation of Foucault in colonial settings, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and* the *Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

4. There have been various efforts to define the post-colonial. The clearest is Stuart Hall, «When Was "The Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit», in *The Post-Colonial Question, Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 242-60.

Inspired by these authors and a handful others, scholars engaged in a project that was explicitly political. The dominant line of scholarship set about to uncover and hence «deconstruct» analytical categories of race, gender, nation, and class, reified in colonial times and persistent in the postcolonial world. Categories were not innate but historically contingent, dependent on numerous factors including: patterns of migration and settlement; ecology, geography, and germs; forms of property ownership; trade and investment; the presence of slavery and other types of forced or coerced labor; the nature of colonial government; family and sexual policies of companies and states; the role of missionary groups and charitable associations; and, as is obvious, the societal and cultural practices, strategies, and responses of the colonized themselves. The construction of racial and gender relationships –and hence power– was so different in say Portuguese Brazil from the British Cape Colony that it was necessary to undertake in-depth research into and –to borrow the expression of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz– produce «thick descriptions» of diverse colonial dynamics. This opened the field up wide. Colonial studies possessed a strong theoretical backbone –the exercise of power through cultural processes. This allowed for fruitful comparisons. However, individual monographs showed that various peoples (Europeans, creoles, *mestizos*, slaves, natives, and others) in multiple colonial settings possessed multifarious experiences, perspectives, and *mentalités*.[5] In this way, overlapping and intersecting trends replaced the grand imperial narrative. In the words of one leading practitioner of Subaltern Studies, the goal was to turn the grand narrative into one of many «provincial» narratives –that of Europe– which existed side by side, along with others, in a complex world.[6]

Another line of scholarship focused on how imperialism impacted metropolitan societies and vice-versa. As many authors have shown, liberalism and republicanism, from their inceptions, coexisted in the minds of men with Montesquieu's distinction between the constitutionalist West and the despotic Orient in addition to enlightenment conceptions of the scientific superiority of the «white» race over the «black» and «yellow» ones. In colonial settings, European powers transformed and secularized the doctrine of «Indian rights», first articulated by the sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan, Bartolomé de las Casas. The goal to bring god, technology, law, property, and discipline to the pagan and unconverted became known to the French as a «civilizing mission» and

5. It would be impossible to even begin to summarize this vast literature: For a representative collection of reprinted essays from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s accompanied with an insightful introductory bibliographical essay, see Frederick Cooper and Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For an overview of essays on gender, see Julie Clancy Smith and Frances Gouda eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997); and Philippa Levine ed., *Gender and Empire* in *Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Spain has been left out of the collected volumes. See Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and John M. Nieto-Phillips, *Interpreting Spanish Colonialism: Empires, Nations, and Legends* (Albaquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Though and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

to the British as the «White Man's Burden». The confluence of diverse and contradictory ideological strands allowed categories of inclusion and exclusion to worm their way into and poison doctrinal conceptions of liberty and equality in colonial spheres. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, liberalism itself was on the retreat. Eugenics, Malthusianism, and social Darwinism were, at least partially, products of imperial experiences that boomeranged back on Europe, altering history and determining the fate of millions.[7]

Taken as a whole, colonial studies, with its Subaltern and postcolonial glosses, has enjoyed immense success. One scholar claimed that its practitioners had revived «a field that had once seemed likely to disappear with the last vestiges of colonial empires themselves».[8] Frankly showing her cards, another leading scholar of gender and the domestic effects of colonialism defined what she called the «imperial turn» as «the accelerated attention to the impact of histories of imperialism on metropolitan societies in the wake of decolonization, pre– and post-1968 racial struggle and feminism in the last quarter century».[9] There were of course dissenters within the field. Many lamented that the history of the non-western world had been infected by postcolonial theory to such an extent that scholars had given up field studies in the archives of Asia and Africa for the libraries of London and Paris, had lost interest in the history of much of the world before colonization, had extemporaneously injected campus «identity politics» into the past, had effectively abandoned the social history of subaltern classes while claiming otherwise, had hijacked the field colonialism in order to pursue the ulterior critique of «Hegelian» western philosophical discourse, and had paradoxically inserted «culturalism» back into the study of non-western people.[10] Still, such voices were considered to be the backlash of traditional historians out of synch with changing times, or the product of flagrantly ahistorical readings coming from the discipline of literature.

All the same, over the past decades such voices have found echo. One line of attack

7. This literature is vast. The latest words in English include: Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Uda Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Catherine Hall, *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Jeanne Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For the latest work on Las Casas, see Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

8. Woodruff D. Smith, Review of Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 28, n. 4 (spring 1998), 648-49.

9. Antoinette Burton, «Introduction: On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation», in *After the Imperial Turn* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

10. For these critiques, see Ann McClintock, «The Angle of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Postcolonial"» *Social Text*, 31-32 (1992), 84-98; Ella Shohat, «Notes on the Post-Colonial», *Social Text*, 31-32 (1992), 99-113; Sumit Sankar, *Writing Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82-108; A. Dirlik, «The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism», *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1992), 328-56; and Richard M. Eaton, «(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India», *Journal of World History*, 11, n. 1 (2000), 57-78.

has been to reassert old generalizations, reformulating them to overcome the postcolonial assault on traditional historiography. This has been the strategy of David Landes whose *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998) is a sweeping and polemical study that sets out to reestablish old truths, or in his words, the continued validity of «modernization theory». Among his targets, the author takes aim at Edward Said's *Orientalism*. To Landes, the late Said and his followers tout an unalloyed political agenda, which he labels as «polemical and anti-scientific».[11] Landes claims that pro Israeli scholars of the mid-east are labeled as «Orientalist», while supporters of the Palestinian cause are deemed to have heroically shed centuries of ingrained prejudice. He also contends that Said erroneously interpreted the significance of Orientalism in nineteenth-century Britain. That this discipline flourished in Britain and much of Europe, while Confucian, Hindu, and Moslem scholars were indifferent to Western culture and technology, was proof positive that the West was committed to scientific inquiry while the East was not. To the author, stereotypes were based on cultural generalizations, which though pejorative were not necessarily false. To be sure, there is much truth to the fact that eighteenth– and nineteenth-century emperors of eastern empires –the Ottomans, the Qing and the Mughals– were despotic leaders of corrupt imperial bureaucracies who often persecuted domestic capitalists seen to threaten their precarious and shrinking hegemonies. To Landes, the rise of the west beginning in the fifteenth century was due to the usual suspects: technological innovation, science, property rights, capitalism, and imperialism. The superiority of western –Protestant– culture was the engine that drove innovation: «If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference. (Here Max Weber was right on)».[12]

Another line of attack has come from scholars who have delved into cultural sources in order to challenge postcolonial theorists on their own turf. In these academic wars, the nature of the British Empire has been the subject of intense controversy. In *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (2001), David Cannadine –an expert on the English aristocracy– has accused Edward Said and his followers of viewing the empire solely though the prism of «otherness», and, as many have done, for «writing in a tortured prose that is often difficult to understand». [13] To Cannadine, British rule was not a reflection, nor did it feed the creation, of racial stereotype. He argues that even in the early twentieth century, the Empire rested upon what he calls a «pre-Enlightenment» conception of society, in which status and hierarchy was more important than race. The Empire was a repository for the gentry who found comfort in the traditional organizations of native societies they encountered in east Asia and Africa. Nostalgic of a disappearing feudal order of the English countryside, they filled the empire with

11. David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: Norton, 1998), 164.

12. *Ibid.*, 516. The parenthetical comments are the author's.

13. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (London: Penguin Press, 2001), VI, XIX.

spectacle and flummery, while nestling up to native princes, shahs, nawabs, and nizams in the way that European aristocracies had once shown a mutual, though at times grudging, admiration for one another. Cannadine has been criticized –his is in empire of governance rather than commerce; rulers rather than capitalists; ritual rather than wars[14] Unfortunate phrases such as «When the English initially contemplated Native Americans, they saw them as social equals rather than inferiors»[15] spell trouble. Nonetheless, the book does pose a challenge to those scholars who, swamped in theory, have portrayed «empire» as a bourgeois monolith that built modern racial categories.

In his *Absent Minded Imperialists* (2004), Bernard Porter performs a similar task in the domestic setting by delving into to novels, textbooks, music halls, and newspapers. His goal is to contextualize, and hence dilute, references to empire within the cultural milieu in which they appeared. He accuses postcolonial scholars of stringing together isolated references to give a false impression of a continued presence of «empire» in British domestic life, and of overblowing the influence of a few Victorian novels. He criticizes «the proliferation of imperial readings of British nineteenth- and twentieth-century society and culture» which have responded to «fashions» and «bandwagons». By «looking through distorted lenses», historians steeped in culture and literature have found things «that are not there»[16] Like Cannadine, Porter stresses that Empire was a gentleman's affair; working and middle classes were disinterested and unenthused. Echoing the theories of Robinson and Gallagher, he agues that the empire had little impact on public opinion. This is why poor government policies, corrupt business practices, and terrible atrocities could go unpunished.[17] Indeed, until the Suez Crisis of 1956, not a single government fell because of a colonial debacle. Racism abounded, but to Porter, empire was not necessarily the culprit. After all, as he observes, «Some of the most blatant examples of deadly ethnic prejudice, especially in recent times, have been found in small and manifestly non-expansionist countries».[18]

A more brazen attack on colonial studies has come from the pen of Niall Ferguson.

14. Cannadine's book caused such indignation that an entire issue of the *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* was dedicated to tearing it apart. As it looks now, *Ornamentalism* is likely to be regarded as a fine account of imperial pageantry, but the extent to which ritual, or relations between governors and native elite, can be said to characterize imperial power is likely to be challenged by even those who are critical of postcolonial studies. See *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, v. 3, n. 1 (spring 2002).

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: What the British Really Thought about Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Porter is arguing against what he termed the Mackenzie school. See John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of Brtiitsh Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984); John MacKenzie ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1986); Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); and Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and the Colony in the English Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

17. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2d. Ed. (London: MacMillan, 1981). Robinson and Gallagher's argument is slightly different than Porter's. They argue that the British government worked hard to keep imperial affairs shielded from the public eye, while Porter stresses that the public was not very interested anyhow.

18. Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 314.

Empire: The Rise and Demise of a British World Order (2002) is a return to grand romantic history, which would have been enjoyed by imperialists such as Winston Churchill or Rudyard Kipling (both of whom come out quite well in the book). If Cannadine's vision of empire is adorned with cocked hats, plumed feathers, gold-laced uniforms, and ceremonial swords, Ferguson's smacks of pith helmets, jodhpurs, khaki shorts, and maxim guns. In an attempt to be evenhanded, Ferguson concedes that the road to empire was paved with violence. Alternating his prose between moral outrage and narrative relish, he acknowledges and recounts the repressions following the Indian Mutiny (1857) and the Jamaican Rebellion (1865), the Omdurman Massacre of the Sudan (1898), the Amritsar Massacre (1919), and other cases. He might also have added the tortures and hangings in Kenya in the 1950s as well as other war crimes committed in Africa and southeast Asia during decolonization. All the same, he emphasizes that (if we ignore the slave trade), modern Britain never committed brutalities on the scale of the Italians in Ethiopia in 1936, the Japanese in Manchuria in 1939, or the Germans eastern Europe during the Second World War. If it was not for Britain and its armies recruited throughout the empire, he argues, either one of the two world wars could have turned out differently, and imperial powers such as Germany, Italy and Japan could have forged a fateful new world order. Posing the question of whether the British Empire was a «good» or «bad» thing, he confidently answers in the affirmative. When economic development is taken into account, the balance sheet is positive.

Ferguson revels in throwing critical readings of culture back in historians's faces. To take one revealing example, historians of gender have paid much attention to the transformation of sexual policies that accompanied the replacement of the British, French, and Dutch East Indian Companies by state structures. In a nutshell, the companies encouraged single men to emigrate to the colonies where they would find wives-housekeepers, spawn mixed-race families, and «go native» so to speak; bachelors were recruited as employees, given that married men commanded higher salaries since they needed to maintain European families in accordance with metropolitan standards. With time, however, racial logic eventually prevailed over economic logic. The British, Dutch, and French states changed tact and, upon taking over the mandates of the companies, preferred to employ married men who would emigrate with their families in order to draw a bright color line between colonizers and colonized.[19] For his part, Ferguson ignores this interesting literature, choosing to wax nostalgic (and wane sexist) about the halcyon days when «the British themselves... took pleasure in being orientalized». For example, he cites the letters of a British bachelor married to Indian woman who found his wife so «amusingly, playful, so anxious to oblige». Another voyeuristic employee, upon observing native women bathing, wrote «the bust is often of the finest proportions of ancient statuary and when seen through the thin veil of flowing muslin as the graceful Hindu female ascends from her morning ablution in the Ganges is

19. See Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal *Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

a subject well worth the labour of the poet or artist». To top it off, Ferguson then depicts these attitudes as contributing to the creation of an «atmosphere of mutual tolerance».[20]

It is unfair to both Cannadine and Porter to group them together with Ferguson, since the former have made weighty scholarly contributions based on painstaking research. Ferguson's genius, in contrast, lies in his ability to provoke. To be sure, Cannadine's description of the affinities between the British upper classes and native elites –his emphasis on «sameness» rather than «otherness»– make a greater contribution to the literature than Ferguson's examples of mutual tolerance. As we shall see, there are some challenging features in Ferguson's *ouvre,* but culture is not one of them. These reservations aside, these three authors throw into question the monolithic depiction of empire as a place for oppression and racial categorization. Could not the British Empire –and other empires– represent something else? Creating an «atmosphere of mutual tolerance» might go too far, but is the imperial balance sheet more balanced? Put in cynical terms, given the atrocities and genocidal records of nation states, shouldn't empire be regarded as merely one of various alternative political structures with the potential for good and bad, for economic development in addition to violence, for racial exclusion as well as cultural interchange? Is the historian Charles Maier correct when he writes, «nations are better at equality, empires at tolerance»?[21] These questions point to a major methodological shift. «Empire» no longer solely implies a relationship of subordination, the mere mention of which comes laden with coats of moral condemnation. Instead, it is being increasingly regarded as a category of analysis or a political system in world history, which, like any other, needs to be examined critically.

Colonial studies has not only come under attack by conservative champions of the Anglo-Saxon world such as Ferguson and Landes, or «mainstream» historians such as Porter and Cannadine, but even scholars from the neo-Marxist academic left have joined the chorus. In their much-vaunted *Empire* (2000) the literary theorist Michael Hardt and the political theorist Antoni Negri have questioned the utility of continuing to expose ingrained value judgments by deconstructing binary codes that serve to «other» and «Orientalize» To these authors, global capitalism has outflanked its critics by incorporated postmodern discourse through marketing, advertising, networking, the internet, and other mechanisms. States and markets have embraced difference, encouraged blending, de-stigmatized sexuality, and even found room for fetishes.[22] As we shall later explain, Hardt and Negri call for a revival of a critique of empire along the materialist lines of liberals and Marxists such as Hobson and Lenin (rather than the post-materialist ones of Fanon and Said).[23] From the perspective of the historian, *Empire*

20. Ferguson, *Empire*, 111.

21. Charles Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 29.

22. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 124-134.

23. For these classic critiques, see J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1902); Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, reprint ed. (New York: International, 1969; original ed., 1916).

is utterly void of merit. One scholar has labeled it «the world according to me».[24] But its enormous popularity within many academic circles is revealing. The political priorities of the generation of 1968 are not the same as those of the new academic left concerned with globalization, genocide, migration, and the growing gap between rich and poor and between North and South. The authors offer no viable research agenda. But they do point out that continuing to bang on about race, culture, gender, and empire is starting to yield –like any well-established field– diminishing returns.

From «The Rise of the West» to the «Great Divergence»

At the same time that practitioners of colonial studies and their critics have been at loggerheads over the meaning of the British Empire, a parallel though related development has occurred. Innovative work on the «rise of the west» and comparative themes in world history has shifted attention away from the preoccupation with culture and returned to political, economic, and ecological questions. Despite the fact that scholars associated with this approach employ a different methodology than those of colonial studies, the two can be read as compatible. Many economic studies have also challenged narratives of progress that implicitly distinguished between a «backward» East and a modern «West». However, rather than striving to expose the discriminatory cultural assumptions that lay behind «modernization theory», many scholars have embraced this theory while stripping it of its prejudicial robes. These studies no longer view property rights, science, technology, and capitalism as distinguishing West from East, at least not to the extent as previously thought.[25] Instead, such approaches shift attention to geography, ecology, centuries-long economic cycles, and even serendipity. Empire, which had formally been seen as a *consequence* of the rise of the West is now seen as a chief *cause*.

On the vanguard of the new assessment are historians of China. By employing comparative methods, they have isolated those factors that distinguished Europe from China and hence stand out as prime candidates for explaining the different paths of East and West. One of the features of this literature is that the traditional date of the «rise of the west» has been moved from 1500 to 1800. As such, the western association with «modernity» is now regarded as a passing occurrence –which began two centuries ago and is arguably winding to an end– rather than as an event that commenced one-half a millennium ago and was destined to culminate in the «end of history».[26] Andre Gunder

24. Frederick Cooper, «Empire Multiplied. A Review Essay», *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2004): 247-272 (249).

25. The classics of this literature (aside from Weber) are William McNeil, *The Rise of the* West (Chicago: 1967); Douglass North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); and E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

26. Francis Fukayama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Frank *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) introduced this new way of looking at things by reasoning that the rise of the West was really no more than the decline of the East.[27] The central thesis is that China's centuries of unparalleled economic growth created vast populations and, by extension, a cheap labor force. With cheap labor, he argues, there was no incentive for technological advance, a circumstance that caused relative decline compared to the western tiger economies, which began to take off in the late eighteenth century. The fortuitous circumstance of China's decline or stagnation, then, allowed the backward West to take advantage of Eastern successes through colonization and through the equally fortuitous circumstance that Europe possessed superior gunboats. Whether China was really on an even economic playing field around 1800 is an ongoing debate, but he convincingly shows that the grandiose «European Miracle» –with all its religious and racial accoutrements (the Protestant Ethic, the White Man's Burden)– may have been no more than a long economic cycle. In this way, the image of a despotic and backward East no longer appears as an everlasting ethnic condition but rather a recognizable and utterly banal discourse of cultural superiority that emerged out of a passing, albeit lengthy, economic reality.

Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the World Economy* (2000) builds on this premise, but is more successful at isolating specific factors that led to the «rise». Like Frank, he concludes that Europe had no significant economic advantage over China around 1800. Two factors, then, account for the «Great Divergence» –industrial technology and empire. With respect to the former, Pomeranz contends that industrial breakthrough was the result of a particularly fortunate geological circumstance present in northern England: Coal deposits were located in close proximity to a region with vibrant commerce that housed innovative communities of technically skilled artisans who had developed calibration techniques by producing clocks, watches, telescopes, eyeglasses, and similar inventions. In China, in contrast, the northern coalfields were a long way from the lower Yangtzee valley, the center of commerce and invention. Pomeranz calls this «geographical good luck». He writes: «If it had been Europe that faced a huge geographical difference between its coal and its concentrations of mechanically skilled people, and China that had had only a small distance to bridge, it is possible that the results in either place might have been vastly different; certainly the history of China's earlier coal/iron complex suggests as much».[28] In other words, if Europe's coal fields had been located in Hungary and China's in the Yangtzee, scholars may have talked about the Confucian –rather than the Protestant– ethic.

The importance he subscribes to empire proves most intriguing. Here, he piggybacks on the pioneering work of E. A. Wrigley who argued that coal was central to

27. Andre Gunther Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

28. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 66, 68.

English development, since, in the absence of coal, the country would have needed fifteen-million additional acres of forest in order to find the timber to power the machines that made industrialization take-off possible in 1830. The argument is that since Britain did not have these acres, or easy access to them through traditional trading routes, the impact of the steam engine would not have been so great.[29] Building on this premise, Pomeranz adds other land-saving materials, all of which came from the colonies: sugar (a product that saved land that would have otherwise had to be used to produce wheat, Europe's chief native source of calories) and cotton (a product that saved land that would have otherwise been needed for wool and hemp). Together with timber, also coming from the colonies, these raw materials accounted for an additional twenty-five to thirty thousand «ghost acres». These provided the «ecological windfall» that allowed industry to take off in Britain around 1830. In addition to the supply of raw materials, the empire stimulated the economy in other ways. It absorbed immigrants easing Malthusian pressures. Spain's silver mines in Peru and Mexico established a universal currency, greasing the wheels of commerce for all of Europe. Chinese and Indians also preferred silver as a material of exchange, which allowed the West to trade it for other goods (gold, copper, and luxury goods –porcelain, spices, silk).

Like that of technological breakthrough, his story of empire is also one of good fortune. Conquest would have been quite difficult, if not impossible, if the Europeans did not possess an epidemiological «advantage» over native Americans who died off when exposed to «white man's diseases»: smallpox, measles, yellow fever, diphtheria, typhus, yaws, tuberculosis.[30] The sugar and cotton plantation economy in the Caribbean might not have come into being had not western Africans already developed an internal slave trade before the Portuguese first landed on the coast in the fifteenth century. This allowed Europeans to jack up demand and import slaves to work plantations. Contrast this to China, whose ships plied the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century but never found either slaves or the New World's «rivers of gold», to borrow Columbus' expression. Instead, China confronted a free –rather than a forced– labor periphery. The teams of Chinese merchants who settled in ports throughout East Asia shared space with native populations who did not die upon contact. Pomeranz shows that both China and Japan were densely populated and in 1800 had a similar (Malthusian) need for the land-saving devices of Europe, but Asia did not have the same geographical good luck and epidemiological advantage. This led to ecological decline, as the only alternative was to

29. E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance, and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 276. Pomeranz, for his part, adds that an up-to-date estimate would put this figure at 21 million «ghost acres». Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 276.

30. Incidentally, the reason why European's developed resistance to these diseases is also a story of geographic good luck. In particular, societies of the Fertile Crescent were fortunate to live among animals that were easily domesticated (horses, cows, sheep) while those of other parts of the world were not so fortunate. The domestication of animals led to sedentary societies based on farming. Humans who shared ecological space with domesticated animals grew resistant to disease more quickly than those who remained in hunter-gatherer societies. See Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (London: Cape, 1997).

work populations harder, which in turn made them vulnerable to climate and cold. Europe, in contrast, was able to avoid this decline, chiefly through industry and empire.

Some of Pomeranz's conclusions have been subject to critique. The claim that China and Europe were in similar economic shape in 1800 is not universally accepted. Even if they were, could they not have been at opposite ends of a curve, heading in different directions? That Europe's scientific revolution did not lead to a significant comparative economic advantage over the East grates against intellectual instinct. Wasn't it science that allowed Europeans to exploit its epidemiological advantage? But, what is clear, is that he closes the debate on the costs and benefits of empire. In so far as a consensus had been reached, it leaned toward the interpretation that investors and entrepreneurs in the colonies profited immensely and those in the metropole did so modestly, but the population as a whole reaped few benefits.[31] However, by shifting the debate to ecology –from Smith to Malthus– Pomeranz demonstrates that the industrial «revolution» would have been inconceivable, or at least much less intense, without the flow of raw materials from the colonies. This echoes Imanuel Wallerstein and his world-system colleagues who have long argued that the extraction of raw materials from a forced labor periphery was the key to European ascendancy, but, since such raw materials never counted for a large portion of the overall economy, such scholars had been criticized for privileging intuition over empirical data.[32] By taking ecology into account, the costs and benefits of empire are simply incalculable. This is because counterfactuals used to compare the benefits to society if there had been no empire –if trade and investment had remained confined to Europe– are ludicrous because the population densities and social structure of industrialized Europe itself could not have come into being without empire. Europe simply did not have the acres to produce the energy and the materials needed to drive and feed machines, and to nourish the workers who operated them. Of course, this does not mean that economic studies are ill-conceived– it is important to locate who profited from, and who paid the taxes to maintain, empires. But it is incorrect to contend that imperialism was a patriotic rather than an economic boon.

An important addition to the «Great Divergence» thesis has appeared in Mike Davis's, *Late Victorian Holocausts, El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*

31. Of course, this generalization needs to be adjusted to time and place. For the argument that the need for higher returns on investment stimulated imperialism, see Michael Edelstein, *Overseas Investment in the Age of High Imperialism: Great Britain, 1850 to* 1914 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For the argument that the empire benefited the upper but not the middle classes, see Lance E. Davis and Robert A. Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Economics of British Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); For the argument that the costs outweighed the benefits, see Patrick O'Brein, «The Costs and Benefits of British Imperialism, 1846-1914», *Past & Present* 120 (August 1988), 163-200. The latest contribution argues that the economic benefits of trade and investment were negligible and in fact prejudicial to persons in the metropole, but were reaped by elites and oligarchies on the spot. See Bartolomé Yun Casillas, *Marte contra Minerva: El precio del imperio español, 1450-1600* (Barcelona, 2004); and Avner Offer, «Costs and Benefits, Prosperity, and Security, 1870-1914», in Andrew Porter ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, v. 3, *The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 690-711.

32. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974-1989).

(2001). In this book, Davis examines a series of famines, caused by extreme oscillations in air mass and ocean temperature in the Pacific Basin, known as El Niño. These famines tore through India, northern China, parts of Africa, Brazil, and much of Southeast Asia, and may have been responsible for some thirty to fifty million deaths from the mid 1870s to the turn of the twentieth century. Building on classic underdevelopment theory but giving it an ecological twist, he argues that the construction of the railroads and the integration of India and other colonies into a worldwide capitalist economy destroyed local forms of famine prevention.[33] As a result, tens of millions died during the famines, while grain was being exported to the west. In the meanwhile, colonial administrators coldly applied the theories of Adam Smith (mixing them with those of Malthus) and lectured subjects on the inadequacies of poor relief. Even countries that were not colonized, such as China, had to dedicate its resources to protecting its borders to prevent colonization rather than trying to alleviate the effects of famine in the north, as it had effectively done in a previous El Niño episode in the eighteenth century. Countries like Brazil, dependent on the British financing of the public debt, and virtually part of Britain's informal free-trade empire, were simply without the resources to combat famine. To Davis, the famines caused the second phase of the Great Divergence. They irreversibly accentuated the differences between a consumptive west and an undernourished East, opened the door to the aggressive gunboat and machine-gun imperialism of the era of the Berlin Congress (1884-85), and laid the foundation for the enormous differences of wealth between the first and Third World.

Under this perspective, it is clear that that empire –if not always as profitable a venture as many metropolitan traders and investors would have liked– allowed western economies to experience spectacular economic growth at the expense of what was to become the Third World. A vivid example of the benefits that could be reaped from informal (and later formal) empire is the oft-told story of how French and British support of Mehmet Ali's quasi-independent state of Egypt stimulated the development of the Nile delta into a huge cotton field destined for European looms by the mid nineteenth century. To state the obvious, without foreign backing, Ali would not have been able to carve out his autonomous polity within the Ottoman empire. Without the autonomous polity, the development of cotton fields that flowed west (instead of east) would have been unlikely. Although it may be possible to calculate returns that companies made through the Egyptian cotton trade and compare them with alternative opportunities, it is simply impossible to calculate the extent to which Egyptian –or Indian– cotton had on lowering worldwide cotton prices (or maintaining them at an accessible level during the American Civil War). Beyond cotton, it impossible to calculate the benefit of maintaining the overland route to Indian open or to calculate the benefits derived from the construction of the Suez Canal. On the eve of Gladstone's

33. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 1991). For the old underdevelopment version of this thesis, see A. J. Latham, *The International Economy and the Undeveloped, 1865-1914* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1978).

invasion of Egypt in 1882, some thirteen percent of British trade went through the Canal.

With the risk of beating a dead horse, a similar analogy to Egyptian and Indian cotton in the nineteenth century is Middle-Eastern oil in the twentieth. Again, the stories are well known. For example, Britain joined the two protectorates of Bagdad and Basra into the country of Iraq, and turned over control to the Hashemite dynasty in 1921. By so doing, the converted their mandate from «direct» to «indirect rule». As part of the arrangement, King Faisal recognized British ownership over Iraq's oil wells and welcomed the presence of troops. Another variation of this theme occurred after World War II when the Americans and British sponsored the ascension (or coup) of the Shah of Iran in exchange for continued control of much of the country's oil, which had been threatened by the Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq who had promised to nationalize the country's wells. Another variation of the script also played out on the Arabian Peninsula. Like the case of cotton, it is simply impossible to quantify the enormous benefits that control over the region's oil brought. It is not enough to compare returns on oil investments to other possible outlets. The macroeconomic savings of cheap energy are incalculable. To take the analysis one-step further, who can compute the benefits of the «open-door» policy imposed on China following the Opium Wars? Who can calculate the value of Britain's «free-trade» or «informal» empire of the nineteenth century?

This tangent on why counterfactuals cannot be used to calculate costs and benefits of empire has taken us somewhat a field of the rise of the west. Returning to and restating Pomeranz's argument with regard to empire, Europe was geographically privileged to have access to the Atlantic, which, once industrialization was afoot, bore greater fruits than the Indian or Pacific. Other authors have emphasized that geographical advantages were not only limited to oceans but to land. This thesis is not new, but it is worth reviewing since it has served as a baseline for further work. Synthesizing much comparative literature, Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) posited that the «European Miracle» was due to the fact that its mountain ranges, rivers, and forests protected the «continent» from the Mongol Empire and in fact from any potential invader. In contrast, large and broad fertile planes around the Yellow, Yangzee, or Ganges Rivers were more easily conquered, and, once they were, gave rise to centralized «hydraulic empires».[34] As the argument goes, geographical diversity led to political fissure, which during the medieval period put Europe at a disadvantage compared to the East. In the long run, however, fragmentation bred competition between states, which gave rise to an arms race and the development of technologically sophisticated fortresses, guns, ships, and canons needed to protect borders and conquer new frontiers. In contrast, the Ming and Mughal empires –two

34. That hydraulic societies led to despotism is the classic thesis of Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). It has been revived in Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 27-28.

empires that emerged out of the collapse of the Mongol khanates– had the «bad fortune» of controlling vast areas without external threats, a status that led to bureaucratic sluggishness, corruption, and a laxity in developing military technologies.[35]

In *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (2005), C.A. Bayly builds on the thesis that competition between states is a central element to understanding the Great Divergence. He explains that seventeenth-century ideological and religious wars between «medium-size» states made Europeans simply «better at killing people» than others.[36] Competition was not limited to European theatres: in the Caribbean, interstate rivalries over islands destined for sugar production gave incentive for the creation of large navies, which later became the chief tool used to conquer and colonize much of southeast Asia. Interstate competition on the continent and in the Atlantic was one of the chief causes of more than one-hundred years of intermittent warfare between Britain and France, which in turn provoked acute fiscal problems for each state. Here, the story is well known. Copying Dutch financial techniques, the British began floating government bonds, which were bought by citizens who took patriotic pride in helping fund the «national debt». Although the French state collapsed in 1789, it was reconstituted as a *machine de guerre*. The Revolution produced the first citizen armies, which, glued together with nationalist zeal, dwarfed the size of previous professional ones, and under the command of Bonaparte, briefly conquered the largest empire on the continent since Rome. When the dust had cleared, the devastating military superiority of Europe over the rest of the world was not only because scientific advances had made Europeans «better at killing people» but also because all countries had adopted mechanisms for sponsoring enormous military and colonial ventures without falling victim to the «fiscal-military conundrum».[37] In functionalist terms, in order to convince ordinary men and women to buy bonds, pay taxes, and have their sons drafted into citizens armies, the trade-off was representative assemblies. States, in incessant competition with one another, borrowed each others' best practices –Spanish conquest and colonization, Dutch finance, British constitutionalism and plantations, French nationalism, popular sovereignty, and citizens' armies, to name but a few.

Geography has also loomed large in the most comprehensive comparative history of empire to date –John Elliott's *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (2006).[38] Just as Sinologists have used comparisons with China to shed light on what made Europe distinctive, this scholar of early modern Hispanism has

35. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict* (New York: Vintage, 1987). A version of this argument is also repeated in Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 17-44.

36. C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*: Global *Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 62.

37. As Bayly himself recognizes, his thesis is heavily reliant on Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

38. J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

performed a similar task with respect to Spain and Britain. In much the same way as historians of China have sought to dispel the myth of a backward Orient, Elliott discredits a stereotype invoked to explain the superiority of northern over southern Europe. This was (and is) the Black Legend, the belief that Spanish and southern European people were inherently inferior because of an inherent historical or even racial predisposition towards war and cruelty and because Catholic superstition stultified scientific innovation and the spread of literacy. In the colonial sphere, the Black Legend has been counterposed to the Protestant Ethic: The «hardworking» and «industrious» British were said to have prepared North America for the challenges of modernity, while the «slothful» and «consumptive» Spanish left South America condemned to impoverishment.[39] In order to demonstrate the error of this assumption, Elliott has written a masterful book.

The book opens with two fortuitous circumstances: First, Spain stumbled upon Mexico in 1519 and encountered a sophisticated centralized tribute-collecting civilization that possessed dizzying quantities of silver and gold. Second, around a century later, the British established their first colony in Jamestown and encountered native populations with significantly fewer riches. At the end of the book, Elliott poses the hypothetical of what might have occurred if Henry VII had been willing to sponsor Columbus's voyage and Englishmen had stumbled upon Inca, Mayan, and Aztec civilizations and hence Mexican and Peruvian sliver? He asks whether England would have developed a centralized bureaucratic structure in order to exploit American resources. Would this have led to the ascendance of an absolutist monarchy financed with American silver and a decline in the influence of parliament as occurred in Spain? This could be taken one step further. Would Henry VIII have converted the country to Protestantism given that the boon to royal coffers would have meant that there was no fiscal need to dissolve the monasteries? In the alternative, without New World Silver, would have Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor been attracted to the Spanish crown? Would have counter-reformation been so strong in Spain or would have Protestantism taken root?[40]

Elliott's point is not to speculate on «what might have been» or to engage in conjecture. He does not go as far as Pomeranz by asserting that the different geographical characteristics of empire was responsible for the «great divergence» of northern and southern Europe, but they was not unrelated either. The purpose of the comparison, and hence the book, is to highlight that the different characteristics of each empire had as much to do with the particularities of each continent –its geography, resources, and native inhabitants– as much as they had to do with the culture and institutions of the colonizing power. Elliott's book is a textured analysis where the

39. For the latest defense of the Black Legend, see Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 153-185, 310-334.

40. These latter speculation appeared in an interesting review of Elliott's book: Fernando Cervantes, «Too Near Madrid», *Times Literary Supplement* (4 August 2006).

dynamics of the colonies as well as the metropoles, in addition to borrowing between the two empires, caused sometimes similar and often different outcomes. Analyzed in this way, the distinction between Britain's «empire of trade» versus Spain's «empire of conquest» was not only due to differences in the policies and customs of the colonizing powers but was also the result of how each country strove to maximize its exploitative potential when confronted with different scenarios. If history is contingent on circumstances, then what civilizations and resources discoverers discovered had unforeseen and gargantuan long-term consequences. Read within the context of other studies, Elliott demonstrates that many of the characteristics associated with the «rise of the west» (which are sometimes equivalent with the rise of Britain), such as commerce, Protestantism, and representative assemblies were not only due to domestic dynamics but imperial ones.

Elliott's counterfactual is reminiscent of another that frequently appears in this literature. This is the question of what would have happened if Ming China had continued its program of exploration, which it had commenced between 1405 and 1431, when it had possessed far superior naval technology, a larger navy, and much larger ships than Europe.[41] China reached as far as East Africa without anything of much value, and in the 1430s a new emperor abandoned maritime exploration and thereafter prohibited the construction of seafaring ships. The query is, then, what would have happened if the Chinese had circled Africa and entered the waters of the Atlantic at a period of time when they had possessed clear naval superiority over Europe? One could even ask what would have happened if this had taken place before the Europeans had built resistance to the Black Death.[42] Recently, the question has been turned around. Rather than seeing the decision to abandon exploration as an enormous blunder, Felipe Fernández-Armesto in *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (2006) argues that China's decision to concentrate on its continental interior culminated in the creation of the great Chinese state; in the meanwhile, the European overseas empires disappeared.[43]

Indeed, it has become somewhat of a sporting game to pose hypothetical scenarios that would have altered imperial histories. Dominic Lieven, in his *Empire: The Russian Empires and its Rivals* (2000) is particularly skilled in this endeavor, demonstrating how the outcomes of wars altered imperial futures. For example, he asks what the world would have looked like if the Confederacy had won the United States Civil War. This emergence of a southern racist state would have likely prevented the emergence of an American hegemon, and created a different and dangerous balance of powers and alliances for the twentieth century. More plausible is the counterfactual that he poses with respect to World War I. He asks how the map of Europe would have been redrawn

41. For this, see Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall*, 6-8; Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty*, 15-28.

42. Here, again Europe was fortunate. It suffered the Black Death in the fourteenth century, perhaps as a consequence of the proximity of the Mongol Empire. It was lucky, however, that the spread of disease was not accompanied by invasion. William McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York: Blackwell, 1977), ch. 4.

43. Felipe Fernández Armesto, *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116-117.

like if Germany had reached a treaty on the western front with Britain and France after having concluded the Peace of Brest-Litovsk with Russia in 1918. The result would likely have been the creation of a large German empire in central Europe and the decline of Russia. Neither Hitler or Stalin would have appeared, and it is unlikely that the Soviet Union would have been able to reconquer the borders of the Tsarist empire.[44]

In Lieven's *Empire*, both geography and serendipity bulk large. Of his many comparisons, the most interesting is between the Russian and Ottoman empires. He contends that both empires were in similar shape during the nineteenth century. Both were Sultanistic-autocratic empires in decline, economically and technologically disadvantaged with respect to the west, incapable of winning wars against great or even small powers. Russia lost to the British and French in Crimea (1854) and then to the Japanese (1905). For its part, the Ottoman Empire witnessed its empire crumble in the Balkans and Egypt. Unable to solve its fiscal-military conundrum, the Public Debt Administration, created in 1881, was foreign controlled and larger than the Finance Ministry. In both empires, the great concentrations of population of the dominant ethnicity lived in under-developed backwaters; in contrast, Russians and Turks were minorities in the richer western dominions of each respective empire. What then accounts for this «great divergence»? For one, Russia was privileged geographically, since it was not threatened in the East and its vast plains and brutal winters provided a good defense against invasion from the west. In contrast, the Ottomans –with Shiite Moslems on the Eastern frontiers– were hemmed in. It has also been posited that Russia's «European» path was due to the fact that it was open to western methods, while the gradual Islamicization of the Ottoman Empire stymied borrowing. In any event, the history of the two empires could have been different if World War I had turned out differently, or if the Allies had launched a stronger and more coordinated attack on Communist Russia following the end of World War I, and so on. The proposition is that geo-politics and war have as much to do with the rise and fall of empires as «internal» factors. In Lieven's account, Russia was a geographically privileged, fortunate, and astute player. Even then, it came quite close to experiencing the same fate of its Ottoman rival.

Where does this leave us? Four observations should be highlighted: First, it is worth repeating that the rise of the west now appears as one of the many cycles in world history, covering a few (still disputed number) of centuries, rather than a phenomenon that culminated in the definitive triumph of modernity. Second, old generalizations have not been disproved as much as improved and endowed with further detail and greater texture. Hence, the vague notion of «nation state», has been shifted to the importance of medium-sized states with domestic bondholders, representative assemblies, and citizen armies; instead of science and technology, specific attention is given to military technology. Property rights and capitalism are no longer deemed to be as distinguishing

44. Dominic Lieven, *The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 55, 58.

as they once were; instead, the capacity of European states to solve fiscal-military conundrums though public debt is considered an epochal innovation. Third, geography, ecology, and serendipity –previously frowned on by historians searching for motor-forces in society and economy– have gained renewed credence. Once thought to be synonymous with ethnic determinism, geography is no longer taboo. Ecological advantages are no longer associated with unchangeable characteristics but help explain why given polities enjoyed advantages during different periods in history. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Europe was geographically blessed, as the Atlantic brought great riches and it avoided El Niño famines. But, this was not the case during the medieval period, when its small states could not muster many resources and when it fell victim to the Black Plague. And it is no longer the case today. Today, the diversity of languages and states is a hindrance to growth. Europe is currently at a disadvantage with respect to more homogeneous polities where trade and investment have fewer transaction costs.

Finally, empire is now at the center of the picture. Conquest and colonization –partially the result of epidemiological and geographic good luck– bore Europe great fruits, allowing it to escape the Malthusian limitation of its own ecology. Empire and interstate competition bred rivalries, sped up best-practice borrowing, spurred innovation, provided essential raw materials needed for industrialization, and caused states to reorganize their bureaucracies, treasuries, navies, and armies. What civilizations a state stumbled upon in the New World and Asia, transformed the political map of Europe itself.

The United States as Empire

The other major historiographical development within the study of empire is the proliferation of books on the United States. If the surging economies of China and India have caused historians to re-examine literature on the rise of the west, the recent wars of the United States –Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003)– have ignited debate over the country's imperial characteristics and pretensions. As is expected, this literature is quite politicized, as various authors have claimed that possession of the lessons of the past should guide future policies. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is no agreement over exactly what such lessons are. Others warn against the political uses of history.

The appearance of a rash of books in a brief time endow them with a repetitive quality. Whether they focus on the particulars of United States expansionism or compare broad trends to those of other empires, they cycle through a rather familiar set of anecdotes, successes, failures, and quotable quotes. Authors cannot resist borrowing from Gibbon who famously stated that a better question of why the Roman Empire fell was why it lasted so long. Thomas Jefferson's reference to the «empire of liberty» makes its way into most accounts. Tocqueville's prophesy that the United States and Russia

were destined to be the great powers of the modern age often features. Always useful is the sardonic comment of the British historian J.R. Seeley who remarked that Britain had «conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind». Few leave out Kipling's poem to McKinley asking him to assume the White Man's Burden. A supposedly revealing quote about America's reluctance to acquire formal colonies occurred when Teddy Roosevelt, upon being asked of his designs on the Dominican Republic, replied that he had «about the same desire to annex it as a gorged boa-constrictor might have to swallow a porcupine wrong-end to». Many authors narrate the spat created when Franklin Roosevelt suggested that the United Nations should be given the right to inspect the British colonies, to which Churchill retorted that they might also want to take a gander at the US South. For the postwar, always useful is De Gaulle's remark that «Western Europe has become, without becoming aware of it, a protectorate of the Americans». He then declared that «It is now necessary to free ourselves of this domination».

The present Bush administration has spawned its own string of bewildering aphorisms that serve as fodder for book introductions and conclusions. In a burst of typical eloquence, Donald Rumsfield declared that Americans «don't do empire». Condoleeza Rice, in a fit of her own absence of mind, once asserted that «America's values are universal». To this ex-Stanford professor of political science and former adviser to the oil company Chevron, the country is «imperial» but does not behave in an «imperialistic» fashion.[45] Richard Haas, director of policy planning in the state department, once called on Americans to «re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power». A senior White House aide reportedly told Bush that «We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality». Vice-president Cheney, a one-time member of the Kazakhstan Oil Advisory Board, sent out a now infamous Christmas card containing a quote from Benjamin Franklin, which read, «And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?» For his part, President Bush has insisted that «We're not an imperial power. We're a liberating power». With such talk going around political circles, historians have not been able to resist the temptation to get into the game.

Describing the United States as an «empire» is a relatively novel development. Previously, only scholars of the left describe the country as such, since the word carried pejorative overtones.[46] However, the recent shift in the study of empire –from a system of exploitation imbued with an ideology of racial or cultural superiority to a regime type in world history– has made the term less problematic. At least within academic literature (as

45. Although ridiculed, there may have been an academic basis to this assertion See Gareth Stedman-Jones, «The History of U.S. Imperialism», in Robin Blackburn ed., *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. Robin Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 207-237.

46. The classic work in this regard was William Appelgate, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament, along with a few thoughts about an alternative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). The most recent work in this genre is the best-selling, Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).

opposed to the mainstream press), the tendency is to regard the United States as an empire. All the same, some scholars add qualifiers indicative of ideological leaning. In support of military intervention and humanitarian nation building in the ex-Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the historian and Canadian Liberal Party politician Michael Ignatieff has called the United States current endeavors as «Empire Lite». A vehement critic of the invasion of Iraq, the historical sociologist Michael Mann has contended that the impossible project of empire-building in the age of the nation-state has created an «incoherent empire» destined for imminent disaster. The liberal political scientist Joseph Nye has reasoned that United States hegemony is dependent upon «soft power». The country is able to impose its will by projecting an image of a «city upon a hill», where economic and political liberty run like young lambs; the industry of culture –television and cinema rather than armies and bureaucrats– are the carriers of this soft culture. [47]

Among the most vehement critics of United States imperial pretensions is Chalmers Johnson, a political specialist on China and Japan. In the *Sorrows of Empire* (2004), he has argued that a network of 725 acknowledged bases, and other unacknowledged ones, constitute a «new kind of military empire –a consumerist Sparta, a warrior culture that flaunts the air-conditioned housing, movie theatres, supermarkets, golf courses, and swimming pools of its legionnaires».[48] Many of these bases –Guantánamo, Guam, Kaiserslautern, Okinawa, Diego García, Camps Doha and Arifjan (Kuwait), Camp Bondsteel (Kosovo), and numerous others– are naked occupations of minute enclaves acquired by the usurpation of private property in the wake of military victory. Others, such as those in central Asia or on the Arabian Peninsula, replicate the familiar scenario of «informal empire» or even «indirect rule» in which domestic dictators have ceded coveted oil contracts to US companies, or guaranteed the free trade and flow of oil, in exchange for personal favors or for military defense against possible aggression. To Johnson, the proliferation of bases around the Persian Gulf over the past three decades are the clearest sign of naked expansionism. The presence of bases in Saudi Arabia was the reason behind what Johnson has termed «blowback», the al-Qaeda attacks on US military and diplomatic targets in East Africa (1998) and Yemen (2000), and against civilian and military targets in New York and Washington (2001).[49] Since bases are not really colonies, however, some authors have preferred to describe the United States as «hegemon», «lone superpower», or «hyperpower».[50]

47. Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003); Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003).

48. Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 23.

49. Johnson providentially coined the term «blowback» before the 11 September 2001 attacks. Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

50. For the distinction between hegemon and empire, see Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 54-59. For a discussion of conflicting terminology, see Niall Ferguson, «Hegemony or Empire», *Foreign Affairs* (September-October, 2003), 154-162.

For their part, historians have seen less need to attach adjectives or find synonyms or euphemisms. It is becoming an accepted view that empires throughout time have had distinguishing characteristics: the United States is just the latest incarnation or pretender. For it would be shortsighted to regard all predecessors (the Greek, the Macedonian, the Roman, the Holy Roman, the Mongol, the Ming, the Mughal, the Russian, the Ottoman, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, the British, etc.) as empires and then carve out a special category for the United States. Even within the American academy itself, the «exceptionalist view» may be on the wane. Thomas Bender, in his *Nations among Nations: America's Place in World History* (2006) depicts the country as an «empire among empires». Paralleling United States to European imperialism, his narrative begins with the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and continues with Manifest Destiny and the subjugation and extermination of native Americans. He then moves to the Spanish American War (1898), the annexation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and Theodore Roosevelt's and Woodrow Wilson's military interventions in the Caribbean and Mexico in the early twentieth century. Expansionism in Asia –from Admiral Perry's opening of Japan in 1854 to the scramble for strategic islands in the Pacific– logically feature.[51] Bender stops in the early twentieth century, but other historians, many mentioned below, have used imperial analogies and comparisons to explain strategies and objectives during the world wars and the Cold War (Korea, Vietnam, the proxy wars of Nixon and Kissinger, etc). Aside from Bender, however, most historians writing on the United States as empire are Europeanists. This might be because exceptionalism still reigns among Americanists, but it is more likely because Europeanists are simply better trained in comparative methods.

If the United States is an empire, the question that follows is what sort of empire is it? A pretender on the rise or one that has seen better days? Charles Maier suggests that the United States might be one in the making. In *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (2006), he is hesitant to endow the United States with full imperial laurels even though its military resources (hard power) and cultural influence (soft power) parallel and even exceed many of the great empires in history. Still, he believes that the United States is not fully there. Aside from the fact that it does not possess formal colonies, Maier stresses that the country has not taken the «populist» –«Bonapartist» or «Ceasarian»– leap in which the executive would subsume a senate-parliament and in which elections would devolve into plebiscites. The transformation from republic to empire should foster the creation of an imperial consciousness that is not yet present. Nonetheless, he does recognize that the country may be on the verge. The deterioration of parliamentary power, the embracing of multiculturalism and immigration, and the call to spread democracy and enforce human rights worldwide through military might (the so-called doctrine of «humanitarian intervention») have imperial overtones. The temptation toward empire, he notes, is great.[52]

51. Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 182-245.

52. Maier, *Among Empires*, 59-69, 294-295.

Those who believe that the United States is an empire on the rise frequently cite recent evidence of expansionism: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of a «unipolar» world, the massive expansion of military bases in the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and central Asia, the recent exhibition of unilateralism in Iraq, and the current threat to deal with «rogue states» through the Bush Doctrine of «preventive war». Empirical measurements of soft and hard power can also be marshaled. If one looks at hard power, the United military is much greater than any in recent memory. The US defense budget in 2001 was six times the size of the second-largest, that of Russia, and seven times that of the next three. Contrast this with nineteenth-century Britain whose Royal Navy was larger than the next two combined but whose army was dwarfed by continental powers.[53] One would probably have to go all the way back to Rome to find such disparities. With regard to soft power, the influence of US «low» culture is on par with that of Italian or French «high» culture in early modern Europe. English is the standard language for business and diplomacy, much as Italian was in the sixteenth century and French was in the seventeenth and eighteenth. Today, McDonalds, Coca Cola, and Hollywood are gargantuan industries exporting a way of life.[54]

On the flip side, there are those who advocate that the United States is an empire in decline. They also brandish an impressive list of indicators that contrast United States economic and political power in the postwar to that which exists today. For example, in 1944, the Bretton Woods Accords, pegged all currencies to the dollar, in exchange for the US promise to be able to exchange dollars for gold at a fixed rate; since 1971, the dollar is free-floating and is slowly losing its unofficial status as a reserve currency; foreign central banks increasingly regard it as one in a «basket». In 1945, the United States Gross National Product accounted for over one-half of the world's productive goods; today, its manufacturing base is eroded –it is smaller than that of the European Union and barely higher than that of Japan. Moreover, a once-positive trade balance has turned into a massive deficit, which has increased from $100 billion per year in 1990 to $450 billion in 2000. In the postwar, the Marshall Plan was one of the greatest examples of benevolent imperialism in history, constituting some $13 billion in aid or some two percent of GNP between 1948 and 1951; today, the foreign-aid budget is six-times smaller and the largest recipient is Israel, a tiny country and one of the twenty richest in the world, which trousers over one-third the budget.[55] In the aftermath of World War II, the backing and bankrolling of Christian Democratic parties in Italy and Germany and of anticommunist forces in Greece and Turkey represented a high watermark of United States influence in Europe. During the Cold War, the United States flexed its muscles throughout Latin America and the Middle East. Today, its ability to alter or even affect

53. I take this statistic from Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, 19.

54. This of course has its own literature. See, for example, Benjamin Barber, *Jihad versus McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

55. For these statistics, see Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, 53; Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order*, trans. C. Jon Delogu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; original edition, 2002), 14-15, 64.

outcomes on these continents is less pronounced. Recently, the United States was unable to use Turkish airbases in its war against Iraq, despite the fact that it had offered the country between $16 and $32 billion to do so.

Of the various commentators who have thrown their hat in on the side of imperial decline, one of the most influential is the Cambridge-trained French historian Emmanuel Todd. Arguing that plunging birthrates would inevitably produce political decline, this author became famous for predicting the fall of the Soviet Union in the mid 1970s.[56] In *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (2003), a best-seller in France and Germany, he attempts to pull off a similar feat. While Paul Kennedy predicted the decline of U.S hegemony due to «overstretch», Todd has focused on internal factors. He claims that the United States has not so much lost its military prowess but its nerve. Its army is only capable of defeating small powers because citizens are reluctant to take casualties or to engage in protracted conflicts. Given grave budgetary problems, the country no longer has the money to undertake expensive rebuilding projects such as those of postwar Europe. Economic and demographic trends (rising levels of inequality, increasing segregation between blacks and whites, and high infant mortality rates and low literacy rates among blacks) evidence that the United States is retreating from its melting pot or multicultural ideal. The recent spate of adventures against minor powers –Granada, Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq– are signs of an empire in decline, «theatrical micromilitarism», or the desperate lurches of a dying beast.

In *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American* Empire (2004), Niall Ferguson also weighs in on the side of decline. He overcomes Maier's problem with lack of an imperial consciousness by underscoring that the country, born through revolution against a colonial power, has been engaged since its foundation in «imperial denial». This, of course, is not unique to the United States. Because of the racist and exploitative connotation of the term, the Soviet Union also denied that it was an empire in the twentieth century; future candidates (European Union, China, India, Indonesia) are likely to do the same. Ferguson is less concerned with demography, health, and welfare than Todd, but his argument is similar: America's fiscal crisis –a «45 trillion dollar black hole»– has the making of «the perfect storm». It has parallels to the eighteenth-century French Monarchy, which spent its last money on war with Britain over United States independence before crashing down in 1789. The US budget deficit is currently propped up by foreign bondholders and Asian central banks, actors whose activities are not guided by patriotism but strategy. As most everyone is aware, there are a number of scenarios that could cause them to doubt whether the United States has the capability of servicing its debt, which would cause panic and sell-off. As he states, «The decline and fall of America's undeclared empire may be due not to terrorists at the gates or the rogue regimes that sponsor them, but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state».[57] The remedies that

56. Emmanuel Todd, *The Final Fall: An Essay on the Decomposition of the Soviet Sphere*, trans. John Waggoner (New York: Karz Publishers, 1929; original edition, 1976).

57. Ferguson, *Colossus*, 276-79.

Todd and Ferguson tender are opposite. The social democratic Todd would advice the United States to abandon its hegemonic posturing, turn its attention to its domestic maladies, and participate in multi-lateral diplomacy. The conservative Ferguson suggests that the country should cut Medicare spending, privatize social security, abandon «imperial denial», boost funds dedicated to neocolonial and state rebuilding projects, train young men and women for extended overseas service, and have America assume the mantle of liberal empire that Britain once held during the nineteenth century.

Although already the subject of endless commentary, Ferguson's clarion call for liberal empire is worth reviewing. His argument is two-fold: First, he claims that since empires always exist, Anglo-Saxon ones are inherently more liberal and humane (or at least less genocidal) than other rivals –German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Ottoman, Russian, etc. He proposes that the United States should engage in an unapologetic, and if necessary an aggressive, project of empire building with the aim to foster institutional stability, uproot corruption, promote capitalism, and combat poverty in Africa and other place in the world. To Ferguson, this would be more effective than the consensual and inefficient organization of the United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Arguing that order is preferable to liberty, he seems to imply that a volley over the heads and even one into the crowd (on the style of Tiananman) could be advisable on occasion. If the United States had greater willingness to take and incur casualties and commit itself to decade-long occupations, this would cause fewer deaths in the long run and provide long-term stability to people who live oppressed by dictators or in polities in, or on the verge of, civil war. His second argument is economic. He contends that European overseas empires brought vast economic benefits to colonies through the provision of infrastructure and the guarantying of debt.[58] To prove his point, he shows that the gap in per capita GDP between former empires and practically all ex-colonies has increased since independence. He also advocates that richer countries abandon unfair trading practices (farm subsidies) to allow poorer ones to compete on an even playing field.[59]

Whatever one might think about his solutions, it is worth recognizing that they are ideological formulas rather than lessons to be coolly drawn from history. With respect to his economic arguments, present problems are as much legacies of imperialism as decolonization. The two concepts cannot be decoupled. The fact that decolonization was an unmitigated disaster for so many countries does not logically translate into an argument for a return to colonial tutelage. Indeed, how decolonization was carried out

58. This is, of course, an old debate dating from the 1960s. For classic arguments in favor of the benefits of empire, see L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Burden of Empire: An Appraisal of Western Colonia Africa South of the Sahara* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1967); and P.T. Bauer, «The Economics of Resentment: Colonialism and Underdevelopment», *Journal of Contemporary History*, 4, n. 1 (January 1969): 51-71; and *Equality, The Third World, and Economic Delusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). For the classic works on the underdevelopment thesis, see Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Under-Development in Latin America*, rev. ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); and Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (NewYork: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

59. Ferguson, *Colossus*, 170-189.

has been key to understanding the subsequent histories of many states.[60] In the end, there are a plethora of ways forward that need to be debated by experts. With respect to his political recommendations, it is ludicrous to think that empire can be recreated along the same lines as before. As Michael Mann has argued, despite the startling disparities between US hard power and that of the rest of the world, Kalashnikov rifles and surface-to-air missiles are highly effective «weapons of the weak»; in contrast, expensive nuclear arsenals are not meant to be used, and bombers and missiles are not effective in theaters where guerilla fighters use civilian populations as shields. Moreover, in the age of nationalism, huge sectors of a population are willing to mobilize against foreign invasion to an extent much greater than feudal times when peasant populations often wisely stayed out of wars among rulers. The United States has been recently driven out of Somalia and Liberia (not to mention Vietnam) in a way that no European power would have been in the late nineteenth century when the maxim gun faced spears and arrows.[61] In the end, Ferguson's recommendations are akin to what his Harvard colleague Charles Maier calls the «attractions» of empire.[62]

The comparison between the United States and Britain is the subject of Bernard Porter's *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America, and the World* (2006). In this book, the author criticizes Ferguson for his suggestion that Britain was everything that the United States is not –an empire willing to dedicate lives and resources, to train young men and women to civilize foreign peoples, and even to engage in and to justify isolated acts of repression in pursuit of the greater good. Porter, for his part, thinks that both the glories as well as the hubris of the British Empire have been exaggerated. He contends that the United States not only resembles the British Empire but has indeed inherited its mantle following the Second World War. In support of his position, he points out that even in its heyday, Britain never employed large colonial bureaucracies as did, say, France. In the late nineteenth century, the Raj only consisted of some 2000 metropolitan civil servants in India. Britain never spent large amounts of money on its colonial possessions, which were supposed to be self financing. Moreover, there were similarities between Britain's «absent-minded imperialism» and United States' «imperial denial». For example, Gladstone reluctantly invaded Egypt in 1881 insisting that it was not an imperial adventure, and then managed to get the country bogged down in a quagmire that resembles Iraq today. Most of the British empire was governed by indirect rule, and Britain's «free trade» informal empire looks much like the «Washington Consensus» of the global economy. Porter refrains from making predictions or recommendations. To this veteran historian of empire, however, he has seen it all before.

Another comparison that is cropping up is Spain. Henry Kamen's *Empire: How*

60. For a recent study of how decolonization affected the fate of ex-colonies, see Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Penguin, 2007). The authors contrast the «successes» of India and Malaysia, on the one hand, to the «failures» of Burma, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, on the other.

61. Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, 18-48.

62. Maier, *Among Empires*, 295.

Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763 (2004) does not address the United States, but there seems to be a whiff of it around. According to Kamen, Spain's «networked empire» drew together Europe's best practices from the sixteenth century –Genoese navigation and banking, German and Italian finance, Flemish and Italian architects and artists, commanders and troops from all of Europe. In many respects, Spain's empire looks like the United States' networks that revolve around international organizations such as NATO, the WTO, the World Bank, the G-8, the IMF, multinational corporations, and research universities that recruit worldwide talent. For advocates of imperial decline, parallels also abound. By the mid seventeenth century, Spain no longer had the military might to defend its empire, but continental powers kept it propped up in order to maintain a balance-of-powers in the western hemisphere. All countries were able to profit from trade, legal and illegal, in Spanish America. Most importantly, financial markets depended on the continual flow of Spanish silver from Mexican and Peruvian mines, much of which went straight to European banks who funded the monarchy's debt. This phenomenon echoes the present situation in which Chinese and Japanese central banks currently hold vast quantities of United States currency and treasury bonds in order to avoid the unimaginably destabilizing scenario of collapse. At the present time, these manufacturing giants profit immensely from the United States' «empire of consumption»,[63] so there are weighty reasons to keep the US consuming. For this reason, the historian Harold James has asked: «Is the United States more Spanish than British?»[64] Unlike the United States today, the British Empire from the mid nineteenth century to World War I maintained a current-account surplus with its colonies.

Rome is also invoked. This is logical since Rome invented the language and mechanisms for western imperial rule, so comparison comes rather easy. It is also because United States' hard and soft power is arguably unparalleled since Rome, at least on a quantitative level. Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri *Empire* (2001) presents the image of the entire globe as a postmodern version of Rome modeled after the United States' westward expansion. Unlike the European overseas empires, which were conquered and governed from above, today's states voluntarily incorporate themselves in the international order. In this way, the world is an networked, plural, decentralized and multi-racial empire, backed by large multinational corporations and fronted by international agencies from the United Nations to the World Bank, which operate through financial nodes scattered around the globe from Singapore to London to New

63. Maier, uses the term «an empire of consumption». He argues that in exchange for the United States' ability to consume goods produced in China and Japan, these countries provide the US with credits. In the alternative, such credits can be also interpreted as «tribute» that is paid to an empire that sustains itself on military might As long as this continues, he argues, the US can continue to defy the logic of international economics. For Maier and other authors, the question is, of course,. for how long can it continue. Maier, *Among Empires*, 238-284.

64. Harold James, *How the Rules of the International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 2006), 77.

York. The United States army and navy act, sometimes through NATO and sometimes alone, as a police force. Like Lenin, they see imperialism as the last phase of capitalism and predict that migrants from the southern hemisphere are the postmodern «barbarians» destined to bring Empire down. They also suggest that Empire could be pushed into disintegration by the rise a new morality, just as St. Augustine helped topple the Roman Empire. In short, Negri and Hardt present themselves as the Lenin and St. Augustine of today.

On the other end of the political spectrum, Harold James makes use of the analogy in the *Roman Predicament: How the Rules of the International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (2006). Empires are not prone to «overstretch», as Paul Kennedy famously argued, but, relying on Gibbon and Mill, he reasons that they usually rot from within. The *Pax Romana* breeds problems: Peace and commercial stability create spectacular examples of wealth and luxury while also attracting and incorporating peoples with multifarious customs and beliefs. At the same time, economic inequality and cultural plurality generate widespread resentment: ordinary citizens search for «absolute truths», such as those contained in Christianity (or Islam), which denounce excess and find cultural difference repugnant. He calls this the «Roman predicament». If nothing is done, disintegration occurs because diverse versions of the good life and conspicuous consumption cause an empire to spend less on governance, welfare, and the military. However, if leaders enforce a set of core values –impose one belief system over another– this inevitably promotes contestation, clashes, and disintegration. Unlike Hardt and Negri, James is a votary of a globalized world economy and seeks to offer solutions to save the political order. His «third-way» is to support, in his words, the plurality of gods rather than a single god, which, in the twenty-first century, is equivalent to strengthening multiculturalism. At the same time, he proposes to reinforce rules of an international economic order to provide conditions for prosperity. Suffice it to note that James's brilliance lies in identifying the predicament rather then solving it.

The other comparison that often appears in the literature is the Holy Roman Empire, although this less-than-flattering analogy usually crops up in reference to the European Union –a multi-layered, multi-lingual, networked, bureaucratic confederacy that lurches toward expansion but has trouble acting in a coordinated fashion outside its frontiers. Europe, though, like all «empires» since World War II also suffers from «imperial denial». This being said, few would doubt that the capacity of the European Union to assume an imperial role this century will be contingent upon whether Germany loses its hesitancy to act in such a fashion, which today is still unthinkable for obvious reasons. [65]

65. For comments on Europe and empire, see Lieven, *Empire*, 83-86; Ferguson, *Colossus* 228-57; and James, *The Roman Predicament*, 118-140. We can look forward to Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Conclusion

This tour through the present literature demonstrates a field in full fluorescence if not overabundance. Although the current critiques of colonial studies will be brushed aside by many, it is also likely that some will heed calls to wed cultural-literary approaches with politico-economic ones.[66] As a general rule, postcolonial theory has probably seen its heyday, as it becomes increasingly evident that we live in a postcolonial but not post-imperial world.

The direction in which the geo-political literature is heading is of course anyone's guess. The welter of books on the United States as «empire» will die down as the country abandons unilateralism and is forced to confront its domestic problems. Nonetheless, the imperial analogy will remain influential and the historical study of empire increasingly topical. Events taking place in the world today have imperial overtones: the economic ascendancy of China and India; radical Islamic terrorism; the United States' and western Europe's preoccupation with «rogue states»; the enlargement of the European Union; the increasing power of global institutions, banks, universities, and corporations; and huge migration flows from Africa and South America. Such phenomena will feed the demand for comparative studies. It is also possible that the language of empire will leave academia and penetrate mainstream discourse as «postmodernism» and «globalization» once did. Whether academic trends have political repercussions remain an open and an intriguing question. At far as academia is concerned, there seems to be a new agenda to imperial studies and probably a return to the archives.

66. With respect to Spain and Spanish America, Josep Maria Fradera has called for a more integrated approach: «Spanish Colonial Historiography: Everyone in their Place», *Social History*, 29, n. 3 (August 2004), 368-372.