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The Idea of Empire

Empires have been, and will be, founded only in the sign of a higher idea.
Nations can found only states.

—FRANZ WERFEL (1937: 7)

For to posterity no greater glory can be handed down than to conquer the barbarian, to recall the savage and the pagan to civility, to draw the ignorant within the orbit of reason.

—RICHARD HAKLUYT, LETTER TO SIR WALTER
RALEIGH, 1595 (IN PAGDEN 1995: 64)

The face of the earth is continually changing, by the encrease of small kingdoms into great empires, by the dissolution of great empires into smaller kingdoms, by the planting of colonies, by the migration of tribes. Is there anything discoverable in all these events, but force and violence?

—DAVID HUME ([1748] 1987: 471)

The Rediscovery of Empire

Antipathy to empire is not the same as indifference toward it, or its study. Hobson and Lenin both loathed empire, but thought it a matter of the greatest urgency to study and understand it. Joseph Schumpeter too, convinced as he was that empire was an atavistic throwback to a militaristic past, devoted considerable thought to its anatomy. In the interwar period, as expansionist regimes in Italy, Germany, and Japan sought to build new empires, scholars and intellectuals such as James Burnham and Franz Neumann—not to mention revolutionaries such as Mao Tse-tung—once more felt the need to scrutinize and analyze the springs of the new imperialism.¹

Both politically and intellectually, the period after the Second World War saw a retreat from empire. Politically, the most obvious fact was the dissolution of the great European overseas empires—British, French, Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese—and the rise of new states created out of them. These new states were nation-states, formed in the mold of the modern European nation-state. The important thing therefore seemed to be to understand nationalism, especially “Third World” nationalism. Empire was a thing of the past. The future was a world of nations, seen most spectacularly in the fifty or so new states that joined the United Nations between 1960 and 1980 (Strang 1991: 437).

Marxists, in both West and East, continued to debate imperialism in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in relation to American foreign policy and the politics of the Cold War. But this was really a discussion about capitalism, and its impact in particular on the Third World of developing nations. Imperialism here was a surrogate for the latest stage of capitalism, in its increasingly global aspect. Hence the common resort to theories of dependency and of “informal empire” (Lichtheim 1974: chaps. 7–9; Mommsen 1982: 113–41).² What disappeared—because the entity itself seemed a thing of the past—was interest in the specifics of empires: their principles of operation, their goals, the particular kind of entity they represented. Antipathy to empire was here matched by indifference.

It is this indifference that has been swept away in recent decades. Empire is back, as a steadily growing volume of books, conferences, and mass media treatments testifies.³ From the viewpoint of scholarly interest, at least in the English-speaking world, one might pick out Michael Doyle’s enterprising and ambitious *Empires* (1986) as marking the start of the revival. This was followed almost immediately afterward by Paul Kennedy’s much-acclaimed and surprisingly popular *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1988): a synoptic study of the great European empires of the past, and of the reasons for their rise and demise. The Gibbonesque echo in the title was not lost on most readers, nor the Gibbonesque desire to draw lessons for the contemporary world—and especially for Americans—from the record of past empires. A similar intent lay behind Niall Ferguson’s more studiously popular *Empire* (2004), whose subtitle—*How Britain Made the Modern World*—combatively asserts the link between the British Empire and contemporary globalization (“Anglobalization”) that Ferguson was at pains to demonstrate. For the student and scholar, David Abernethy produced an invaluable work of synthesis on the European overseas empires, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance* (2000); Dominic Lieven (2001), focusing especially on Russia, did the same for the land empires in his

Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals (2001). More recently there has been an impressively wide-ranging account of empires as a global phenomenon, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's *Empires in World History* (2010).

Empire, everyone agrees, continues to have the negative, pejorative connotation that it began to acquire in the early twentieth century and that rose to a high point of intensity in the post-1945 period of decolonization.⁴ Today no one argues for empire, at least in the sense of formal empire, as many people did in the past. If empire exists today, it is the thing that dare not speak its name. Even talk of “the American Empire” tends to come overwhelmingly from those opposed to current American policies and strategies in the world; it is rare to find anyone advocating American imperialism as such.⁵

But if empire is generally thought to be bad—if, in present circumstances, it is difficult to imagine anyone or any state even attempting it in a formal way—why has it suddenly become popular to study it? Why the outpouring of books and conferences on the subject? What accounts for its fascination today?

There are a number of possible reasons, but one word, “globalization,” probably covers a good many of them. Empire, at least as an object of reflection, is back in favor because it retrieves a form that in a practical way engaged with many of the features that preoccupy us today. Do we attempt “multiculturalism,” that is, to accommodate a great variety of beliefs and ways of life within existing state structures? Empires were multicultural almost by definition. Are we faced with the challenge of emigration and immigration on a global scale, creating “diasporic” communities of newcomers as large minorities within host populations? Empires were both created by and the cause in turn of vast migrations across the surface of the world. Is the nation-state under stress, perhaps even in crisis, as a result of the transnational movements of finance, industry, people, and ideas? Empires were and are “multinational” and “supranational.” They preceded the nation-state and may well succeed it.

Empire, in sum, can be the prism through which to examine many of the pressing problems of the contemporary world—perhaps even the birth pangs of a new world order. Wherever we turn we seem to encounter problems and situations for which there are precedents in the historic empires.⁶

It may be somewhat in jest that some commentators talk of the European Union as a revived “Habsburg Empire,” or a revived “Holy Roman Empire”; there may be a degree of nostalgia in speaking approvingly of the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire as some kind of model for our multicultural societies; the *pax Britannica* as an exemplar of world order may bring a smile to the lips of some hearers. But there is a real sense in which empires achieved many of

the things that currently elude us. Stephen Howe, no friend of empire, nevertheless suggests that “at least some of the great modern empires—the British, French, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and even the Ottoman—had virtues that have been too readily forgotten. They provided stability, security, and legal order for their subjects. They constrained, and at their best tried to transcend, the potentially savage ethnic or religious antagonisms among their peoples. And the aristocracies which ruled most of them were often far more liberal, humane, and cosmopolitan than their supposedly ever more democratic successors” (Howe 2002a: 126–27; cf. Kappeler 2001: 3, 392).⁷

It seems likely that it is this contemporary relevance, arising from some very long-term and deep-seated changes in the political and economic order of the world, that will continue to fuel the revived interest in empires. In that sense it is the most important cause of the revival. But there have also been some more immediate causes. The breakup, in 1991, of what has generally come to be called “the Soviet Empire” was one. It was almost impossible for scholars to resist the urge to compare the Soviet Empire with other empires, past and present, to ask whether there might not be instructive parallels in the course, development, and eventual collapse of similar, far-flung, multiethnic land empires, such as the Habsburg or Ottoman empires. The Soviet Empire increasingly came to be seen within the perspective of Russian imperialism as a whole, to include therefore the previous tsarist phase. Once this was conceded, the way seemed open to comparative inquiry that brought together scholars from a range of disciplines and specializations concerned with empire.⁸

Whether or not talk of “the American Empire” will stimulate so instructive a discussion is a moot point. But there is no doubting the impact of the renewed accounts of America as an empire.⁹ This applies as much to the idea of America as itself an empire—as in Alexander Hamilton’s belief that the new republic was “an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world” (Lichtheim 1974: 60)—as to the more conventional view that America is pursuing, and has long pursued, an imperial policy toward the rest of the world. The current debate about the American Empire is mostly a debate about American intentions in the world today, and about the ideologies that sustain them. But it has had the effect of raising questions about the nature of empires in general, what they are and how they perceive themselves. Nearly every discussion of “the American Empire,” whether or not it finds the term satisfactory, begins with an account of what we know about other empires; nearly every conference on empires ends with a session on “the American Empire”—usually followed by a question mark.

It is indeed a widely held view that the new interest in empires springs directly from talk of the American Empire. This seems to take too narrow a view of the matter. There are many other things driving the move. It may be in fact that what has led to the discourse of the American Empire is itself a product of those other, wider, changes. Globalization has impinged on America no less than it has on other societies, even if America has played a central role in bringing it about (so partly disguising the process as simple “Americanization”). What makes America “imperial,” or makes it seem so, may simply be the current American responses to a fragmentation and instability in the world order that have in good part been caused by America’s own cultural and economic dynamism, and by the victory of American-style capitalism over all its rivals (including Soviet communism). The “American Empire”—which everyone admits does not include the desire to acquire fresh possessions—is what exists when “the lonely superpower” confronts a “new world disorder.”¹⁰

One thing, in any case, is clear from the widespread rediscovery of empire: empire is not just history. It has a contemporary resonance that gives it a strong claim on our attention beyond the purely historical. But it is also contemporary in a further sense. The disappearance of the European empires has, after all, been very recent, in historical terms. The Austrian, German, Russian, and Ottoman empires—the great land empires—collapsed during and after the First World War. The French, Dutch, British, Belgian, and Portuguese overseas empires dissolved more slowly, in the thirty or so years following the Second World War. But in either case we are talking of a period of no more than a hundred years, to be set against many centuries of imperial rule. It is impossible that there should be no “afterlife” of empire, no legacy that continues to haunt the societies of both the colonized and the colonizers (cf. Pagden 1995: 1–2).

This has been a major theme, of course, of many studies of formerly colonized peoples, mostly non-Western but including for some scholars nearer “colonies” such as Ireland and the Balkan countries. Writers such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said have been the major influences here, followed by various schools of “postcolonial theory” (see, e.g., Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995; Young 2001). But it is equally important to see that imperial legacies continue to play a significant role in the life of the imperial peoples themselves—the British, French, Russians, Austrians, Turks, and others. This has been clear in a number of ways, most obviously in the post-1945 immigration into European societies of large numbers of people from the former European empires (“the empire strikes back”). But it also shows itself in the impact of empire on

the consciousness of the former imperial peoples, their sense of themselves and their place in the world when empire has gone.

This is a subject by itself, to be addressed separately (as I hope to do in a later book).¹¹ This book touches on it, but its main concern is the outlook and attitudes of the ruling peoples during the period of actual imperial rule, when the empires were at their height. Their formal demise opened a new chapter in the history of empire, one that looked back reflectively but also contemplated future forms of empire. When empires ruled the world, the way they thought about themselves necessarily had a different character. Whatever their doubts and anxieties about their future, their rulers had the immediate, practical task of managing a multiplicity of peoples. How they saw that task, how they conceived their role as an imperial people, what kind of identities that conferred on them: those are the main themes of the chapters that follow.

To concentrate on the rulers rather than the subject peoples of empire is to shift the emphasis away from most recent studies, especially of the “post-colonial” variety. But that does not mean to neglect the impact of empire on the subject peoples. Rather, it is to reconceptualize the relationship, to see it not simply in oppositional terms but as a matter of a shared enterprise that could unite rulers and ruled as much as it divided them. Just as nation-states have divisions—classes, races, religions—but can often act collectively, so too empires aimed at and often achieved a unity that overrode the many differences that were indeed constitutive features.

That brings in ideologies, the way empires sought to portray themselves, often in the form of a universal “mission” that justified their rule and expansion, and in which all peoples of the empire could participate. Often that took religious form—Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism; sometimes it was secular, as in the French *mission civilisatrice*. Time played a part in this; generally the later the empire, the more secular the mission. But we should also remember that it was the Romans who pioneered the original “civilizing mission.” Some missions are transhistorical.

Nation-states sometimes also have missions; but, premised as they are on the principle of the equality of nations, they are different from the universal missions of empires. That is one way that empires differ from nation-states, despite some important similarities. Another is the extent to which the rulers of empires have to suppress their own national or ethnic identities, in the interests of the more efficient management of their multinational states and the long-term preservation of their rule. That is one of the most distinguishing features of empires, and will get due attention in the succeeding chapters.

All these things follow from focusing on the rule of empire, the ideas and ideals of the ruling peoples. They will concern us in all the main chapters of this book, those dealing with the Roman, Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian/Soviet, British, and French empires. They provide, as it were, the thematic spine to the chapters. The empires differed from each other in many ways, not least in the way in which they responded to a changing historical environment. Later empires faced different challenges from earlier ones. But all empires had to deal with many of the same problems, those especially of managing difference and diversity across often vast geographical spaces. History and narrative are important, and they find their place in this book. But there are also questions to do with the very form of empire, empire as an entity with some characteristic features. This cuts across history and chronology. This too must be our concern as we analyze the individual empires, in all their particularities.

First we need to turn to the concept of empire. We need to know what it has meant, and whether any of those meanings fit our current usages. How best should we think of empire? What kind of an entity, or entities, is it? What characteristic relations does it establish? How does it differ from other political forms that we are familiar with—most especially, the nation-state?

“Empire without end”: Rome and the Imperial Idea

The history of the world is virtually a history of empires (Howe 2002a: 1; Pagden 2003: ix; Ferguson 2005: xii). For much of recorded history, at least, people have lived in empires. But empires have come in many shapes and forms, at many places and in many times. That, according to John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson in a famous article, is why there is so much disagreement among students of empire: they are “writing about different empires,” selecting often “eccentric or isolated aspects” and generalizing from them (Gallagher and Robinson 1953: 1; cf. Morrison 2001: 3).

The variety is indeed extraordinary, if we consider the things that are usually called empires. From the time of Sargon of Akkad’s conquest of the city-states of Sumeria (third millennium BCE), the Middle East—source of civilization—has been host to a succession of empires—the Akkadian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian, the Persian, the Greco-Roman, the Arab, the Ottoman. In the same area the Egyptian Empire was for more than three thousand years a beacon of civilization and culture—so powerful, so creative, that some have been tempted to see it as the parent of civilization itself. Further east in Asia there were empires in China and India; while to the south were the Aztec and Inca

empires of the New World. Later came the European empires—the Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Belgian, and British empires, the Austrian, German, and Russian empires. These empires, taken as a whole, exhibit an enormous range of characteristics, politically, technologically, culturally. What, if anything, unites them? Why call them all “empires”?

It was not so very long ago that scholars still attempted, as had earlier generations, to find common patterns, common principles, linking all empires, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern (e.g., Eisenstadt [1963] 1993; Kautsky [1982] 1997). Nowadays the custom is to be more cautious, to distinguish types and periods of empire and imperialism. Nevertheless, there is a surprising amount of agreement on what constitutes empire at the most general level. What is also convenient is that this understanding derives in the main from our understanding of the Roman Empire. The concept of empire that emerges from considering the Roman case can be fitted, without too much of a stretch, to most of the other political entities that we are in the habit of calling empires—including those, such as the Assyrian or the Persian, that predated Rome. The reason why this is convenient is that the empires that concern us in this book without exception harked back to Rome.

Of course it is not mere chance or good luck that brings about the fit between Rome and empire. To a good extent what, especially in the West, came to be called empire was indebted to the Roman example. To be an empire was to be like Rome. But, once formulated from the Roman case, the same principles are readily found to be at work in many other instances that we have come to think of as empires.

The Roman or Latin word for empire is *imperium*. “*Imperium sine fine*,” “empire without end,” with “no bounds in space or time,” is what, according to Virgil’s celebrated account at the opening of the *Aeneid* (1.278–79), Jupiter promised the Romans, the descendants of the Trojan founders of Rome. But by Virgil’s time—the first century of the Principate, the Roman Empire proper—the word had undergone an important shift in meaning. Or, rather, the word had acquired a double meaning, a fact that has been responsible for much of the confusion in later times.

In its main, original, and longest-lasting sense *imperium* referred to the lawfully conferred sovereign power of the magistrate or ruler. “In the language of public law the word denoted the power bestowed by the people on the highest magistrates entrusted with enforcing authority, the consuls, proconsuls, praetors, propraeors, dictators” (Koebner 1961: 5–6; cf. Richardson 1991: 2).¹² Consonant with this sense was the military usage, also common from the

beginning, in which *imperium* was bestowed by the people on a supreme military commander.

It is this first meaning of *imperium* that has persisted ever since Roman times, finding an echo in all the European vernacular languages.¹³ For English speakers, the best-known example of this is the famous pronouncement in Henry VIII's Act in Restraint of Appeals of 1533, that "this realm of England is an empire" (Elton 1982: 353; see also Ullmann 1979). By this was meant that the king of England acknowledged no superiors in his realm, that his rule was sovereign or absolute, and that there could be no appeal to a higher power, such as the pope. That Tudor England, a kingdom of modest size and moderate power, could make such a claim shows that size and power were not determining criteria. In principle any state—kingdom or republic—could declare itself an empire, as did several of the Italian city-states, such as Milan under the Visconti dukes. It did not have to have extensive territories inhabited by different peoples.

No doubt, "as far as the word referred to the authority of government it seemed more natural to reserve it for some particularly majestic government" (Koebner 1961: 57). The European vernaculars had already begun to use the word "empire" figuratively, to connote majesty and grandeur, whether of the sun or of a great river. But if Shakespeare can refer equally to England, Scotland, and France as all being "an Empery," it is clear that size and grandeur are not for him necessary elements in the understanding of empire; other meanings had to be imported to make these the essential criteria that they became. For early modern thinkers, the key aspect of empire was authority, especially royal authority (though not "despotism").¹⁴ That is why we find so many rulers during the era of European absolutism making this claim for their realms. Empire was no more, and no less, than a synonym for sovereignty—the principal meaning given to it in the writings of Bodin, Hobbes, Grotius, and Spinoza (Koebner 1961: 52).

Returning to the Roman case, it is with such a meaning in mind that we must understand the frequent references to empire in such writers as Cicero. "Cicero's comments on the *imperium populi Romani* never swerved from the intrinsic meaning of 'imperium' to which he paid emphatic tribute in *De Legibus*—the legal power to enforce the law. . . . It was not understood to denote 'the Empire', the political entity of the *orbis* governed by the *imperium populi Romani*" (Koebner 1961: 4–5). This restraint is all the more remarkable given that the Roman Empire, in fact if not in name, was largely a republican accomplishment. As Edward Gibbon correctly put it, "the principal conquests

of the Romans were achieved under the republic; and the emperors, for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions which had been acquired by the policy of the senate, the active emulation of the consuls, and the martial enthusiasm of the people” (Gibbon [1776–88] 1995, 1:31; cf. Schumpeter [1919] 1974: 50–51; Finley 1978a: 2).¹⁵ In view of this one might have expected the word *imperium* to be extended to cover the thing, the empire, over which *imperium* was exercised.

In fact this did happen, thereby giving rise to the second main meaning of *imperium* that was handed down to Rome’s successors. It was perhaps out of republican sentiment that Cicero, who after all died for the republic, was unwilling to speak of *imperium* as “the empire.” But the word apparently was used in this additional sense even in his time. Caesar, for one, fittingly did so use it, even in the period before his actions brought down the republic and inaugurated the empire. Its success as the designation of empire was aided by the fact that the Senate conferred on both Caesar and his successor, Augustus, the title of *imperator*. This was a word that had generally been used in the republic—and for some time after—as “a title of honour, bestowed on a victorious general by the acclamation of the army on the field of battle” (*OED* 1989: s.v. “emperor”). In the case of Caesar and Augustus it was meant to refer to the military powers with which the chief of state was invested.

Augustus was at pains to insist that he respected the institutions of the republic, and that the title of *imperator* did not infringe on any of its legal practices. He reaffirmed on several occasions that the *imperium orbis terrarum*—the territorial empire—remained the *imperium populi Romani* (Koebner 1961: 7). However, since not only Caesar and Augustus but every ruler of the empire subsequently (with the exceptions of Tiberius and Claudius) adopted the title of *imperator*, it was inevitable that it would go beyond its purely military meaning to take on all the connotations of political rule. When, in 23 BCE, Augustus’s proconsular *imperium* was declared by the Senate to be permanent and to include all of Rome’s provinces—a remit that all subsequent emperors claimed—the stage was set for *imperator* and *imperium* to be conjoined. The *imperium populi Romani* now became emphatically the *imperium Romanum*, ruled by a deified *princeps* or *imperator*. It was as such that the Augustan poets Virgil, Horace, and Ovid acclaimed it; other writers, such as Livy and Tacitus, confirmed the link, though with more misgivings (Koebner 1961: 11–16; Lichtheim 1974: 25–26; Woolf 2001: 315).

The passage from *imperium* as authority, the authority of the Roman people, to *imperium* as the province or territory of the emperor, was, as George

Lichtheim notes, “a development of the highest significance, for it coloured the whole subsequent course of Western political history and, more especially, the coinage of Western political terminology” (Lichtheim 1974: 24). Empire never lost its association with absolute rule or sovereignty; but it was fused now with the idea of rule over a vast region occupied by many different peoples—the empire, the *imperium orbis terrarum* or *imperium totius orbis*, the territorial empire that included not just Romans and Italians but Greeks, Gauls, Spaniards, British, Egyptians, Africans, Syrians—potentially, and ideally, the whole world.¹⁶

This is of course the meaning most common today, at least in popular parlance. When we speak of the Russian or the British Empire, we do indeed usually still think of a single ruler, the tsar or the “king-emperor,” and there is still the lurking sense that this ruler is absolute. But the British Empire was ruled for most of its history by a parliamentary monarchy, and the French Empire, from 1871, by a parliamentary republic. The earlier meaning of “empire” has been largely superseded by the later one, such that “empire” now means, for most people, a political organization incorporating peoples of many different races and ethnicities—“une état vaste et composé de plusieurs peuples,” as it was put by the compiler of a dictionary in early eighteenth-century France.¹⁷ It means more than this, of course, especially in scholarly usage, as we shall see; and the earlier meaning has by no means disappeared.¹⁸ But the fact that empire is thought of as it is today is ultimately due to the shift in meaning that took place as Rome moved from the *imperium populi Romani* to the *imperium Romanum*.

Roman usage had, therefore, by the time of the first century CE linked the two main meanings of “empire”: absolute authority or sovereignty, and rule over a complex territorial polity (Richardson 1991: 1, 7; Pagden 1995: 13; Woolf 2001: 313). This duality was continued, if with less assurance, in the “Holy Roman Empire” that, from its founding by Charlemagne in 800 CE, maintained some kind of existence for over a thousand years, until its abolition by Napoleon in 1806. The emperor elected by the German princes was, in theory at least, as sovereign and supreme as the Roman emperors of old; at the same time the empire over which he ruled was made up of a bewildering variety of territories—kingdoms, principalities, bishoprics, independent cities—many of them not German.¹⁹ In the hands of Ottonians and Salians, of Hohenstaufens such as Frederick Barbarossa and Frederick II, and of Habsburgs such as Charles V, the full universalist legacy of Rome could be claimed, and asserted (including the right to govern Italy and to make Rome the seat of the empire); for other Holy

Roman emperors, it was merely an aspiration or a dream, undercut by the reality of rivalry with the papacy and severely limited power over the empire's territories (Folz [1953] 1969: 121–68; Bloch 1967; Heer [1968] 2002: 22–93). But so long as the empire lasted, it perpetuated the notion of empire as a particularly authoritative—if not authoritarian—form of rule over a far-flung territory or territories whose main characteristic was diversity.²⁰

There is one further theme deriving from Rome that needs to be mentioned here. That is the theme of the empire's universalism. Here the Romans drew on Greek thought, especially as developed by the Stoics with their idea of a single human community united by the universality of reason—"a single joint community," to use Cicero's later phrase, "of gods and men" (in Pagden 1995: 19). Influenced by the actual conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek philosophers came to see Hellenic civilization as having a universal mission. Greek civilization, the highest level to which mankind had hitherto attained, was in their eyes coterminous with the *oikoumene*, the civilized world; beyond its borders lay barbarism. The purpose of empire was the extension of the global civilizing mission, under Hellenic auspices, begun by Alexander.²¹

It was indeed Greek thinkers such as Polybius who, from the second century BCE on, came to regard the Roman Empire as continuing the mission of Alexander. Roman writers, such as Livy and Virgil, seized on the theme enthusiastically. Rome would bring peace, order, and justice to mankind. Its empire would encompass the *orbis terrarum*, the entire known world, uniting all the peoples of the world in the *pax Romana*. With the Christianization of the empire following Constantine's conversion in the fourth century, Rome's ecumenical mission was given a further spiritual dimension. All medieval emperors, in their various efforts to revive and renew the Roman Empire, emphasized the unity of the *orbis christianus* and the *orbis romanus*: they were two sides of the same universalizing mission, now under God's protection, to realize for the benefit of all mankind the virtues that Romans and Christians had always striven for.²²

Rome remained, and perhaps still remains, the fount and emblem of empire, certainly in the West. "Rome has consistently provided the inspiration, the imagery, and the vocabulary for all the European empires from early-modern Spain to late-nineteenth-century Britain" (Pagden 2003: 19; cf. Pagden 1995: 11–12). Howe goes further in declaring that "the Romans invented the concept of empire, at least in the forms in which it was to be understood, and constantly referred back to, by later empire builders" (Howe 2002a: 41). And Koebner indicates the depth of the inheritance going back to the earliest times:

The modern concept of empire unfailingly recalls the Roman Empires of the past: the *Imperium populi Romani* of the Republic, the *Imperium Romanum* governed by the Emperor Augustus and his successors, the Holy Roman Empire which was vested in Charlemagne and later on in the kings elected by German princes. The British empire, the Empire français of the Napoleons, the Reich of the Hohenzollern, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the State of the Tsars have, in whatever mood—whether of glorification, of misgivings, or even of abhorrence—provoked comparison with one or other of these predecessors. (Koebner 1961: 18; cf. Richardson 1991: 1)

It was not just the “grandeur that was Rome” that constantly provoked these comparisons. We need to remember that Rome itself persisted long after its supposed decline and fall in the West. It persisted even in the West, in the form of the Holy Roman Empire that was extinguished only in 1806; and, more unequivocally, it persisted in the East, in the Byzantine Empire that was the direct continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire established by Constantine in the fourth century. That empire was overthrown in 1453, by the Ottomans. But the Ottomans too were dazzled by Rome. They too felt, like many European emperors, that they had inherited the Roman mantle. They called their capital Istanbul, the Turkish name for Constantinople, the city of Constantine.²³ The sultan Mehmed II, conqueror of the Byzantines, had his portrait painted by the Italian artist Gentile Bellini, and employed Italian humanists to read him stories from Herodotus and Livy about the glories of Greece and Rome. “No one doubts,” he was assured by the Byzantine scholar George of Trebizond, “that you are the emperor of the Romans.” Noting this continuity Anthony Pagden has said that “if the Western Roman Empire came to an end . . . in 1806 . . . the Roman Empire in the East vanished only with the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate on March 3, 1924” (Pagden 2003: 176).

Chapter 2 gives a more detailed account of the Roman legacy of empire—a legacy that we will have occasion to refer to many times in the course of this book. First, though, we need to turn to the question of what, deriving from this particular history, modern scholars have made of the concepts of empire and imperialism.

Empire, Imperialism, Colonialism

By the eighteenth century, the two central elements of the idea of empire were firmly established. The older and primary notion of sovereignty was

increasingly overlaid by the newer concept of rule over extensive territories containing many different peoples. Whatever the contribution of the Holy Roman Empire in this respect, there can be no question that it was the dazzling achievements of certain European states in the lands beyond Europe that most definitively set the seal on this development. It was above all the overseas empires of Portugal and Spain, later of Holland, France, and England, that gave the word “empire” its modern connotation. Rome and its empire were constantly invoked in these creations; but Rome had never had anything to match the huge Spanish possessions in the New World, nor the territories of the British Empire, which at its greatest extent occupied a quarter of the world’s land surface and included a quarter of the world’s population. “Romans are dead out, English are come in,” proclaimed Thomas Carlyle in 1840, as he contemplated the “grand tasks” assigned to the English people in “the stream of World-History” (Carlyle [1840] 1971: 202).

But it was not just the Atlantic powers that, from the sixteenth century, were becoming imperial. There were the Habsburgs who, following the building of an overseas empire through the Spanish line, continued through the Austrian line to found another empire, this time a land empire in central and southeastern Europe. There was Russia, which from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth expanded gigantically in an eastward direction, reaching the Pacific by the end of the seventeenth century and mopping up areas in between thereafter. There were the Ottoman Turks, who conquered Constantinople in 1453, so setting the seal on a vast land empire that straddled Asia and Europe, twice bringing them to the gates of Vienna where their advance was finally halted. Even China, which since the Ming dynasty had turned in on itself and seemed uninterested in further expansion, in the eighteenth century under the Qing dynasty engaged in massive expansion to the north and west, giving China a multiethnic and multilingual “imperial” character that it had not previously possessed (Di Cosmo 1998; Perdue 2005). These imposing and long-lasting land empires had their own distinctive patterns and made their own characteristic contribution to thinking about empire.

There are, in other words, many empires ancient and modern, and empires of many varying types, to reflect upon in coming to some sort of definition of what is or makes an empire. One might be, as I am, sympathetic to Max Weber’s observation that “definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study” rather than at its beginning (Weber 1963: 1). No doubt by the end of this book we might have arrived at some different sense of empire from the one with which we began. But it is useful to make an initial stab,

helped by a number of authors. What is striking is the general agreement on the main concept of empire, and of such derived terms as imperialism. Moreover, it is clear that, whatever the changes in the intervening centuries, modern definitions derive from empires as they have been known and spoken about for centuries—Rome, of course, being the persisting point of reference.

In a formulation that has found wide acceptance, Michael Doyle has defined empire as “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. . . . Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing an empire” (Doyle 1986: 45).²⁴ The key elements here are a one-way flow of power, stemming from the imperial state or “metropole,” and a consequent dependence or subordination on the part of the colony or “periphery.” What links the metropole to the periphery, besides the asymmetrical relationship of control, is a “transnational society” based in the metropole (Doyle 1986: 81). By this Doyle means the “transnational extension of the domestic society of the metropole” to the periphery, whether this takes the form of the democratic city-state, as with the fifth-century Athenian Empire, the urban legal civilization of Rome in the case of the Roman Empire, or the political institutions of Tudor and Stuart England, as with England’s North American empire (Doyle 1986: 129). Imperial states, in other words, export their characteristic institutions to the periphery, thereby building a bridge between the two and creating a common culture that ensures that metropolitan institutions and ideas always have the upper hand.

This conception of empire allows us to distinguish empires simply from large or extensive states lacking both the separation involved in the distinction between metropole and periphery, and the presence of a transnational society and transnational actors bridging the distance between metropole and periphery. Moses Finley has complained that it is only too common to identify empire with any extensive territorial state, whereas what is critical is the exercise of authority “over other states (or communities or peoples)” (Finley 1978a: 1; see also 1978b: 104).²⁵ We have seen that, deriving from its original meaning of sovereignty, there was indeed a practice of calling large states empires even when there was no obvious connotation of rule over a number of different peoples. We shall also see, later in this chapter, that the line between territorial states—especially nation-states—and empires is by no means as clear-cut as Finley or Doyle would like us to think. Many modern states, such as France or Britain, have an imperial character even when they do not acknowledge it, and before (and after) they have acquired their formal overseas empires. What remains important, however, in these as much as in

the better-known and more familiar cases of empire, is that rule is exercised over a plurality of peoples.

It is misleading to suggest, as some scholars do (e.g., Lieven 2001: 25), that the two meanings of empire—simply a large state as opposed to a multiethnic or multinational state—map onto the well-known distinction between land empires and overseas empires. It is true that in the case of land empires, such as the Russian and the Habsburg empires, the fact that territories are contiguous makes it less easy for the casual observer to distinguish between metropole and periphery than in the case of overseas empires, such as the British or the French, where the geographical distances underline the political ones. Nevertheless, land empires no less than overseas empires have fairly recognizable and well-understood metropolises and peripheries. No one could mistake that, say, in the land empire of the Ottomans, where Constantinople stood in a clear metropolitan relationship to its peripheries. The distinction between land and overseas empires is a helpful one, as we shall see, and carries important implications for both imperial and subject peoples. Things become even more interesting in the case of those states, such as Britain, that can be considered both land empires and overseas empires. But the distinctions that matter are not those between empires that have metropolises and peripheries and empires that do not. It is a distinguishing mark of all empires that relations of metropole and periphery exist and that they structure much of the political life of those entities.

More problematic is the distinction that some scholars wish to make between “imperialism” and “colonialism.” There is some basis for this in the history of the terms. “Empire” is a venerable term, but “imperialism” entered the vocabulary of European nations only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and “colonialism,” as a general term, not until the 1950s and 1960s (*OED* 1989: s.v. “imperialism,” “colonialism”). Each had its characteristic uses. In the 1880s and 1890s—overcoming an earlier negativity—“imperialism” was generally used with a positive connotation, to mean the advocacy of empire, principally by Western powers. With the publication of J. A. Hobson’s *Imperialism* in 1902, followed by the writings of Lenin and others, the word began its career as a term of disparagement, though the positive meaning continued alongside for the first half of the twentieth century (Fieldhouse 1961: 187–88; Koebner and Schmidt 1964: chaps. 4–8; Hobsbawm 1987: 60). In the 1960s, thanks largely to its use by communist and Third World writers and activists, the word “colonialism” began to displace “imperialism” as a term of abuse. Unlike the latter, the former “seems to have been used with almost exclusively hostile intent right from the start” (Howe 2002a: 27).

But, apart from this terminological history, can a more useful distinction be established between colonialism and imperialism? Eric Hobsbawm suggests that, with the imperialism of the capitalist powers of the late nineteenth century, a new type of empire arose, the colonial empire. Imperialism now took on an irreducibly economic character, thereby rendering obsolete all comparisons with earlier precapitalist empires. For Hobsbawm, there is from this time only colonialism—even if the word had to wait to be fully domesticated—rather than old-style imperialism (Hobsbawm 1987: 57–60).

Hobsbawm may believe that latter-day imperialism or colonialism can be reduced to economic causes. But he is perfectly well aware that many people, such as Schumpeter, thought differently, and we are certainly under no obligation to follow the Marxist canon on this. There are in any case too many problems associated with it.²⁶ It certainly does not help us very much in understanding such twentieth-century phenomena as the Soviet Empire, still less Hitler's Third Reich. It is true that most of the supporters of the European colonial empires expected them to bring in economic dividends, though whether in the event they did remains a hotly contested topic (see, e.g., Offer 1993). But that does not mean that we can ignore military, political, or ideological factors in their creation, or see these simply as the superficial features of a basically economic motivation. To that extent they belong to the same species as other empires of the past, reaching back to Rome and even beyond. There may well be important differences between ancient and modern empires, but the stress on economics does not seem to get to the heart of the matter.

A different way of distinguishing imperialism from colonialism comes in the suggestion that imperialism be restricted to the activities of land empires, leaving colonialism as the proper term to describe the system of overseas empires. Thus the Chinese or the Russians can be said to have had the older form of the more regionally based land empires, while the British and the French engaged in the world-transforming enterprise of overseas colonialism (see, e.g., Adas 1998: 371). But a number of scholars have argued persuasively that, to take the Chinese case as an example, Chinese expansion into "Inner Asia" under the Qing in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had all the basic characteristics of European overseas expansion, and that "Qing rule in Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang did not differ in principle from the European penetration of overseas dependencies" (Di Cosmo 1998: 306; see also Perdue 2005). Moreover, it has long been held that the Russian overland conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century had many of the hallmarks of colonial expansion, including the planting of colonists and the establishment of a

colonial administration (Carrère d'Encausse 1989; Di Cosmo 1998: 307). Once more, while we may wish to insist on the differences between European and non-Western imperialism, principally on the issue of superior technological and military power (Adas 1998: 382–88), that is a different matter from trying to distinguish between imperialism and colonialism.

One further attempt might be mentioned, even though it might seem to confuse matters even more. Moses Finley (1976) has argued that the term “colonialism” should be applied only in those cases where the metropolitan society deliberately plants settlements of men and women—true colonies or “plantations”—that exist in a relation of dependency on the metropolitan power. By this account, while the Athenians and the Spartans of the fifth century BCE had empires (Finley 1978b), the ancient Greeks generally did not have colonies or colonialism, since the “colonies” set up by the metropolis or “mother-city” were both in intent and in fact self-governing communities of citizens, like the *poleis* from which they derived (see also White 1961).²⁷ More controversially, Finley argues that while India was part of the British *Empire*, it was not a colony and therefore does not belong to the system of colonialism. Colonialism in the British context can apply only to those settlements where there were considerable numbers of British or European colonists, such as those of North America, Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa. This means that many of those parts of the British Empire, including many territories in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, where Europeans did not settle in great numbers, cannot be considered colonies. Imperialism and colonialism may overlap, but they have different principles and lead to different relationships between metropole and periphery.²⁸

In trying to return to a “technical” and confessedly rather archaic meaning of the term “colony,” Finley is aware that the enterprise may appear quixotic (Finley 1976: 170). Indeed it is so. It is as clear to him as to others that colonialism and imperialism have come to be used more or less interchangeably, and no great service is done by attempting to keep them separate. When the attempt is still made, it is done without much conviction (e.g., Howe 2002a: 25–31). Even a concept such as “internal colonialism,” which has been put to good use by thinkers such as Michael Hechter ([1975] 1999), turns out not to be very different from what we mean by imperialism, and certainly does not call for the plantation of colonies as suggested in Finley’s account (which is why Finley will have none of it). Similarly while “decolonization” is a useful term, for which “empire” and “imperialism” provide no equivalent cognates, its use requires no special theory of colonialism distinct from that of imperialism.

Empire, imperialism, and colonialism make up a family of concepts with varied but overlapping uses. While their histories point to different origins, the passage of time has merged them into a composite about which there is a reasonable degree of consensus. What matters above all from our point of view is the meaning of empire. Rome supplied the basic terms of that meaning. Doyle's definition, quoted above, is a reasonable summation of the tradition of use that derived from that. Empire is rule over a multitude of peoples. Imperialism and colonialism are the attitudes and practices that relate to empire.

Imperialism, in the strict, formal sense, may be a thing of the past. The various institutions of the international community frown on attempts to annex or to incorporate new territories into existing states. Even the most powerful states have come to accept that self-denying ordinance.²⁹ But there have always been forms of "informal empire," ways of controlling the destinies of other states and societies without formally taking possession of them (Gallagher and Robinson 1953; Wood 2005). The British practiced this on a large scale in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Americans since the Second World War if not earlier; the Russians may be doing so today after the loss of their formal empire of the Soviet Union. "Empires" may have gone, but imperialism may still be with us.

More important, there is a widespread sense that the political institutions that served the world community over the past two centuries or so are no longer capable of doing so in the same way or with the same effect. Whether or not the nation-state and its institutions are in "decline" is a hotly debated question. But virtually no one disputes the changed context of the nation-state, the global forces—economic, political, and military—that play upon it and constrain its actions. There may be some two hundred nation-states in existence. But their ability to determine their own future varies wildly, with perhaps only a handful of states with that capability. That of course was the position of the world in the classic imperial era of the late nineteenth century, when the European empires more or less controlled the world. In that respect there is a certain familiarity about the present time, and a sense that reexamining the history of empires may be more than "mere" history.

There is one further point. We are accustomed to comparing and contrasting empires with nation-states, and to assuming that there has, in the past half century or more, been a passage "from empire to nation" (see further below). Even more, it has been assumed that the national principle, born in the French Revolution, is the "modern" principle, and that empires are in some sense pre-modern. Their persistence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries then has

to be seen, as Joseph Schumpeter saw it, as some sort of archaic hangover from the past. In which case one must surely say, some hangover! Far from giving way to the nation-state, empires have accompanied and to a good extent overshadowed nation-states in the past two centuries. Even when empires formally dissolved, in the decades after the Second World War, their place was speedily taken by “superpowers” that were in many ways empires in all but name.

Empires, in short, are not only of the past but also of the present. We need to examine their persisting forms and influence. If empires belong to history, it is to that part of history that has an inescapable afterlife. “The empires of our time were short lived, but they have altered the world forever,” says a character in V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men* ([1967] 1985: 32); “their passing away is their least significant feature.”

Among the features most in need of reexamination is the relation between empires and nations, and the presumed conflict between them. This has always been at the heart of discussions about empires, especially modern empires. How different in fact are they? To what extent have nation-states supplanted empires? What are the similarities, what the differences, between imperial and national identities? If empires are indeed radically different in their principles from nations, what are the implications—in terms of their impact, and of what can be learned from them?

Nation versus Empire

It has long been the conventional wisdom that nations and empires are rivals, sworn enemies.³⁰ The principle of nationalism is homogeneity, often seen in ethnic terms. Nations strive to embody, or to produce, a common culture. They express a radical egalitarianism: all members of the nation are in principle equal; all partake of the common national “soul.” Nations, moreover, are intensely particularistic. While they do not deny the existence of other nations, and of their right to cultivate their ways, they are generally concerned only with their own way, convinced that it is superior to the ways of all other nations. Nationalists are highly inward-looking. They tend to celebrate themselves—“we English,” “we Germans,” “we French”—simply for their good fortune in being who they are, rather than for any cause or purpose in the world that might justify their existence (Breuille 2000: 217).

Empires, by contrast, appear to exhibit principles antithetical to those of nations. They are multiethnic or multinational. Far from having or seeking a common culture, they stress the heterogeneity of cultures, especially that

between the elite and the local cultures. Empires are hierarchical, opposed in principle to egalitarianism. The lines of solidarity are vertical, between subject and ruler, not, as in nations, horizontal, between equal citizens or fellow members of the same ethnic group. Empires, finally, aspire to universalism, not particularism. As with China or Rome, they see themselves as being at the center of the known world, the source of civilization itself and the carrier of the civilizing process to all the corners of the globe. Far from celebrating merely themselves, they tend to see themselves as the instruments of larger purposes in the world, generally of a moral or religious character. Toward nationalism they are contemptuous, as something petty and self-centered. “I am not *nacional* [*sic*]; that is something for children,” declared the count-duke Olivares of imperial Spain, in an expression typical of the imperial mentality (in Elliott 1984: 74).

A powerful statement of what Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* calls “the inner incompatibility of empire and nation” (Anderson 2006: 93) is to be found in an equally famous study of nationalism, Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism*. For Gellner empires—seen as essentially premodern in type—belong to what he calls “agro-literate” society, the central fact of which is that “everything in it militates against the definition of political units in terms of cultural boundaries” (Gellner 1983: 11; see also Gellner 1998a: 14–24; Breuilly 2000: 198–99). Power and culture belong to different realms. Crucially, the culture of the elites—often cosmopolitan or international in character—is sharply differentiated from the myriad local cultures of the subordinate strata in the empire. Modern empires, such as the Soviet Empire, perpetuate this division, which is why for Gellner they are inherently unstable in a world in which nationalism is the dominant principle.

For nationalism, argues Gellner, closes what in modernity becomes an increasingly intolerable gap between power and culture, state and nation. It insists that only political units in which rulers and ruled share the same culture are legitimate. Its ideal is one state, one culture—which is to say, its ideal is the “nation-state,” since it conceives of the nation essentially in terms of a shared culture. In the eyes of nationalists, for rulers of a political unit to belong to a nation other than that of the majority of the ruled “constitutes a quite outstandingly intolerable breach of political propriety” (Gellner 1983: 1). What, to nationalists, could possibly justify the existence of an entity such as the British Empire, in which a handful of British ruled over millions of Indians, Africans, and others, all of whom contained within themselves the seeds of potential nationhood?

In pitting nation against empire, Anderson and Gellner work within a tradition that stretches back to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Anthony Pagden has drawn attention to the thought in particular of Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the fathers of European nationalism, in “setting up the unalterable opposition of nations and empires.” “For Herder, the concept of a people, a *Volk*, and the concept of empire, were simply incompatible. Sooner or later all the world’s empires were destined to collapse back into their constituent parts,” seen as peoples or nations (Pagden 2003: 131–32; see also Pagden 1994: 172–88; Muthu 2003: 210–58). “Nothing,” declared Herder, “appears so directly opposite to the end of government as the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixture of various kinds of humans and nations under one sceptre” (in Muthu 2003: 248). This view became a commonplace of nineteenth-century liberal thought as it increasingly allied itself with the national principle. Even those liberals, such as Lord Macaulay and John Stuart Mill, who defended empire accepted that nationality was the “natural” principle, and that empires could be justified only insofar as they were leading “backward” peoples toward independent nationhood (Mehta 1999: 77–114; Pitts 2005: 123–62).

The history of the relations between nations and empires in the past two centuries would seem to bear out the truth of this view of difference and divergence. For what has that history been but one of a revolt against empire in the name of nationality? In the wake of the First World War, the great continental land empires, commonly denounced as the “prison-houses of nations”—the Russian, the German, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Ottoman empires—all came crashing down, to be replaced by independent nation-states that were widely regarded as their legitimate heirs. The victorious Allies’ charter of 1918, President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, loudly proclaimed the triumph of the principle of nationality over that of dynastic empire (Seton-Watson 1964: 19–23; Hobsbawm 1994: 31; Kappeler 2001: 213; Ferguson 2005: 172–73).

Later came the turn of the oceanic or overseas empires of the French, the Dutch, and the British. In a spectacular series of “wars of national liberation” their colonies claimed and enforced their independence on the basis of the nationalist doctrine that had become the norm of the international system. It became common to speak of the movement “from empire to nation” (e.g., Emerson [1960] 1962) to sum up this postwar experience. Moreover, the breakup of these empires too had partly been the result of a cataclysmic war, the Second World War, and, as with the previous war, there was again official

endorsement of the nationality principle in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 ("everyone has the right to a nationality"). Later still, in 1989, the "informal colonies" of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe declared their independence, followed swiftly thereafter by similar actions among the various national republics or "internal colonies" of the Soviet Union itself (though, as Gellner rightly noted [1998a: 57], it was not nationalism itself that brought down the Soviet Union).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 seemed to set the seal on the long-drawn-out encounter between nation and empire. Despite much talk about the new "American Empire," it was clear that formal empire in the classic sense had for the time being at least reached a certain historic terminus (the announcement of the "end of history," and similar claims that liberal democracy had triumphed in the world, were some kind of recognition of this). The opprobrium that had, with increasing force since the Second World War, gathered around the terms "empire" and "imperialism" seemed now to hold sway everywhere. No state called itself an empire anymore; only its enemies did so. If indeed there was or is an American Empire, as Niall Ferguson argued, it was "an empire in denial," an empire that practiced "the imperialism of anti-imperialism," an empire that "dare not speak its name" (Ferguson 2005: xxii, 6, 61–104; cf. Teschke 2006: 137).

Nations as Empires

But there is another way of telling the story of the relation between nation and empire. In this account, nation and empire are not so much opposed as acknowledged to be alternative or complementary expressions of the same phenomenon of power. Empires can be nations writ large; nations empires under another name.

The great historian Sir Lewis Namier once said that "religion is a sixteenth-century word for nationalism" (quoted MacLachlan 1996: 15). This seems to be a typical case of a secular thinker's refusing to accept the sincerity or authenticity of the participants' own protestations. The sixteenth-century conflicts that tore apart most European societies *were* indeed "wars of religion," and any attempt to convert or reduce them to nationalist (or even "protonationalist") conflicts seems, *pace* Anthony Marx (2003), highly anachronistic.³¹ But what is insightful in Namier's comment is the recognition that nationalism can take a variety of forms and expressions, and that a concept such as "imperial nationalism" therefore may not be as contradictory as it first sounds.

In the first place it is important to note that, as discussed above, many early modern states—those which later evolved into nation-states—saw themselves as *empires*. David Armitage, among others, has stressed that especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the term “empire” was often used in its original (Roman) sense of *sovereignty* or *supreme authority*, rather than in its later—and more common modern—meaning of rule over a multiplicity of lands and peoples (Armitage 2000: 29–32; see also Pagden 1995: 12–13). “Rex in regno suo est imperator,” the king is emperor in his own kingdom—this common late medieval saying was the basis of many claims to empire among early modern states (Ullmann 1979). Here, then, was an assertion of empire, as sovereignty or self-sufficient authority, very similar to one of the central claims of the nation-state.

There was a further way in which empire and (nation-) state might overlap. Many of the early modern states were what have been called “composite monarchies” or “multiple kingdoms”—states, that is, such as Spain or Britain, where one monarch might rule over several territories, many of them formerly independent kingdoms. Thus the Spanish monarch Charles V—leaving aside what we might think of as Spain’s more classically imperial possessions in the New World and elsewhere—ruled over the kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, Milan, Naples, and the Low Countries; Britain, with the accession of James I in 1603, and more firmly with the Act of Union of 1707, was a composite state made up of the kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland and the principality of Wales (Koenigsberger 1987; Elliott 1992; Russell 1995; Armitage 2000: 22–23). Such states, in other words, contained that variety and plurality of peoples and lands that empire connoted, both classically and in modern times. Whether therefore the stress was on sovereignty or multiple rule, state and empire were conjoint terms for much of the early modern period (Koebner 1961: 52; Armitage 2000: 14–23; Pagden 1995: 13–14).

But there is an even more compelling consideration that might lead us to see convergence rather than divergence between (nation-) states and empires. Most nation-states, or what became nation-states, are, like most empires, the result of conquest and colonization. The later ideology of nationalism of course disguises this unpalatable fact, as much as it exhibits amnesia about many other aspects of the violent origins of nations (Marx 2003: 29–32). The rise of nationalist historiography in the nineteenth century drove a wedge between “domestic” and “extraterritorial” history, between the nation-state and empire—both the territorial empires that had preceded it and the extra-European empires that were constructed across the globe in the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, as David Armitage says, “the nation-state as it had been precipitated out of a system of aggressively competing nations . . . functioned as ‘the empire *manqué*’”—within Europe itself as much as beyond it (Armitage 2000: 14).

Robert Bartlett (1994) has given the classic account of how European states were formed by a process of “conquest, colonization and cultural change,” in the High Middle Ages, from the tenth century to the fourteenth. From their heartlands in the old Carolingian lands—modern France and western Germany—Frankish and Norman knights swept westward, eastward, and southward. Normans conquered England, and went on to take Wales and Ireland. They put enormous pressure on the Scots, forcing them, as a condition of survival, to adapt to Anglo-Norman culture and institutions. In the East, Germans cleared the forests, established new towns, and settled in old ones—such as Prague—in large numbers, opening the way to the eventual incorporation of these lands into Prussia and other German states. Burgundian families established their rule in Portugal and León-Castile and spearheaded the Christian reconquest of Andalusia from the Moors. The Normans conquered Sicily and from this base spread the ways and institutions of Latin Christianity throughout the southern Mediterranean and many parts of the Levant (aided by the crusading movement that established the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem). In this massive centrifugal movement, a uniform system of town charters, commercial law, coinage, language (Latin), and educational and ecclesiastical institutions came into being in a huge swath stretching from the Baltic to the eastern Mediterranean. “Europe, the initiator of one of the world’s major processes of conquest, colonization and cultural transformation, was also the product of one” (Bartlett 1994: 314).

This dynamic process of conquest and colonization meant that the states and kingdoms that were established in medieval and early modern Europe nearly all had the appearance of empires. England, for instance, once united by the Norman Conquest of 1066, went on in its turn—largely at first under Norman auspices—to “unite” (*sc.* conquer) the peoples of Wales, Ireland, and, eventually, Scotland, into another state, the United Kingdom, and another nation, the British. Observing that “many of the most successful nation states of the present started life as empires,” Niall Ferguson asks, “What is the modern United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland if not the legatee of an earlier English imperialism?” (Ferguson 2005: xii). Just as Europe itself did, so too England began its great colonizing venture in the world with an initial act of “internal colonization,” the construction of an “inner empire” of Great

Britain that became the launching pad for the creation of an “outer empire” of “Greater Britain” overseas (Kumar 2003: 60–88; cf. Cooper 2005: 172).

France too achieved nationhood by a process of conquest launched by the Capetian kings from their base in the Île-de-France (see further chapter 7). They gradually conquered and absorbed the surrounding states: Normandy, Brittany, Burgundy, Languedoc, Provence, and many others of the once-independent principalities that succeeded the Carolingian Empire. As Eugen Weber (1976) showed, it was only in the late nineteenth century that peasants of disparate traditions and many tongues were nationalized, turned into Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. The France of “the Hexagon” has recognizably imperial roots.

Spain shows even more clearly the pattern of unification through conquest—the more so as it remains in several respects still incomplete, with a persistent Basque separatist movement and intermittent calls for independence emanating from Catalonia. From the time of the union of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile in 1469, Spanish monarchs engaged in a strenuous and only partly successful effort to bring adjacent territories into a single state and to form a Spanish nation. That the process was tortuous, marked by frequent rebellions and civil wars, is made clear in the comment of an eighteenth-century Spanish civil servant, Olavide, that Spain was “a body composed of other smaller bodies separated, and in opposition to one another, which oppress and despise each other and are in a continuous state of civil war. . . . Modern Spain can be considered as a body without energy . . . a monstrous Republic formed of little republics which confront each other” (in Carr 2000: 6).

Spain, France, and England/Britain are the countries most regularly invoked in the literature on nationalism as early, well-formed, nation-states (see, e.g., A. Smith 1991: 55). It is salutary to remember, then, how much of conquest and colonization there was in the formation of these nation-states, and how imperfectly the word “nation,” with its suggestion of consensus, community, and homogeneity, sums up the resulting product. “Spain,” “France,” “Britain,” and their respective nations, were the result of the more or less forcible integration of neighboring lands and peoples by dominant groups whose institutions and culture often differed considerably from those of the conquered peoples. This pattern has often been noted for later examples of nation building as well. For example, it was common to say, in the nineteenth century and later, that “Germany” was made by Prussian conquest of the other German states; less commonly, but perhaps equally accurately, it might be said that “Italy” was made by the Piedmontese conquest of the other Italian

states (which explains the famous remark of Massimo d’Azeglio in 1868, that “we have made Italy, now we must make Italians”). And it has frequently been pointed out that many of the “new nations” of Africa and Asia are so only in name, that they are artificial creations, the result largely of the wars and political maneuverings of the former imperial powers. What we need to stress is that this pattern is not simply typical of latecomers to nation building but has been the norm since the very earliest examples. Many “nation-states,” to put it another way, are empires in miniature; they have been formed as empires have usually been formed. There is in that sense an inescapably imperial dimension to the nation-state.

Empires as Nations: “Imperial Nationalism”

If nations have often been conceived and constructed as empires, might the reverse also be true? If nations can be seen as miniempires, can empires be seen as large nations? Does imperialism converge with nationalism? What are the degrees—and limits—of this convergence?

Anthony Smith has in several places (e.g., 1986, 2004) argued that all nations are constituted by “core” *ethnies*, around which may cohere other ethnic groups in subordinate roles. In the English case, for instance, it is impossible to ignore the contribution over the centuries of Norwegians, Normans, Huguenots, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Jews, Indians, Afro-Caribbeans, and other ethnicities to that mix we call “Englishness.” But it is equally clear that, by about the sixteenth century at the latest, there had emerged something like an English nation (which is—*pace* Greenfeld [1992]—quite a different matter from saying that we can find English *nationalism* in this period). The English language, for one thing, had by then come into its own, supremely with the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, and others. Protestantism was beginning to do its work, especially in its nonconformist forms. Parliament and the common law were already beginning to be acknowledged as emblems of the national culture. This was the beginning of something like “racial Anglo-Saxonism,” to use Reginald Horsman’s (1981) term, though it had little of the biological character ascribed to it in its nineteenth-century guise. It does, though, mean that by this time a distinctive and dominant *ethnie* had emerged in England, setting the terms and conditions within which later groups were invited to find, or to force, a place (for other examples, see Kaufmann 2004). It is this core *ethnie* that lends its peculiar qualities to the nation; it is this group that defines the “national character,” difficult as it

always is to enumerate its attributes precisely (see, for a good discussion of the English case, Mandler 2006).

Can we not say something similar about empires? Most empires are constructed by a particular people—the Romans, the Spanish, the English/British, the French, the Russians, the Turks, and the like. It is they who name it and oversee its development. Whatever their numbers, it is they who tend to define its character. They are, we may say, the “state-bearing” peoples of the empire. And, just as a particular ethnic group might come to identify itself with the nation it creates, so a particular people or nation might come to identify itself with the empire it founds. Nations and empires, we have seen, tend to think of their purpose or destiny in the world in different terms, the one more inner, the other more outward looking. But it seems fair to say that in both cases we can discern a group or groups that identify with their creation and derive their sense of their collective identity from it.

I have elsewhere (Kumar 2000, 2003: 30–35) argued that we can call the sense of identity of imperial peoples a kind of “imperial” or “missionary nationalism.” There is, I agree, a double danger in so doing. In the first place, the ideology of nationalism does not emerge until the late eighteenth century, and it is therefore anachronistic and misleading to speak of nationalism in any form before that time. Since empires for the most part clearly predate the age of nationalism—even if they persist well into it—we obviously need to specify clearly what we might mean by “imperial nationalism.” In the second place, for all the suggestive parallels, empires are not nations (and nations are not empires), as we shall see. Hence to speak of imperial nationalism runs the risk of confusing two entities—nations and empires—that for most purposes need to be kept separate.

The reason for nevertheless thinking that “imperial nationalism” might be a useful concept is the gain that comes from seeing two disparate phenomena from a common vantage point. Like nationalists in relation to their nation, imperialists feel that there is something special or unique about their empire. It has a mission or purpose in the world. This may, again as with nationalists, endow imperial peoples with a sense of their own superiority, a feeling of inherent goodness as of a people specially chosen to carry out a task (cf. Smith 2003).³² Imperialists, like nationalists, are true believers.

What are the causes or missions that have given imperial peoples a sense of their collective identity? For most Europeans, the pattern was set by the Romans with their belief that they were giving nothing less than civilization—Roman laws, Roman institutions, Roman culture—to the world. Hence it

was possible for the Romans to identify their empire with the whole known world, the *orbis terrarum*. Later European empires, from the Holy Roman Empire onward, repeated the claim, to an almost wearying degree, though the content might vary depending on the particular place or time. Thus although the Spaniards, like most imperialists, saw themselves in the image of Rome, it was as a Catholic power that they saw their mission, in Europe and in the New World (a role intensified with the Protestant Reformation). The Austrian Habsburgs took up the torch from their Spanish cousins, putting themselves not just at the head of the Counter-Reformation but also—as the Ostmark or Österreich—seeing themselves as the defenders of European civilization on its eastern flank, against the threat of the infidel Turks. The Russians, proclaiming Moscow the “Third Rome” and themselves the legatees of the doomed Byzantines, aspired to continue the struggle for Orthodoxy in the world. A similar resolve, but for a contrary cause, animated the English when as “the Protestant nation” they attempted to lead the Protestant crusade in Europe and the New World, especially against the machinations of the Catholic powers of Spain and France. The French, for their own part, having first hitched their empire to the Catholic cause, after their Great Revolution of 1789 and the turn toward republicanism, increasingly came to identify French imperialism with *la mission civilisatrice* (as, in the later phases of the British Empire, did the British). This too, in its own terms, was the mission of the Russians in their second or Soviet Empire, the spreading of reason and science to the benighted in the form of communism. In this renewed emphasis, begun with the Romans, on the mission to civilize and enlighten, the wheel had come full circle.³³

Merely to list these causes or missions is to cast doubt on the analogy between nationalism and imperialism. Nationalist causes are not typically like these. For some time in the early nineteenth century, when a form of liberal nationalism flourished under the banner of Giuseppe Mazzini and his followers, nationalism did indeed ally itself with the noble causes of spreading freedom and enlightenment in the world (Alter 1994: 19–23, 39–65; Mazower 2015: 48–54). But the period that followed, the period of “organic nationalism,” showed another face of nationalism: one that was vindictive and intolerant toward rivals, one that trumpeted the power and glory of particular nations, one that asked its citizens to die for the nation whatever the cause it chose to embrace. The Nazis’ celebration of the Teutonic or Aryan peoples, in and for themselves, indicated the logical end point of this type of nationalism (Alter 1994: 26–38; Hobsbawm 1992: 101–30; Zimmer 2003: 80–106).

Imperialist ideologies are universalistic, not particularistic. That difference has to be borne in mind. Imperial peoples do not, unlike nationalists, celebrate themselves; they celebrate the causes of which they are the agents or carriers. It is from this that they derive their sense of themselves and their place in the world. But the parallel with nationalism is still instructive. In both cases we see the attempt to effect a fusion, a symbiosis almost, between a people and a political entity. Imperial nationalism plays down membership of a “mere nation,” with its tendency toward self-congratulation and self-importance; but it does so in order to insist on a higher form of nationalism, one that justifies the nation in terms of its commitment to a cause that goes beyond the nation.

It is somewhat ironic, in view of this, that the greatest apparent convergence between imperialism and nationalism is to be found in the very period—from the 1870s to the First World War—in which nationalism threw off its liberal mantle and presented itself in the guise of naked power seeking. The historian Wolfgang Mommsen speaks of “the deformation of national politics” in this period:

The idea of the nation state progressively lost those elements which in the first half of the nineteenth century had made it an emancipatory ideology, directed against the arbitrary rule of princes and small aristocratic elites, and an intellectual weapon in the campaign for constitutional government. Instead it came to be associated with the power-status of the established national culture, and the imposition of its values on ethnic or cultural minorities both within and beyond the body politic was now considered essential. (Mommsen 1990: 215; see also Mommsen 1978)

Mommsen sees this deformation as directly connected to the “high imperialism” of the times, when the great powers—in particular Britain, France, Germany—competed for dominance on the world stage through the acquisition of larger and larger territorial empires (Mommsen 1990: 212). This was the view too of another liberal thinker, J. A. Hobson, the great critic of imperialism, who saw imperialism as “a debasement of . . . genuine nationalism, by attempts to overflow its natural banks and absorb the near or distant territory of reluctant and unassimilable peoples” (Hobson [1902, 1938] 1988: 6). For Hobson as for other liberal thinkers, nationality still appeared the natural and desirable principle—a “plain highway to internationalism”—with imperialism a “perversion of its nature and purpose” (Hobson [1902, 1938] 1988: 11).

Such a position has seemed too kind to nationalism, in the view of other thinkers. For them nationalism is inherently imperialistic, just as it was

inevitable at this time that imperialism would take the form of nationalist rivalries. Imperialism is then seen not so much as a perversion as a more or less natural extension of a power-seeking nationalism; in its turn, the nation comes to conceive of itself in the image of empire, the traditional emblem of grandeur and the supreme expression of great-power status. “Imperialism and nationalism,” says Christopher Bayly, “were part of the same phenomenon. . . . The rise of exclusive nationalisms, grasping and using the powers of the new and more interventionist state, was the critical force propelling both the new imperialism and the hardening of the boundaries between majority and assumed ‘ethnic’ populations across the world. . . . Imperialism and nationalism reacted on each other to redivide the world and its people” (Bayly 2004: 230, 242–43).

Once again, therefore, the ground between empire and nation, imperialism and nationalism, seems to crumble and disappear. If nations can be seen as empires, empires, especially modern empires, can seem no more than nations writ large. The British Empire, or “Greater Britain” as some termed it, is in this view no more than the expression of British nationalism, the desire to expand the British presence and power in the world (see, e.g., Seeley [1883] 1971); the French Empire, partly in rivalry with Britain, the expression of a wounded French nationalism in the wake of the crushing defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871 (see Schivelbusch 2004: 103–87). Imperialism appears as hypertrophied nationalism, perhaps; but nationalism nonetheless, expressing its ultimate logic and tendency.

Empire and Nation: Continuing Antagonisms and Tensions

Is this, then, the conclusion? Are Gellner, Anderson, and so many others wrong in drawing such a sharp distinction between the principle of empire and that of the nation? Is imperialism simply nationalism under another name?

Max Weber once observed that while all great powers tend, for reasons of prestige, to be imperialist and “expansive,” this was not the case with all nations, some of which sought their principles and sense of national pride from within themselves. “Not all political structures are equally ‘expansive.’ They do not all strive for an outward expansion of their power, or keep their force in readiness for acquiring political power over other territories and communities by incorporating them or making them dependent. Hence, as structures of power, political organizations vary in the extent to which they are turned outward” (Weber 1978: 2:910). Britain, France, and Germany might feel the need for empire, but not Switzerland or Norway.

This perception might be one way of considering the fact that empire and nation can, at different times, alternate in the striving of states. In the early modern period, the examples of the Spanish and Portuguese empires made it seem that empire was the only way of establishing one's presence in the world. The British, Dutch, and French hurried to imitate the imperial style of those countries, with a considerable measure of success. Later, in the nineteenth century, as the national principle gained in strength, nation-state formation seemed to offer a more fulfilling, as well as for many a more practicable, option. This was especially so in the case of smaller or weaker countries, such as Italy, Poland, Ireland, Norway, and the Slav peoples of the Habsburg Empire. Here empire was the enemy, not the goal.

But nationalism, rather than imperialism, was not just for small or weak countries. The tension between nation and empire could often be seen within the same country, including some of the most powerful, at the same time. Britain in the nineteenth century had its "Little Englanders" who, especially after the loss of the North American colonies, felt that empire was ruinous to British commerce and corrupting in its moral and political effects at home. The way forward was for Britain to renounce imperial entanglements and to exert its influence by the example of its peaceful and prosperous existence as one nation among others (see, e.g., Thornton [1959] 1968: 1–56; Gott 1989).³⁴ In France, after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine following the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, there was a bitter struggle between the imperialists, keen on matching Britain's imperial power, and the nationalists, who felt that it was essential to France's national honor to recover the lost provinces, and for whom empire was a crippling distraction (Baumgart 1982: 55–68; Schivelbusch 2004: 176–87).

Nationalism and imperialism could therefore, despite their similarities, point in very different directions. A world of nations, accepting the particularities of different peoples, and promoting the cultivation of unique national cultures, was quite different from a world of competing empires, each intent on reforming the world in its own image. J. A. Hobson, the best-known writer on modern imperialism, and one who was fully alive to the connections between nationalism and imperialism, nevertheless felt the need to make it plain at the very outset of his study that the kind of imperialism that was collusive with nationalism was of a very novel and highly untypical kind. It was novel and untypical because it took the form of competing nations, each striving to magnify their empires; whereas the true principle of empire was unitary and universal.

The notion of a number of competing empires is essentially modern. The root idea of empire in the ancient and the medieval world was that of a federation of States, under a hegemony, covering in general terms the entire known recognized world, such as was held by Rome under the so-called *pax Romana*. When Roman citizens, with full civic rights, were found all over the explored world, in Africa and Asia, as well as in Gaul and Britain, Imperialism contained a genuine element of internationalism. With the fall of Rome this conception of a single empire wielding political authority over the civilized world did not disappear. On the contrary, it survived all the fluctuations of the Holy Roman Empire. Even after the definite split between the Eastern and Western sections had taken place at the close of the fourth century, the theory of a single state, divided for administrative purposes, survived. Beneath every cleavage or antagonism, and notwithstanding the severance of many independent kingdoms and provinces, this ideal unity of the empire lived. It formed the conscious avowed ideal of Charlemagne. . . . Rudolf of Habsburg not merely revived the idea, but laboured to realize it through Central Europe, while his descendant Charles V gave a very real meaning to the term by gathering under the unity of his imperial rule the territories of Austria, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Sicily and Naples. In later ages this dream of a European Empire animated the policy of Peter the Great, Catherine, and Napoleon. (Hobson [1902, 1938] 1988: 8–9)

There is not much to add to this masterly sketch, merely to say that its accuracy has been confirmed by most later studies of the imperial idea (see, e.g., Folz [1953] 1969; Muldoon 1999; Münkler 2007). Hobson goes on to say that the “internationalism of empire” was continued, with diminishing force, in the “humane cosmopolitanism” of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, only to “wither before the powerful revival of nationalism” in the nineteenth century. Nationalism properly understood and practiced, he continued to believe, was not in necessary contradiction with internationalism. But linked to an aggressive and competitive imperialism, which transforms “the wholesome stimulative rivalry of varied national types into the cut-throat struggle of competing empires,” it threatened “the peace and progress of mankind” (Hobson [1902, 1938] 1988: 10–12).

The revival of interest in empire today, we have noted, has much to do with the revulsion against the excesses of nationalism in the twentieth century, specifically as these were seen to culminate in the fascist regimes of Italy and

Germany, and more recently as the cause of violence in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. This has, no doubt, led to a certain amount of nostalgia for empire (including the Soviet Empire), coupled with the feeling that the historic empires have much to teach a world struggling with the problems of globalization and the diminished role of the nation-state, not to mention the management of increasingly “multicultural” societies (themselves to a good extent the product of past empires). Whatever our feelings about this, however, they do underscore the point that in the minds of many people empires and nations, for all the interesting ways in which they overlap, are in the end based on different principles and point to different worlds.

As ideological formations, nations and nationalism may well have occupied center stage in the modern world order, at least in the last two centuries. The American Revolution, the first anticolonial revolution of modern times, may be taken as marking the birth of a strong anti-imperial sentiment in Western thought. It was greeted with enthusiasm by many European intellectuals, not least in France, where it played a significant role in bringing down the old regime in 1789. Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot and Herder, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke, even Jeremy Bentham, inveighed against empire (Pagden 1995: 156–200; Mehta 1999: 153–89; Muthu 2003; Pitts 2005: 25–122). Empires were widely seen as archaic and outmoded, obsessed with the antiquated virtues of “honor,” “grandeur,” “greatness,” “glory.” Their oppression of other peoples readily turned into despotic rule over their own. Though apparently a source of riches, they were ultimately as ruinous to the economies of their countries as they were to its moral health.

But nationalism and anti-imperialism by no means had it all their own way, neither in thought nor, even more, in practice. We are familiar with the late nineteenth-century bout of European (and, for a time, American) imperialism—the “scramble for Africa,” the “Great Game” of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, the parceling out of the world among the great European powers. What is less well known is how strongly empire, as an idea and a practice, persisted in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, and continued to inform the policies of the major states throughout the nineteenth century. The old idea of a mid-nineteenth-century “hiatus” of anti-imperial liberalism and *laissez-faire* now looks increasingly illusory, or at best as only a partial truth. The British Empire, for instance, moved seamlessly from the loss of its North American colonies to the acquisition of even more glittering prizes in Asia; France too, having lost its North American empire, began the construction of a new one in Africa as early as 1830, with the conquest of

Algeria—not forgetting, of course, Napoleon’s attempt at empire (see further chapters 6 and 7, below).

The persistence of empire in European policy and practice was matched by its persistence in at least one important strand of European thought. This refers not only to racist and right-wing thinkers, such as Thomas Carlyle and Arthur Gobineau, though of course their popularity indicates the appeal of empire in the earlier as much as in the later part of the nineteenth century. Nor should one forget the rehabilitation of the imperial ideal in *les idées napoléoniennes* that, following the death of Napoleon in 1821, proved so seductive to so many French statesmen, not least the founder of the Second Empire, Louis Napoleon (Koebner and Schmidt 1964: 1–26). But more significant is the “turn to empire” in some of the most famous liberal thinkers of the day, such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. Mill and Tocqueville, with whatever misgivings, each justified his country’s empire in terms of its educative mission of spreading civilization to peoples who had not yet reached the levels achieved by European societies (Mehta 1999: 97–114; Pitts 2005: 123–62, 204–39). In both Britain and France, then, the two leading imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, influential thinkers throughout the nineteenth century lent their intellectual distinction to the imperial idea.

The point that needs stressing, because of our tendency to ignore it, is that empires have been part of the modern world order as much as, and arguably more than, nation-states. An “age of nation-states” did not succeed an “age of empire”; nationalism did not succeed imperialism. Nationalism was certainly the new thing, and nineteenth-century imperialism showed the impress of the new thinking and the new forces. Empires, more than ever before, carried a national label, most obviously in the land empire that Hitler attempted to create in the 1930s and 1940s, as the Third German Reich. The British and the French empires expressed, to an extent, nationalist rivalries, superimposed on the more old-fashioned “great power” rivalries of the eighteenth century. But in no case did they cease to be empires. That meant that they had a principle, and a purpose, different from those of nation-states. Their aims and aspirations were global, not local.

The disappearance of empires—at least in the formal sense—has been relatively recent. The signs of their existence are still all around us, not least in the large populations from the former empires that are now part of the life of most major Western cities. In order to understand our present we need to understand our past. We need to interrogate more closely the principles of empire. We particularly need to turn the spotlight on the ruling peoples themselves,

their self-conceptions and justifications of empire. “Force and violence,” as David Hume saw, is surely part of the story of empires, but it is not the whole story, and could not have been to have enabled them to last for so long. How did the peoples who made and maintained empire, the “state-bearing” peoples, conceive their role? How did they carry it out? How did it affect their sense of themselves? What are the consequences for them of losing empire?

Since the history of empire is well-nigh coterminous with the whole of recorded history, there is a wealth of examples to draw on. We shall restrict ourselves to some modern examples—the British, the French, the Russian, the Ottoman, and the Habsburg empires. But with empire one is always forced out of any one particular mold, any one historical period. Empires, by virtue of their very principle, are acutely aware not simply of contemporary rivals but also of the great examples of the past. Sometimes this is the relatively recent past, as with the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch empires—all of which persisted alongside the newer, more vigorous, empires of Britain and France and indeed continued right up to the twentieth century, if in vastly etiolated form. But for all the Western empires, nothing rivaled Rome, though in their case all roads led not so much to Rome as from Rome. Rome was the inspiration, even as it was a warning in the often-told story of its decline and fall. The modern empires—mostly run by elites educated in the classics—all admired Rome, learned from it, wished to be known as the “New Rome.” But they also hoped to go beyond it, to learn from its mistakes and to establish their empires on firmer foundations. All such hopes are of course ultimately illusory, as Thomas Gray recognized—“the paths of glory lead but to the grave.” But that is true of all human institutions. Empires are no less subject to this law, but equally no less instructive than any other long-lasting institution.

At any rate, before looking at the more modern examples, we need to glance back at Rome. We have already considered what the Romans meant by empire, as a concept, and how influential this was in the later history of empire. We need now to consider, in brief outline and with the broadest of brushstrokes, what the Roman Empire actually was, how it saw itself and how it was run. For, in however distorted a form, and however misunderstood, these ideas and practices were to have a profound influence on later conceptions of empire, of what an empire was and should be, and how it should conduct itself. No less important, as a dreadful warning, were the causes of its collapse, or what were thought to be its causes, and what that might teach later empires about how to avoid Rome’s fate. No empire escaped the shadow of Rome, even as it struggled to break free from what seemed a predestined outcome.