

Chapter 1: Introduction: What is an Empire?

Empires have existed for thousands of years. Indeed, the first empires came into being at the very dawn of civilization. The imperial form of political and social organization has been one of the most persistent ways to govern societies, and continues to be highly important in our world at the dawn of the 21st century. Because empires take many different forms, a simple working definition is needed at the outset.

An empire exists when one nation, tribe or society exercises long-term domination over one or more external nations, tribes or societies. Through that domination the imperial power, or empire, is able to determine many of the key political, social, economic and cultural outcomes in the dominated society or societies. And that is the critical point---the ability of the empire to determine what happens, the outcomes in the societies under its control---is what distinguishes an empire from other forms of political organization. Those who hold power at the centre of an empire typically derive economic benefits, access to important resources, control of militarily strategic territory, and other forms of power as a consequence of imperial arrangements.

Typically, we have an image in our minds of an empire as an old fashioned arrangement under which one power, say Rome or Britain, conquers and occupies the lands of many peoples and rules them from

an imperial capital. Without Rome's imperial legions or Britain's navy such an empire could not have existed. Laws made in London or promulgated by the emperor in Rome were enforced across the empire. The Union Jack, the British flag, flew over the territories of the empire. This kind of formal empire has existed many times in different parts of the world. In addition to formal empires, however, there are informal empires. Informal empires---much of the British Empire was informal as we will see---exist when the imperial power does not actually annex the territories it dominates. In those territories, there is a local government in place, which may be national or tribal, and in theory, the laws of the imperial power are not in force in the territory.

To prevent the Egyptians from defaulting on bonds held by Europeans and to secure the Suez Canal, the British military occupied Egypt in 1882, making the country effectively a part of the British Empire. British troops and ships were garrisoned in Egypt. Following the British seizure of control, Egypt was effectively ruled by a British appointee whose modest title was "British Agent and Consul-General." In theory, though, Egypt had its own ruler, and to make matters more complicated still, it remained a province in the Ottoman Empire, whose capital was Istanbul. But the Ottoman Empire was in decline and its sultan had no real authority in Egypt. In this case,

there was an arrangement in which the old formal imperial power was collapsing, a new national Egyptian government was in place, but the crucial decision-making power lay in the hands of another imperial power, which in theory was not the ruler of the country. Empires, this illustrates, are not as simple as we may have imagined. And they come in many different shapes and sizes.

Today the American Empire is the world's greatest power, universally recognized as the only superpower of our era. It is almost entirely an informal empire and the label "empire" is one that American political leaders never use to describe American global power. While for European states in the past, the word "empire" was positively embraced---as in the cases of the British, French or German empires---for Americans, the word has always had negative connotations. This is because in the American Revolution, the founding fathers of the United States and the patriots they led proclaimed that they were fighting against the British Empire and on behalf of the right, not only of Americans, but of all peoples, to be free of imperial rule. Later in this book, we will return to the case of America and will make the argument that today there is an American Empire and that its policies determine economic, political, military and cultural outcomes for very large parts of the world.

The first empires came into being with the establishment of the earliest civilizations. We don't

know the names of those empires and we have few records of their existence. What we can conclude, however, is that empire came into being alongside another institution with a very long pedigree---slavery. Slavery and empire came into existence in the same historical epoch and for much the same reasons.

In the earliest days of human existence, techniques for gathering food and acquiring shelter were so rudimentary that no surplus of any sort was possible. A small number of people living together in a band could only scrape together enough food to feed themselves. It was perfectly possible for such groups to have enemies, rival bands with whom they fought over a particular habitat. But there was no point for the victors in such squabbles to take the vanquished into slavery. The slaves would only have been able to generate enough food to meet their own needs. But imagine then a very small improvement in food gathering techniques that would allow, for the first time, the reaping by an individual of more food than he or she could consume. Imagine, therefore, the creation of the very first surplus production as a consequence of human labour. Though the surplus was not large, what it did was to open up the possibility that a privileged few could live off the surplus produced by an enslaved many. It now made sense, as the consequence of a victory over foes, to enslave the survivors rather than simply killing, or in some cases, even eating them.

Slavery was the seminal institution in the launch of civilization, and with it, came empire. The surplus production of slaves allowed for the creation of a small privileged class of rulers who could spend their time freed from the most menial kind of labour. The privileged ones could be rulers, warriors or priests. They could even be, at a somewhat later time, thinkers, people with that most valuable of commodities, free time to devote to activities other than the relentless struggle for mere survival.

It is not difficult to see how empire and slavery come into the equation together. As a consequence of a victory in battle of one band, tribe or society over another, whole peoples could be vanquished by the victors. Military victories thus could net slaves for a rising and conquering society. The slaves, therefore, were not merely an underclass, but an alien underclass, members of a defeated society brought within the sway of a nascent imperial power. The first empires, thus established, were doubtless rudimentary affairs and the discovery, if we can call it that, of the benefits of conquest to acquire slave labour, was doubtless made countless times in different parts of the world. Rulers, then and later, were no doubt not particularly pleased to see their rising good fortune attributed to mere conquest and the acquisition of slave labour. The thought, even today, that the rise of civilization was the consequence of slavery and

empire is not an attractive one to contemplate.

Thousands of years would pass before these early, or proto, empires would develop into the complex civilizations of which we have an historical record. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are much closer in time to the days of the great Roman and Chinese empires than those empires were to the first empires to come into being. The Han Chinese and Roman empires, existing in different parts of the world, and overlapping in time, were developmentally far more advanced than the earliest empires that came into being thousands of years before them.

The Chinese and Roman empires are among the most complex and advanced of the earliest form of empire, which we can call the peasant or slave empire. Three other forms of empire have arisen over the millennia since the days of the Han and Roman empires. First came the mercantile empire, an early example of which was the Venetian Empire, which reached its zenith from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. The most far-flung of the mercantile empires was that of Spain, which became the world's greatest power from the late fifteenth century to the late seventeenth century. The early British and French empires, whose struggles dominated the 18th century, were initially attempts to copy the Spanish Empire.

Mercantile empires were launched in societies that had

developed an early form of capitalism. (In capitalism, investors and owners earned profits from enterprises they controlled. Under feudalism, in contrast, aristocrats collected a portion of the produce of the serfs on their lands and those serfs were required, as well, to perform labour for aristocrats.) The goal of such empires was to reap profits from foreign conquests, and bankers and other financiers invested large sums to send Spanish expeditions to the New World in search of gold and silver. Along the way, the Spaniards overthrew mighty indigenous western hemisphere empires, the Aztecs, the Maya and the Incas, setting up their own system of imperial rule. The main goal from the start, though, was bullion, to be brought home to Spain in the great galleons that dominated the seas in the days of Spain's empire. Mercantile empires made use of brutal conquests, thievery, and the deployment of peasants and slaves to reap their profits.

The next form of empire, the form that was most common in what was called "the age of imperialism" in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was the capitalist empire. The classic imperialism of the 19th century involved an immense campaign by the European powers to annex the, as yet, unconquered parts of Africa, to seize pieces of Asia and to force China to grant them special powers in regions of that great, but divided and besieged country. The most frenzied period of the land grab took place in the decades after 1870. All the other

European powers were following the British example. It was the heyday of Britain whose rulers boasted that the "sun never set on the British Empire." Maps of the world splashed red across British domains, from Canada to Australia, to large parts of Africa, the jewel of the whole imperial enterprise being the Indian subcontinent. By contrast, the British Isles, small bits of land off the northwestern corner of Europe, the centre of it all, were tiny dots of red on a world map. The British, and the other empires of the age, were carved out by capitalist powers, in the full flush of industrialism, and in a threatening new age of militarism.

Scholars, journalists and political leaders alike, during that age, debated whether imperialism was profitable for the imperial powers. Did the cost of governing and securing the colonies outweigh the profits realized in them? Observers produced tables that showed that Britain and the others were spending more on their overseas holdings than they were earning back from them. More important than the numbers on the tables was the fact that the people paying taxes for the governing of the colonies and those profiting from them were, for the most part, not the same people. While the general public paid into the coffers of the state to run the colonies, the sons of aristocrats got most of the top posts in the colonial realms, and great financiers and investors, like Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, made the super profits. For these

privileged people, the empires were well worth it.

The sun set on the British and the other great European empires in the decade or two following the end of the Second World War. By the end of the 1960s, the age of imperialism seemed to have come to an end. In the era of the Cold War, two superpowers, with sharply different ideologies, the United States and the Soviet Union, dominated the world. Empire appeared to be a thing of the past.

Under closer scrutiny, however, it was evident that the United States and the Soviet Union were both creating their own empires. The Soviet Union's empire was a regional affair, the fruit of the conquest of eastern Europe by Soviet armies that drove the Nazis out in the last days of the Second World War. Although eastern European countries had their own governments, the real power lay in Moscow, and when popular movements in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 sought to achieve democratic regimes ruled by their own citizens, Soviet tanks rolled in and crushed these popular uprisings. The Soviet Empire lasted until 1989, when the reform-minded regime of Mikhail Gorbachev decided no longer to use force to uphold Soviet power in Eastern Europe.

One by one, the people of the Soviet satellite states rose up in revolutions that were almost entirely peaceful and set up their own governments, free from

Moscow's grasp. In 1991, the Soviet Union disintegrated and its constituent republics went their own way as separate states, some more or less democratic, others authoritarian, and still others condemned to years of civil strife. In a very short space of time, an empire that was also a superpower crumbled, not as a result of external conquest, but the victim of its own internal contradictions. The collapse of the Soviet Empire was an illustration in our own time of the fact that great political entities can rise and fall with extraordinary suddenness.

During the decades when the Soviet Union was a superpower, the United States was assembling its own, very different, and much larger empire. It was a new kind of empire, the fourth type of empire to be encountered in our inquiry. We can call it a "global empire" with both a structure and a global reach that was unlike that of any of its predecessors. While an important part of the British Empire was informal, in that the Union Jack did not fly over it, most of the empire was formally British territory, directly ruled from London or, in the settler dominions, such as Canada, by a locally elected government that had power over domestic affairs. The American Empire, by contrast, is almost wholly an informal affair. What makes it an empire is that American power, economic, political, military and cultural shapes crucial decisions in the countries that fall within the empire. Though American power is decisive, national governments

administer the countries, a task the Americans do not perform in the way the British once did throughout most of their empire.

In chapter three, we will have much more to say about the American Empire. First though, in the next chapter, we will briefly survey the experience and histories of some other empires in different eras and different parts of the world.

This introductory discussion about empire raises a number of questions we should have in mind as we look more closely at particular empires. Who benefits from empire? While it is obvious that a small and powerful group of people at the centre of an imperial power derive enormous benefits from running an empire, what about the people as a whole in the imperial centre, do they benefit from empire or do they pay a price? And what about the people who live in the colonized parts of the empire? Are they exploited and impoverished as a consequence of empire, or do they benefit from the transmission of economic techniques, investment, culture and political ideas from the imperial centre? And finally, having observed that empires have existed throughout recorded history, we need to ask, are they likely to remain a crucial part of the human landscape for the foreseeable future?