Robin Blackburn

Emancipation & empire, from Cromwell to Karl Rove

'Empire' only became a dirty word in the twentieth century. Prior to this, educated Europeans and North Americans believed that while there were certainly bad empires (usually Eastern and despotic in character), there were also good empires – notably that of Rome, the cradle of Christian civilization and a model for enlightened later monarchies and republics. The Catholic Church always had an affinity with empire and saw even the heathen variety as providential if there was any chance of converting the ruler, as had happened with such prodigious consequences with Constantine in fourth-century Rome. Charlemagne, Frederic II, Charles V, Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon – all dreamt of reestablishing the universal empire. Republicans, too, admired the emancipatory vigor of the Roman Republic, seeing its imperial reach as proof of the special virtue of this form of government, even as they worried about the danger that a republican empire could be undermined by its own successes and capsize (as Rome did) into militarism and monarchy.

Under the circumstances, it is not so surprising that the idea that there might be something wrong with empire caught on very slowly – a process worth reviewing in more detail.

Robin Blackburn is Visiting Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Faculty of the New School University and professor of sociology at the University of Essex. He is the author of "The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776 – 1848" (1988) and "The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492 – 1800" (1997).

© 2005 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

The triple success of colonial rebels in the Americas (of the North American revolutionaries in 1776 – 1783, the Haitian revolutionaries in 1791 – 1804, and the Spanish American revolutionaries in 1810 – 1825) should have impressed on all thoughtful observers the vanity of empire, and for a time it did play a part in discouraging overseas expansion. The terms Jefferson used in 1811 to denounce European imperialism also stressed its absurdity:

> What in short is the whole system of Europe towards America? One hemisphere of the earth, separated from the other by wide seas on both sides, having a different system of interests flowing from different climates, different soils, different productions, different modes of existence and its own local relations and duties, is made subservient to all the petty interests

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

of the other, to their laws, their regulations, their passions and wars.

The implications were ironic, however. For Jefferson's anathema left open a path for the United States to further extend its own institutions in its own continent.

For much of the U.S. Republic's first one hundred and forty years, its leading statesmen would find it natural to talk of an American empire – an 'empire of liberty,' as it was sometimes called – and to see no tension between this and the revolutionary tradition of 1776. This was good republican empire, not bad monarchical empire. John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren opposed the unfolding of empire and the wars and displacements it involved, but this stance led them to defeat or isolation. The removal of Indians and the acquisition of territory were justified in the name of a 'manifest destiny' that would spread good order and good husbandry, prosperity and republican institutions.

Thus domestic disorder in Mexico in the 1840s was seen as a sufficient threat to warrant a wholesale military invasion and the seizure of extensive territory. Though the actions of statesmen – especially the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican War – were decisively important to U.S. expansion in the nineteenth century, these could only be effective because they expressed the dynamic of a whole social formation, with its increasingly commercial farming and new manufacturing, its canals and railways, its slave plantations, and its celebration of liberty and race. When Spain and France acquired Louisiana by treaty, each could make nothing of it. Within a few decades of its acquisition by the United States it comprised eleven flourishing states. Empire was felt to be a projection of the republic's native virtues and, like the republic's, was rooted in revolution.

Emancipation & empire, from Cromwell to Karl Rove

The victory of the North in the Civil War was a striking victory for republican empire, just as the defeat of the Confederacy was a defeat for the right of self-determination. The slave emancipation policy lent a needed idealistic dimension to the Union cause. Elsewhere in the Americas, attempts were made to construct monarchical empires – in Mexico (Iturbide, 1823 – 1824; Maximilian, 1863 – 1865), Haiti (Dessalines, 1804 – 1806; Soulouque, 1849 – 1859), and Brazil (Pedro I and II, 1821 – 1889). With the exception of the Brazilian Empire, which boasted many 'liberal' and parliamentary features, these attempts foundered quite quickly. The imperial idea fared better in the Old World: Napoleon III helped to unify Italy and was himself defeated by the formidable new German Empire. Russia consolidated a transcontinental empire even larger than that of the U.S. Republic.

Following the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884 – 1885, the European Great Powers carved up what was left of Africa and Asia. This was empire not simply as a monarchical style, but as a program of overseas territorial expansion and rule. The Europeans claimed they were acquiring colonies in order to stamp out the slave trade, to improve the condition of women, and to extend the benefits of free trade and civilization. The republics of Central and South America were spared outright colonization, but were still the objects of debt-collecting gunboat diplomacy. The United States had not claimed any prizes in the scramble for Africa – though it did support the Belgian king's claim to the Congo, citing his supposed abolitionist credentials.[1] Notwithstanding the antislavery claims made by the European imperialists, the

1 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

spread of European rule in Africa in the late nineteenth century led to a horrendous expansion of slavery and forced labor in the newly acquired territories as the new rulers and their favored enterprises recruited labor for public works, plantations, and mines. While cynicism, racism, and cruelty contributed to this result, it was also brought on by colonial entrepreneurs whose efforts to recruit paid labor attracted little response. The Atlantic slave trade had created large-scale slave raiding and trading complexes. With its end, large numbers of slaves were available on the African market at low prices.

Still, attitudes toward empire were changing. The implicitly positive charge of the term was challenged around the turn of the century by three spectacles of colonial bloodletting: in 1895 – 1898, Spain sought to suppress a Cuban rebellion; in 1899 – 1902, Britain put down the Boer republics in South Africa; and in 1901 – 1904, the United States stamped out Filipino resistance to colonization. This moment witnessed the rise of an anti-imperial movement in the United States that attracted such illustrious supporters as Henry Adams and Mark Twain. In Britain there was radical and liberal opposition to the groundswell of imperial jingoism. J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism* elaborated a thoroughgoing critique of the new imperialism.

But in neither the United States nor the United Kingdom did the anti-imperial movement prevail: The British imposed their rule on the Boers. Washington clung on to the Philippines and Puerto Rico, extended its grip on Hawaii, established naval stations in the Pacific and Caribbean, and schemed to promote a canal in the Isthmus of Panama. The U.S. military occupation of Cuba ended in 1902 with the establishment of a Cuban republic, which was obliged, by the terms of the Platt Amendment, to lease back Guantánamo and to accept a constitutional clause allowing for U.S. intervention if Washington deemed good order or U.S. property to be at risk. The nominal independence given to Cuba stemmed from the fact that the United States had supposedly gone to war to help the plucky Cubans in their valiant struggle to free their country. There was, indeed, some danger that the Cubans might revolt once again if denied the form of independence. Washington was also aware that the government and people of the war-devastated island would be more likely to be accommodating if treated with a little respect.

However, in the case of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, the openly imperial reflex triumphed, because President McKinley and Vice President Theodore Roosevelt believed that the United States could not stand aside from the global scramble for territory and coaling stations. Unlike Jefferson and Jackson, McKinley proposed overseas, not continental, acquisition: it was America's sacred duty to rule over its 'little brown brother.' The president famously claimed to a visiting delegation of Protestant pastors that he had gone down on his knees to the Almighty in his perplexity as to what to do – and then it came to him that the Philippines should not be given back to Spain, nor turned over to Germany or France, "our commercial rivals," but should rather be taken into American custody to "uplift and civilize and Christianize" its inhabitants.[2]

The sanctimonious rhetoric of imperial statesmen was belied by the results of the new colonialism that included a huge loss of life among native peoples, as well as wholesale plunder and great cru-

2 Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother: How the United States Purchased and Pacified the Philippines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

elty. Whether monarchical or republican, liberal or conservative, parliamentary or presidential, the new imperialism was based on racial oppression and economic exploitation. In this species of imperialism, the ownership of railways, loans, plantations, and mines were just as important as the control of territory, harbors, and coaling stations. Indeed, J. A. Hobson defined the new imperialism by its mobilization of extra-economic means to gain complex economic ends – its willingness to use gunboats or garrisons to secure supplies of tropical produce and scarce mineral deposits, to control overseas markets, and to guarantee the most secure investment conditions for the export of capital. It was this, rather than the seizure of territory, that defined the new capitalist imperialism.[3]

The British Empire drew great profit from plantations in the Americas, Africa, and the Far East; it balanced its international trade thanks to its grip on India; and it staked out strategic claims to oil in the Middle East. The British built railways and harbors but their aim was to facilitate the movement of grain and troops. While the troops were to deter native unrest, the grain was to move to where it could be sold. In Ireland and India, even in times of dearth, huge quantities of grain were sold to the metropolis, and thus were not available to feed the starving subjects of the Queen-Empress. Indian textiles enjoyed global primacy when the British arrived, but the commercial arrangements of the Raj rendered the entire subcontinent a captive market for English manufacturers. In 1750, India produced 24.5 percent of global manufactures; by 1900 this number had sunk to 1.7 percent.[4]

The famines that brought many millions of deaths to India in 1876 – 1878 and 1896 – 1897 were not widely reported in Europe, where they were seen as unavoidable natural disasters. But while Britain was not responsible for the drought cycle, it was responsible for the agricultural and commercial policies that aggravated the impact of the dearth. Native irrigation systems were neglected, and, in deference to laissez-faire doctrines, huge quantities of wheat were sold for export to Britain. Some U.S. observers blamed these devastating events on British arrogance, thirst for revenue, and lack of concern for native peoples.

The Indian elite, upon whom British rule depended, protested the destruction of native manufacturing and the flaunting of racial privilege. When the Indian National Congress called for a boycott of British manufactures in 1905 – 1906, it was speaking for an anticolonial movement that was well organized, respectable, popular, and modern, at a time when the Raj, under Lord Curzon, was mounting such pseudo-feudal displays of vice-regal splendor as the Delhi Durbar.

During the same period, reports of pitiless repression and concentration camps in Spanish Cuba, British South Africa, and the U.S.-occupied Philippines in the years 1897 – 1903 showed that armies supposedly answerable to

3 J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 71 – 109. Hobson's sharp attention to the "economic taproot of imperialism" is complemented by a vigorous discussion of the "moral and sentimental factors" mobilized by imperialist policy. See Ibid., 196 – 222.

4 See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), especially 279 – 340; Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968); S. B. Saul, *Studies in British Overseas Trade, 1870 – 1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960); B. R. Tomlinson, "Economics: The Periphery," in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

presidents and parliaments could act with great brutality. Imperial rivalries made it difficult to conceal news of atrocities. In the 1900s, the revelation of the terrible consequences of King Leopold's rule in the Congo, and of the extermination of indigenous peoples by German forces in southwest Africa, made a mockery of the claims of the powers that had met in Berlin two decades earlier. Indeed anyone who cared to look into the matter would discover that, since empire was everywhere plagued by a lack of legitimacy, colonial authorities would typically resort to naked violence when challenged. But in these cases the victims were 'colored' and seen as savages or heathens of the 'lower races.'

The Great War of 1914 – 1918 was different. It showed that the rival empires were also prepared to slaughter white Christians, and to do so on an industrial scale.

The carnage of World War I discredited the new imperialism in the eyes of many citizens of the belligerent states. It was also marked by nationalist stirrings in the colonial empires. In Russia, the Bolsheviks sought to make themselves the standard-bearers of the anti-imperial idea. They gained power in 1917 by insisting that Russia would withdraw from the war, and they kept their promise. Leon Trotsky, the first commissar for foreign affairs, published the secret treaties between France, Britain, and Russia that outlined their aim to dismember the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires.[5] President Wilson, notwithstanding his willingness to enter the conflict in alliance with the Entente Powers, saw the need to redefine the aims of the war. To the considerable discomfort of his new allies, he declared in early 1918 that the United States was aiming for a peace that would embody the self-determination of peoples.

Wilson's brandishing of the right of peoples to self-determination reflected an understanding of the power of nationalism and aimed to head off any revolutionary appropriation of the anti-imperial cause. As a Southerner, Wilson was keenly aware of the bitterness and resentment that could be provoked by alien occupation. He also sensed that the United States had no need of a territorial empire – a conclusion also belatedly reached by Theodore Roosevelt. The U.S. president was able to wield great leverage in 1918 – 1920 because of the utter exhaustion of Europe and the booming state of the U.S. economy. In the difficult year or two following the end of the war, the United States denied succor to those states that were reluctant to fall into line with its plans. Béla Kun's revolutionary government in Hungary was brought down by a food blockade and a Western-backed Romanian military intervention. Herbert Hoover, the 'Food Tsar,' saw it as his duty to prevent radical socialists from gaining strength in the German Revolution and to offer support only to moderates, even though they had earlier backed the war. Arno Mayer has shown that the arbitrating role of the United States in 1918 – 1919 stemmed not only from General Pershing's divisions, but also from the U.S. ability to orchestrate a blockade of Central Europe that threatened millions with starvation.[6]

But Wilson's hope that the United States would continue to exercise world leadership was not shared by Congress, which declined to ratify the League of

5 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879 – 1921* (London: Verso, 2003).

6 Arno Mayer, *The Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918 – 1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3 – 30, 266 – 273, 510 – 514, 716 – 852.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

Nations. The Treaty of Versailles dismembered the German and Ottoman Empires, chiefly to the advantage of Britain and France, though in deference to Wilsonian rhetoric the latter acquired 'trusteeships,' not colonies.

Wilson had sent a punitive expedition to Mexico in 1913, and his immediate successors routinely ordered U.S. Marines to occupy any Caribbean or Central American state whose government was deemed to be slacking in its duties to U.S. companies or creditors. Franklin Roosevelt believed there were better and more effective ways to promote U.S. interests. When the military strongman Fulgencio Batista put an end to Cuban revolutionary turmoil in 1933 – 1934, the U.S. government formally revoked the Platt Amendment while retaining the lease on Guantánamo. World War II and the Cold War were to consolidate the emergence of a de facto U.S. global empire based on financial and military power rather than territorial conquest. The expansion of Japan had swept Western colonialism out of Southeast Asia, its defeat opening the path for indigenous nationalism. But Washington had the resources to bid for leadership of the multiplying ranks of the United Nations.

The U.S. sway over the greater part of the world's peoples was embodied in the special role of the dollar, the structures of the IMF and World Bank, the power to open or deny access to the U.S. domestic market, the power of Wall Street and Hollywood, and, last but not least, the global network of alliances and military bases. From FDR onward, U.S. presidents once again took to decrying territorial colonialism and to proclaiming a Wilsonian faith in national self-determination. But the bases and alliances meant that there was still a territorial dimension to U.S. global ascendancy. While the United States refused to back a crudely colonialist Anglo-French power play at Suez in 1956, it often contrived to integrate strategic assets that had previously been exploited by the former colonial powers.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 – 1991 boosted U.S. global power to new heights, prompting a redefinition and extension of the United States' informal empire. If the Soviet Bloc had crumbled almost bloodlessly, then it might have seemed rational to rely on the existing apparatus of sanctions and incentives, and the new alliance with Russia, against lesser threats. But the opportunity to act with less constraint could not be resisted. Both the elder Bush and Bill Clinton advanced the idea of a new world order led by the United States and structured by an expansion of the old system of alliances – in particular, a NATO that spread eastward, surrounding Russia. The new NATO, spurning help that Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe would willingly have furnished, took unilateral action against Serbia and was prepared to act out of theater.[7] According to Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright, the United States was the "essential nation" because only it possessed decisive military might.

Those wishing to impress by their realism already spoke of a U.S. empire. But it was George W. Bush and his response to the 9/11 attack that gave the term 'empire' wide currency through the writings of Max Boot, Niall Ferguson, and Michael Ignatieff, who all supported the second Iraq war. Capitalizing on the global wave of sympathy elicited by 9/11,

Emancipation & empire, from Cromwell to Karl Rove

7 I explain my reasons for believing this, based in part on observations made by Gorbachev during a visit to Cambridge, England, in March of 1999, in Robin Blackburn, "Kosovo: The War of NATO Expansion," *New Left Review*, series 1, no. 235 (May/June 1999): 107 – 123.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

the United States acted with needless unilateralism, first in Afghanistan, and then by seeking long-term advantage by establishing new bases in Central Asia. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a more brazen act of empire, responding to no direct aggression or threat. Washington rubbed salt in the wound by first soliciting UN help and then flouting a Security Council veto.

The new imperialists held that the UN Charter doctrine that one member state had no right to attack another was obsolete and dangerous in a world menaced by rogue states, failed states, terrorist networks, and proliferating weapons of mass destruction. A global gendarme, equipped with the power to intervene preemptively, was needed. Only the United States could play this role, and it could not allow others to determine its actions. Washington's willingness to overthrow governments and establish occupation authorities was saluted by some as the unveiling of a new empire. However, most of those who endorsed the Iraq war still shrank, as did the administration itself, from using the E word: 'Empire' was not a term that George W. Bush or Colin Powell wanted to use, for reasons I will explore later.

The recent turn to overt empire talk stems as much from frustration at the state of the planet as it does from the unprecedented power of the United States. The misery of Africa and the dismal condition of the Middle East and of parts of South Asia and Latin America generate frustration and despair among bien-pensant observers of every description. Neocon advocates of the big stick acquire liberal allies who also believe that the answer is for the world's most powerful state to lead and to take matters into its own hands. The often deeply disappointing results of decolonization lead to a revisionism that forgets why colonialism was discredited in the first place. Niall Ferguson made himself an outstanding exponent of this revisionism with the publication of *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* in 2003 and *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* in 2004.

Ferguson is to be commended for calling empire by its name, and for not shrinking from spelling out its logical corollaries. His message is that Britain did much to invent capitalism and, with it, the most valuable ideas and institutions of the modern world – the English language, private property, the rule of law, parliamentary institutions, individual freedom, and Protestant Christianity. This British self-regard easily segues into endorsement for American national messianism, with the Anglo-American imperial formula (handily termed 'Anglobalization') offering the colonized the best hope of capitalist success. As a historian of the English-speaking peoples, Ferguson seeks to rescue Winston Churchill's narrative from its contemporary fate – that of being entombed in countless forbidding leather-bound volumes. He offers a pacier narrative, garnished with excellent quotes from the great man and many shafts of his own droll wit (his one-liners are too reliant on puns to be fully Churchillian).

Still, Ferguson's subtitle to *Empire* – "How Britain Made the Modern World" – should have given him some pause, considering the sad state of our world. Many of the most intractable and bloody communal divisions we live with today were fostered, if not invented, by Britain's imperial policy of divide and rule. Any list of the world's most dangerous and difficult communal conflicts would include the standoff between Pakistan and India and the Arab/Israeli clash. The partition of Cyprus, the still unresolved

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

conflict in Northern Ireland, and the deep racial tensions in Guyana and Fiji would also figure in such a list. In the postapartheid era, the racial legacy of empire and colonization is being gradually dismantled in South Africa, but problems remain in many other parts of Africa.

Ferguson urges that ethnic sentiment and division long preceded colonization. He rightly observes that expatriate colonizers were often the driving force behind injurious racial privileges and distinctions. Yet liberal imperial strategists from Locke to Gladstone went along with colonial racism because that is what empire was based on. Nor does Ferguson register the fondness of imperial administrators for cultivating the so-called martial races at the expense of other colonial subjects; or the deliberate fostering of poisonous divisions – between Muslims and Hindus in India, Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Turks and Greeks in Cyprus, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Indians and natives in Fiji, blacks and (east) Indians in British Guyana. The communal fault lines were not always of the imperial administrators' making, but those administrators nevertheless have much to answer for – after all, they were in charge. (Likewise, today's neo-imperialists are partly responsible for aggravating communal divisions in the Balkans and Iraq.)

Today the division of the world between rich and poor regions roughly follows the former division between imperial and colonized areas, even though it has sometimes been partially counteracted or qualified by resistance to empire, or by prior institutional or natural endowments. The colonial experience weakened the ability of the colonized to negotiate an advantageous relationship to the emerging capitalist world market and often condemned them to subordination and neglect. Ferguson cites the disappointing performance of most ex-colonies as part of his case for empire, when it would be more logical to conclude that the empires did not, in fact, really equip the colonized with survival skills. The poor record of Britain's former African colonies leads him to plead that "even the best institutions work less well in landlocked, excessively hot or disease-ridden places."[8] He concedes that, at 0.12 percent, India's overall annual rate of growth between 1820 and 1950 was pitifully low, but he won't hold selfish imperial arrangements responsible because "[t]he supposed 'drain' of capital from India to Britain turns out to have been surprisingly modest: only 1 percent of Indian national income between the 1860s and the 1930s, according to one estimate of the export surplus."[9] But obviously a country growing at only 0.12 percent a year would have had many good uses for that lost 1 percent of national income. Ferguson himself points out that in 1913, Britain's school enrollment rate was eight times that of India's.

Empires did not invent the uneven development of capitalism, but, having inherited or established a hierarchical structure of advantage, they reinforced it. For example, plantation slavery certainly brought great wealth to some in the plantation colonies and states. But it did not generate sustained and independent growth in the plantation zone, as the postemancipation experience of the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and the Brazilian northeast testify. Empires tended to encourage only those infrastructure improvements that facilitated the movement of troops and the export

8 Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 197.

9 Ibid., 195.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

of commodities. In the process that Davis calls "the origins of the third world," Western incursions into China from the Opium War onward weakened the Qing authorities and prevented them from maintaining the country's vital system of hydraulic defenses. With its customs service run by a consortium of foreign powers, China suffered a deindustrialization almost as severe as that of India.[10]

At the same time, Ferguson's neoliberal agenda and British focus lead him to miss the way that non-Anglo-Saxon empires promoted economic integration and coordination by nonmarket means. In an off-the-cuff remark explaining "why it was that Britain was able to overhaul her Iberian rivals," he fails to explain the source of Spanish wealth, but says that Britain "had to settle for colonizing the unpromising wastes of Virginia and New England, rather than the eminently lootable cities of Mexico and Peru."[11] Both the Spanish and the British certainly looted American silver and gold. But Ferguson does not explain how this Spanish, rival species of empire worked, and seems to regard it as economically less impressive than the record of British settlement. Spanish administrators were, in fact, innovators who mainly relied on wage labor to mine and process the silver ore. In place of simple 'looting' they adopted a tribute system, echoing Inca and Aztec arrangements that required the native villages to supply either labor or foodstuffs and textiles to the royal warehouses. The king claimed a royalty of a fifth of the silver mined. But he garnered much more by selling mining concessions and the tribute food and clothing in his warehouses to the miners. It was this ingenious system, not looting, that sustained a highly productive network of exploitation for nearly three centuries. This is just one example of the productive organization promoted by Iberian imperialism that explains why the Mexican and Peruvian elite were so reluctant to break with empire. But with Spanish American independence, all such coordination ceased, and entry into Britain's informal empire of free trade led to economic stagnation or regression.

Empires could promote a limited and usually self-interested species of colonial development. Often, as today, the imperial impulse stemmed from overweening confidence and a missionary impulse as much as from a sober calculation of material gain. When empires spread, they did so partly because they could, partly because they engaged in a rivalrous multistate system, and partly because, in metropolitan regions where capitalism was taking hold, consumers wanted colonial products. Starting with the Portuguese, the European maritime empires entered the lists partly because they saw an advantage they did not want to yield to others, and partly because those newly in receipt of rents, fees, profits, and wages had a thirst for exotic commodities.

But there was still another more paradoxical and perplexing factor. This was the role that revolutionary changes within the metropolitan societies played in boosting the impulse to empire. Since Ferguson does not much address the connection between the domestic and overseas articulation of power, it will be necessary to pursue the argument without his help.

There have been at once real and fantastic connections between empire and revolution. The real connection is that

10 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 279 – 310.

11 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 369.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

societies that had been internally transformed by revolution thereby acquired social capacities that made economic, cultural, and territorial expansion possible. But the fantastic connection was just as important, in that a deluded revolutionary conceit dreamt that empire might elevate and redeem otherwise benighted, recalcitrant native peoples. Such notions as the elect nation, the New Zion, and the republic 'one and indivisible,' prepared the ground for the 'Anglo-Saxon race,' jingoism, and chauvinism.

In areas where the native peoples were largely wiped out by settlers and disease, as in North America and Australia, something approaching the replication of the metropolis – or of those elements of the metropolis that were compatible with modernity – was achieved. The land was appropriated in a way that echoed Europe's own social arrangements as they had been shaped by the neolithic revolution, the Roman Empire, the territorial expansion of Christendom, and the rise of commercial society in England. The relationship of settlers to the land was defined by displacement of the original inhabitants, deforestation, exhaustive exploitation, and absolute property rights.[12] The resulting transformations nourished the mistaken idea that the metropolis in other areas as well would eventually transform the colonized into replicas of the colonizers, namely, self-governing, individualist Anglo-Saxons.[13]

Emancipation & empire, from Cromwell to Karl Rove

The rise of the absolutist states had been based on the defeat of rebellious peasants and independent towns, on a military and administrative revolution, and on the raising of sufficient revenue and credit to pay for this. Absolutist monarchs embodied an administrative transformation and sociopolitical formula that easily carried over into empire.[14] Despite setbacks and reversals, England's Tudors and Stuarts emulated enough of this to make a contribution to the imperial organization of the British state. When clerics beholden to Henry VIII first spoke of a 'British Empire,' the term certainly gestured at a wish to rule the whole of the British Isles. But the charge of the term 'empire' was also theological and political. It was a declaration of independence from the pope, and an insistence that the ruler of Britain had direct access to the Almighty – a foible more forgivable in a sixteenth-century monarch than in George W. Bush.

While several British monarchs, notably James II, made a contribution to the foundations of empire, the real substance came from elsewhere. England's new merchants of the mid-seventeenth century took their cue from Dutch businessmen, not the Spanish kings. They were interested in catering to mass consumption, not in supplying the court or aristocracy with rare silks and fine wines. Both the civil war of the 1640s and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 carried forward a fateful link between domestic transformation and overseas expansion.[15] As in nineteenth-century

12 See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 – 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe, 950 – 1350* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

13 See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

14 Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B., 1974).

15 Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and Lon-*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

America, military victories and diplomatic treaties could only lead to permanent results where the ground had already been prepared by pioneering settlers and entrepreneurial merchants. This explains the very different fates of England's seventeenth-century acquisitions of Virginia and Algeria: while the former became a self-financing tobacco plantation, the latter had to be abandoned as a costly encumbrance.

The colonial impulse fed on the notion that native barbarism and backwardness demanded civilized intervention. The colonial mission was a transformative one. Indeed, the nature of modern empire, with its commercial impulses, cannot be grasped unless its relationship to revolution – real and surrogate – is understood. The process classically known as the 'bourgeois revolution' – and the tremendous boost it gave to the polities it transformed – helps us to identify one of the dynamic components of modern imperialism, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century and beyond, or, if you can forgive the bathos, from Cromwell to Karl Rove (on whom more below). If colonialism had a partly revolutionary impulse, it also invariably marked the limits of the transformative power of revolution, the geographical and social spaces that the bourgeois revolution could not penetrate.

The Dutch war of independence against Spain could not be confined to the Low Countries and eventually encompassed an attempt to take on, and take over, Iberian imperial strong points in the Americas and Africa. Grotius's *Mare Liberum* was both a cry of Dutch defiance and a charter of commercial expansion. The Dutch East and West India Companies established a global network of trading posts and colonies. But the disinclination of many Dutch to emigrate and the vulnerability of the Dutch state in Europe led to the loss of Dutch Brazil and North America. The English Puritans who had opposed the Stuarts did so in the name of a more aggressive policy against Spain in the New World. The Commonwealth period in Britain organized a new navy, checked Dutch power, and confronted Spain. It gave birth to the 'Western Design,' the capture of Jamaica, and the first version of the empire-fostering Navigation Acts. British colonial rule in Ireland was extended and reinforced. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 confirmed the imperial orientation and scope of the British state.

The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 certainly enunciated momentous principles of self-determination but, as we have seen, these soon spilled over into the project of a new empire. The Continental Congress, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Louisiana Purchase all bear witness to the imperial urge of many of America's Founding Fathers, their wish to expand their sway over all North America. Long before the French Republic was transformed into Napoleon's empire, the revolutionary Convention, by hurling itself against the old order in both Europe and the Caribbean, enunciated some of the themes of an 'emancipatory' empire radiating from the republic 'one and indivisible.' In each of these cases there were countercurrents that saw the urge to empire as a betrayal of the true ideals of the revolution – but the countercurrents did not prevail.

These revolutions did much to shape the world in which we live. But their best results were at home, not overseas. They could export goods much more easily than social arrangements. The

don's Overseas Traders, 1550 – 1653 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

Dutch intensified an odious slave traffic, while the English Puritans resorted to barbaric reprisals against the stubbornly Catholic and alien Irish. The Americans repeatedly failed to turn Indians into 'Americans' and instead sought to remove or extirpate them. Following the Civil War, America's 'Second Revolution,' the North failed to modernize the South and instead allowed it to remain for a century in the grip of Jim Crow, landlordism, and rapacious supply merchants. Under pressure from a tenacious slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, the French enacted the first comprehensive emancipation in 1794, but within less than a decade Napoleon's forces were trying to reintroduce slavery.

In 1848 and 1871 Europe was again haunted by the specter of revolution. In the wake of the suppression of revolutionary movements, the governments of France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy turned to a new wave of colonial expansion, partly in the hope that it would furnish an outlet for those who were discontented, and partly to display the potency of newly established polities – the French Third Republic, newly reunited Italy and Germany – but overseas these newly constitutional states resorted to a grim repertoire of land clearances, forced labor, racial privilege, and, where resistance was encountered, native extermination.

The national historiography of empire stresses each state's unique features and destiny. In reality the different empires ceaselessly borrowed from one another. The Spanish borrowed from the Incas and Aztecs, drawing on their tribute systems to extract silver, textiles, and foodstuffs in the Andes and Central America. The Portuguese learned from local merchants how to trade slaves along the African coast and drew on this trade to establish sugar plantations. The Dutch improved on Iberian seamanship and trading; they also passed on expertise to English and French planters and merchants. The English refined and developed their own slave plantations and colonial system while the French brought to both a new pitch of intensity. The colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was even more imitative and reflexive, with each power trying to preempt the other. The United States was drawn into colonial acquisition in part because it believed that it had to have its own coaling stations and secure territory in the Caribbean and Pacific to compete with European rivals. Most of today's far-flung U.S. military outposts are relics of bygone battles with bygone empires. The imperial practices that prevailed were those that inspired imitation and stood the test of time – which often meant the tests of war, revolution, and economic competition.

The retreat of empire was often impelled by genuine national and social revolutions that trumped the phony imperial variety – as in China, Cuba, Algeria, and Vietnam. However, none of the European empires collapsed simply from internal resistance. The two world wars were watershed events, rendering the European empires very vulnerable. But there was one empire – the Soviet – of which this was less true. While it was obviously weakened by economic failure and the strain of Afghanistan, it was also undermined by its relative success in fostering nation-states. Stalin's rise at the expense of Bolshevik internationalism, and the Red Army's advances in the Great Patriotic War, seemed simply to boost the old Russian Empire, albeit in Communist disguise. Yet the Soviet constitution entrenched a right of secession to its constituent republics, while the autarchic economy nourished a species of

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

nation building. In Eastern Europe, where Yalta brutally aligned national groups with new borders, the "people's democracies" were allotted the trappings of sovereignty, and Moscow's often heavy-handed tutelage nourished a countervailing nationalism.[16] The peaceful breakup of the Soviet empire was owed partly to the strength of such processes, partly to Gorbachev's idealism, and partly to the Russian people's disinclination to defend an empire that brought more burdens than privileges. No other empire yielded with such readiness.

Today the major international question is whether, for a similar mixture of motives, the people and government of the United States can also be induced to give up empire.

The optimist must hope that a similarly mild quietus can be administered to the new imperialism. While the new lurch to empire will certainly join the heap of discards sooner or later, there are many in U.S. ruling circles who still cannot read the writing on the wall, even though that wall is in the land of ancient Babylon. Their dream is that neoliberalism, with its market fundamentalism, and neoconservatism, with its jingoism and Old Testament certainties, can impose on the whole world what Ferguson calls Anglobalization.

In the aftermath of twentieth-century decolonization and the breakup of the Soviet Bloc, some neoconservatives and liberal imperialists got a frisson from rehabilitating the 'politically incorrect' language of empire. It underlines the hard-headedness and candor of those who use it and allows them to urge even greater boldness on Washington. But if we scan the speeches of George W. Bush or the National Security Document of September of 2002, we find a repeated invocation of the need for 'liberation,' understood not just as national independence but as a further commitment to what the president called "democratic revolution" in his speech at the Banqueting Hall, London, in November of 2003. Given that he was the guest of the English monarch, it is understandable that he did not remind his listeners of the Banqueting Hall's previous rendezvous with history – the execution of Charles I – but he did declare that the time for alliance with absolutist monarchs and dictatorships in the Middle East was over.

The echo of revolution may be no more than rhetoric, but it would be wrong to neglect it just the same. It allowed Bush and Blair to sell their subsequent war, at least for a while, to their electorates and to some sectors of liberal opinion. When the charge that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD was discredited, it was the subsidiary claim that regime change would open the way to democracy in the Middle East that took its place.

Bush's address to the United Nations in September of 2004, in the midst of the presidential election, returned to the theme that the U.S. mission was to advance liberation, rights, and democracy. By contrast, John Kerry, the Democratic contender, urged that 'stability,' not democracy, was the best that could be hoped for in Iraq. While President Bush appealed to a naive but idealistic belief among voters that their country could and would promote democracy, Kerry implicitly favored the argument from realpolitik and a deal with the strongmen who run so much of the Arab world. In their different ways, both poli-

16 Ronald Suny, "Incomplete Revolution: National Movements and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire," *New Left Review*, series 1, no. 189 (September/October 1991): 111 – 125.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

cies were imperial: they were based on the idea that Iraq should be occupied for years to come, with the occupier determining the scope of the country's politics. Prior to its departure in June of 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had dismantled much of the apparatus of the Iraqi state, with dire consequences for the delivery of basic public services. It had seized and spent oil revenues and had handed out large contracts to foreign, mainly U.S., firms. Resistance from Shiite leaders obliged the CPA to abandon an attempt to entrench in Iraq's basic law the wholesale privatization of national property. These leaders also insisted that the date for elections be brought forward. The CPA, and the caretaker government led by Allawi that it appointed, chose to prepare for elections by attempting to silence or arrest critics of the occupation. Allawi's party received less than an eighth of the total votes.

Karl Rove, George W. Bush's chief political strategist, has said that the book that most influenced him as a graduate student was Eric Foner's classic study of the origins and rise of the Republican ideology in the 1840s and 1850s, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. There can be little doubt that Bush sees himself as the man ordained to complete the neoconservative revolution of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and to bring it home to the 'axis of evil' and to any other countries that stand in the way (China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Venezuela being candidates here). The vision is both an imperial and a revolutionary one, since it seeks to reshape the whole social formation of target countries. That vision seeks to dismantle the local state and to entrust its essential functions to foreign corporations linked to the military-industrial, and as Abu Ghraib made clear, prison-industrial complexes.[17] The whole awkward structure is to be guaranteed, as Chalmers Johnson stresses, by a multiplication of military bases in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.[18] Once acquired, such dubious assets are difficult to give up, further swelling the hugely expensive, provocative – and ultimately indefensible – global U.S. military establishment.

The emphasis that Niall Ferguson places on the imperial export of a neoliberal institutional package places him squarely in the camp of those who believe that democratic revolution can be introduced from outside.

Ferguson believed that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq would help bring Middle Eastern terrorism under control – he still argues this as justification for the war in his book *Colossus*. But instead of wiping out those he calls Islamo-Bolsheviks, the occupation has given them perfect conditions for jihadist mayhem. This is extremely unwelcome to most Iraqi nationalists and to the long-oppressed Shia majority. But since the continuing occupation furnishes an excuse to the jihadists, it is unrealistic to expect Iraqis to rally round the occupiers. Large numbers of Iraqis who loathed Saddam have nevertheless come out in opposition to

17 Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2004). For the "prison industrial complex," see Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 13 (January/February 2002): 41 – 60. While contemporary imperial thinking denies the state a social role, it still needs to foster a global network of states strong enough to enforce property rights and trading conditions; see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2003), 138 – 169.

18 Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

the occupation. The second anniversary of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April of 2005 was marked by a demonstration of 300,000 people in Baghdad calling for the withdrawal of all occupying forces. So far as the scourge of terrorism is concerned, the U.S. presence is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Only a government fully representative of Iraqi opinion and beholden to no outside power – especially a power interested in Iraqi assets – can hope to defeat the jihadists. The jihadists are neither numerous nor popular, but they can only be isolated by an unimpeachably Iraqi government. A government that cannot secure the withdrawal of the occupying powers and the closing of their bases will lack legitimacy.

The old empires eventually yielded to, or preempted, a rising tide of nationalism. The agitations of the Irish and the Indians, the pitched battles fought by Vietnamese and Algerians, the need to crush rebels in Malaya and Kenya – all prompted the metropolitan elite to undertake a rigorous cost-benefit analysis and to explore decolonization as a new form of indirect rule. While particular colonial ventures could be very profitable (I have given examples above), the costs tended to rise as other empires sought to enter the field, acting as competitors or spoilers.

As the British found out as early as the 1780s, decolonization did not need to be an economic disaster. In fact, Anglo-American exchanges soon boomed. After World War II, Western Europe discovered extraordinary prosperity as it shed colonies. There is a message here for the United States today. Those who really believe in market forces should conclude that it makes no sense to secure control of oil-producing states at great cost, since, in the end, the oil will have to be purchased and sold at market prices. If there are energy shortages in store, then fuel efficiency will be cheaper in the long run than expeditions that require a down payment of $200 billion, followed by heavy running costs.

The new imperialism is a very much more flimsy entity than the old. The sad condition of Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia – plagued by differing combinations of insecurity, communalism, lack of legitimacy, drug trafficking, and warlordism – is no advertisement for it. Few will be happy to pay a price in blood and money to achieve such results. There are no problems that the United States should expect to be able to solve by flexing its military muscles. China and India must soon be recognized as Great Powers, and Brazil and Iran as worthy of a place at the top table. Bullying these countries would be folly, just as it is perilous and provocative to encircle China and Russia with bases. Eventually, it must be hoped, the United States will acquire a president who will understand and see the advantages of a less exposed and overweening stance. Withdrawal from all overseas bases would be a good start.

The neo-imperial project may well help to destabilize the old order without achieving its own goals. We can be quite sure that indigenous democratic revolutions will sweep the Arab lands, Iran, and China. They will arise sooner rather than later, and advance notions of liberty without any 'Made in USA' label. The overwhelming case for homegrown democracy does not mean that each state and people should simply be allowed to sink or swim. Today states are ceaselessly, if often ineffectively, coerced into approved capitalist behavior, including a wholesale downsizing of social provision. Ferguson believes that public entitlements should be drastically slashed in

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024

the United States as well as in developing countries. He rightly insists that the citizens of the United States must choose between empire and Social Security and Medicare – or, as this option used to be phrased, between 'guns' and 'butter.' But he is wrong to argue that it is 'guns' that should be preferred.

A just international order remains to be built. While it, too, would require the more advanced countries to make a contribution, it would seek to stimulate sustainable growth. It would require a fundamental reshaping of world institutions that function simply as relays for the Washington–Wall Street consensus.[19] It would also require a willingness to seek out the ways in which transnational banks and corporations might be obliged to contribute to badly needed expenditures on education, infrastructure, and social insurance.[20] These are problems that do not even appear on the radar screen of the new imperialists – something which sets them apart from their classical Anglo-Saxon forebears, from Joseph Chamberlain to Winston Churchill and from Teddy Roosevelt to FDR. A century or more ago the combination of imperialism and social reform proved to be rather effective. The formula of 'imperialism and social counterrevolution' is unlikely to have the same appeal.

Ferguson is not unaware of the problem of the ineffectiveness and weakness of too many states in the modern world, but he does not see that ever-larger doses of imperial intervention and free-market philosophy will make the problem worse. What is required is institutional innovation and a democratic, new 'cosmopolitics' that nourishes the social and economic capacities of its constituent states.

19 For a debate on what this might entail, see Danielle Archibugi, ed., *Cosmopolitics* (London: Verso, 2004).

20 I have some suggestions as to how that might be done in "The Pension Gap and How to Meet It," *Challenge* (July/August 2004): 99 – 112.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/134/2/72/1828936/0011526053887383.pdf by guest on 10 August 2024