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Empires Versus States

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Summary and Keywords

The classical analytical category of “empire,” as opposed to “state,” “city,” “federation,” and other political forms, can account for a large number of historical and current experiences, including the past United States of America, the European Union, Russia, and China. An “empire” has been conceived, in contrast to a “state,” as a very large size polity with a government formed on movable frontiers, with multiple institutional levels, overlapping jurisdictions, and asymmetric relations between the center and the diverse territorial units.

Keywords: empire, imperialism, state, nation-state, federation

Introduction

“Empire” is a classical category in the study of politics that was neglected or even derided for several decades. During most historical periods, most human beings have been living in empires, including the Chinese and Persian Empires, the classical Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, the Indian Empires, the Holy Roman Empire, the German Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the Japanese Empire, as well as the colonial empires of Spain, Britain, France, and other European powers (see Figure 1).

From “State” to “Empire”

About a generation ago, a claim was made to “bring the state back in” the social sciences, as in the work by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (1985) and, especially, Skocpol (1985). This claim was initially addressed to correct “too society-centered” ways of explaining politics and governmental processes that had prevailed during a previous period starting in the 1950s and 1960s. Bringing the “state” back in brought about much more attention to formal rules and institutions, governmental activities, and the impact of authorities on societal processes, including economic interests and social movements. New knowledge and science have indeed developed from that impulse and the subsequent turn in methodological approaches.

However, in a number of further scholarly studies, the “state” was conceived not only as an institutional and organizational structure for different actor’s strategies and decisions, but as a unitary actor, especially in the field of international or transnational relations. The “explanatory centrality” given to the state as a potent and autonomous actor somehow neglected the role of both larger and smaller political units, especially as the scale of politics has been greatly changing during the most recent period.

Empire-wide political and institutional processes indeed disappeared from the field of academic political studies after the Second World War. A search in *The American Political Science Review* (APSR) since its foundation gives the following results. In the first period, from 1903 to 1949, as many as 7 articles and 74 books reviewed included the words “empire” or “imperial” in the title. Most of them dealt with the “problems and possibilities” (as titled in one of the reviews) of the British Empire, followed by the German Empire, as well as the American, Chinese, Japanese, and Ottoman Empires. Articles and books approached such suggestive subjects as empire’s unity, nationalism, federalism, government and politics, political system, governance, constitution and laws, legislative jurisdiction, administrative system, civil service or civil code—that is, the same kind of subjects that can be studied under the alternative framework of “state.”

In contrast, not a single piece of work published in the APSR between 1950 and 1967 included the words “empire” or “imperial” in the title. This suggests that the “society-centered” approaches mentioned above, which were prevalent during that period, not only neglected the study of states but also forgot the study of empires. Since 1968, the words “empire” or “imperial” reappear, although only in 40 book reviews, not in the titles of full-fledged articles. Most of the reviews in this period focus on history of past colonial empires, while only 8 address imperial relations in the current world (mainly regarding American foreign affairs). Interestingly, in this period “empire” is also used in a different sense, as in expressions such as “empire of law,” “empire of liberty,” or “empire of reason,” which may indirectly reflect the oblivion in which the political concept of empire had plunged.

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A new source of interest in the concept of empire derived, however, from some results of state-centered studies in state-building and nation-building. The promoters of the newly “state-centered” approach had remarked that it derived in part from analytical developments and problems in previous “society-centered” approaches, since the explanation of many societal processes required to ascertain the impact of the political system and the state itself. Analogously, the development of studies directly or indirectly inspired on the assumption of state centrality contributed to pay attention to alternative political units with an impact on states. In recent times scholars of the state have realized that the state cannot be taken for granted; its very existence is problematic; processes of state-building and nation-building show that there are different degrees of “statehood” or “stateness”; there are strong and weak states, as well as numerous failed “states”; and the future of the national state in the current world is questioned by new issues of scale, space, and territoriality. Both supra-state and infra-state institutional and organizational structures appear increasingly relevant to explain collective processes and outcomes in the current world.

Specifically, some fundamental discussion was initiated two generations of political scientists ago, by S. E. Eisenstadt (1963) and collected by S. N. Eisenstadt and Stein Rokkan (1973). As they were embedded in the “modernization” paradigm, the editors acknowledged they had been unable of “developing a general theoretical structure for comparisons across all regions of the world,” but remarked on “the uniqueness of the Western experience of state formation and nation-building” and its inappropriateness for the “Third World.” Especially for Africa, for instance, “nation-building in the European style was a luxury when not a catastrophe” (See also Rokkan & Urwin, 1983).

Somehow following or paralleling this intuition, a number of historians have identified spatial and temporal limits for the validity of the concept of “state”: basically Western Europe and a few of its colonies since mid-17th century. A masterful survey of the modern states in this perspective is given, for example, by Martin L. Van Creveld (1999). Other enlightening studies on the formation of early states include William Doyle (1978), Charles Tilly (1975), Hendrik Spruyt (1994), and Philip Bobbitt (2002). The importance of initial violence, force, and coercion in building a state was particularly highlighted by social historian Charles Tilly, who went so far as to present both war-making and state-making as forms of “organized crime” (Tilly, 1985). In the academic headquarters of political science more strictly defined, the role of violence and coercion in the formation of states was also stressed by Margaret Levi (1988, 1997) and Robert H. Bates (2001). Bertrand Badie and Pierre Birnbaum (1983) remarked that the state is but one possible institutional formula in complex societies in the modern world. The failure of the state model beyond Europe was subsequently analyzed also by Bertrand Badie (1992).

A few works dealing more directly with political and governmental processes in empires must be mentioned. Specifically, “the concept of empire” and its potential in the analysis of long-term historical periods was discussed in the excellent book co-authored by an outstanding selection of historians and political scientists at the initiative of Maurice

Duverger and published only in French (Duverger, 1980). A long-term historical sociology of empires was also developed by Michael W. Doyle (1986), who presented empires as forced by either force, collaboration, or dependence.

Later on, Samuel E. Finer provided the only political science-oriented history of government in the world that goes beyond the last 200 years (Finer, 1997). Finer states at the very first page of his impressive, indispensable, and irregular three-volume study that his “concern is with states.” However, he immediately acknowledges that most “pre-modern” polities did not fulfill the basic characteristics of “state,” namely, the notion of territorial sovereignty (and far less that of “a self-consciousness of nationality”). Actually, in his own “conceptual prologue,” Finer goes to provide a three-fold typology of structures of government based on the distinction between city, state, and empire. In his extensive survey, the category of city-republics includes a number of cases in Mesopotamia, the poleis of Greece, and the medieval Europe. The “formation of the ‘modern European state’,” in turn, “starts effectively with, and is built around, the erection of known frontiers . . . States were the product either of aggregation from small territorial units or the disaggregation of large territorial units,” according to Finer (pp. 9, 35). But it has also been argued that, in the current world, the states themselves are suffering processes of both disaggregation into small polities (along the revived tradition of city-republics) and aggregation into large territorial units of imperial size.

In fact, most of Finer’s work deals with empires, using regularly and explicitly the word. Specifically, his analysis includes Assyria, “the first empire in our modern sense”; Persia, “the first secular-minded empire”; China, in fact a series of “multi-state empires”; Rome, which ruled through “imperial agents” like the provincial governors; the Byzantine Empire; the Arab Empire of the Caliphate; the Ottoman Empire; and the Indian Empires. Finer’s work provides, thus, highly valuable material for political science analysis of polities or structures of government through history, although his initial emphasis on “states” is dismissed by his own substantive analysis of really existing governments. Other interesting suggestions for further work from Finer’s materials were also provided by George E. Von der Muhll (2003).

Historian Peter Turchin has remarked the role of cooperation among people who have to band together to fight off a common enemy in the formation of empires. Although there was no direct connection between the authors, this evokes William Riker’s model of formation of federation for paramount defense and military motives (Riker, 1987). For Turchin, this kind of cooperation led to the formation of the Roman and Russian Empires, and also the United States (Turchin, 2006).

Other recent contributions were motivated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the expectation of a new world order under the hegemony of the United States. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) tried to use the notion of empire to address the emergence of a “postmodern” or post nation-state global order. Alexander J. Motyl (2001) surveyed the historical decay and collapse of empires. Herfried Munkler (2005) pondered the “surprising return” of empires as prompted by the failure and collapse of

states. Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank (2010) focused on how empires accommodated differences among populations. And James Muldoon (1999) reviewed the history of the various concepts of empire.

Defining Empires and States

One of the reasons for overlooking the usefulness of the concept of empire may have lied in its confusion with imperialism. An “empire” means a form of polity, that is, a form of organization of a political community. A polity can be organized as a city, a county, a region, a state, a federation, or an international organization, among other categories, each based on different scales of the territories under their jurisdictions. The specific form of polity called “empire” implies a large area and it’s different from both a sovereign state, which tends to be smaller, and a great international organization formed by sovereign states.

Imperialism is something different: a policy of conquest and domination of foreign lands and populations. In fact, an imperialistic policy can be implemented not only by an empire, but also by the other forms of polity. There can be imperialistic states, as was the case of the colonial empires of European states in America, Africa, and Asia. And there can even be imperialistic cities, as historical experiences such as those of Sparta or Venice, for instance, can suggest. Likewise, polities like a city, a state, or an empire can do non-imperialistic policies, but favor transnational cooperation and peaceful coexistence. Modern history shows all these alternatives. An imperialistic policy and an imperial polity are two different things that may come together or not. An encompassing review of ideologies of imperialism is provided by Jennifer Pitts (2010). Niall Ferguson (2003, 2004) has discussed the relevance of the experience of the British and the American empires for the organization of the current globalized world.

Some essential characteristics of “empires” as a form of polity are the following:

- Very large size, in terms of both territory and population.
- Absence of fixed or permanent boundaries. Empires tend to expand over the territory, up to the point of conflict with other empires, and when in decline they may also contract. In general, “territory” should not be considered a strong defining element of empire.
- A compound of diverse groups and territorial units with asymmetric links with the center. In ancient and medieval times, an empire could be comprised of cities, republics, counties, principalities, bishoprics, and other varied forms of political organization. Today, multiethnic federations can be arranged with less heterogeneous institutional regimes. But democratic empires may also include political units organized with different forms of parliamentary or presidential, uni-chamber or multi-

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chamber, monarchical or republican governments. They may be linked to the center by diverse institutional formulas.

- A set of multilevel, often overlapping jurisdictions. Within an empire, no authority typically rules with exclusive powers. Rather, the central government may rule indirectly through local governments; the latter develop self-government on important issues; power sharing is widespread.

All these characteristics are in contrast with the concept of “state,” which is a political unit defined by the following elements:

- Large or midsize, in terms of both territory and population.
- Fixed territory and formal boundaries, as the clear establishment and foreign recognition of the territorial limits of a state are intended as protection from external attacks, invasions, immigrants, and imports.
- Sovereignty, as the state has supreme authority over a territory and population, it recognizes no other source of jurisdiction but itself, and the state’s power to make ultimate decisions is recognized by other sovereign states.
- Attempts at monopoly and homogenization, as the state has reserved functions with exclusive jurisdiction within its territory, and it is organized with an internal hierarchy of powers. In order to facilitate the exercise of its functions and consummate its exclusiveness, the state tends to establish a uniform administration over the territory, as well as to promote the homogenization of important social and cultural characteristics of its subjects or citizens.

The “state” is a form of government that has achieved wide appeal in the modern world. Apparently, the current world is organized in almost 200 “states.” But only a relatively limited number of these political units can be considered to be successful “states” in a strict sense of the word. Sovereign states succeeded in Europe within a historical period that began only about 300 years ago as they emerged from and consolidated themselves against previously existing empires. The earliest political units deserving to be called states were England, France, Spain, and Sweden, which were formed on territories located at the periphery of the former Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. During the 18th century all of these states combined occupied only between 2 or 3% of the earth’s territory, while all other parts of the world were organized in small political units and larger empires of various formulas. New large states were also formed later in the core territory of the Holy Roman Empire, that is, Italy and Germany, but in these cases in a much more decentralized way based on the aggregation of a networks of midsize cities and regions.

Beyond Western Europe, the model of the sovereign state has been much less successful. The United States of America was created from the beginning, rather than as a nation-state, as a “compound republic” formed by previously existing units retaining their constituent powers. Instead of concentrating power around a single center like in the European-style states, the American empire was organized with a “checks and balances”

regime based on division of powers, negotiations, and jurisprudence. For almost 100 years, until the Civil War, the American Union was characterized by unstable borders, weak federal institutions, and a variety of formulas along the territory including states, commonwealths, and territories directly ruled from Washington. The transformation from empire to federation was completed only by the early 20th century, when the basic federal institutions were established, including those for finances (the Federal Reserve), security (FBI), and representation (homogeneous electoral systems for the House, the Senate, and the Presidential College). The model of the United States not as a sovereign state, but as a “compound republic,” has been elaborated, among others, by Vincent Ostrom (1987).

In Asia, a few very large, overpopulated empires have also escaped from the project of statization: China, the compound India-Pakistan-Bangladesh, as well as Indonesia and Japan, have maintained certain traditional imperial characteristics of internal complexity, not adopting the homogenizing features of modern European states mentioned above.

Unlike in either North America or Asia, attempts to replicate the typical European “state” form of government were made in Hispanic America, Africa, and the Middle East as a consequence of the colonial expansion of European states and the further independence of their colonies. Indeed, the larger and more powerful states of Europe, which had been created as an alternative formula to empires, engendered new colonial empires in other parts of the world. But when the people of the colonies rid themselves of imperial domination, paradoxically, they also lost the large-scale networks of imperial size able to provide common security, open trade, and other large-scale service. They did nothing but imitate the old “state” forms of government of their former masters. The experience was less successful than it was in the metropolis—in many cases, a failure indeed.

An empire is, thus, an alternative political form to a state. It should also be distinguished from a federation. Like a federation, an empire implies multiple levels of government focused on policy issues at different territorial scales and some overlaps. Unlike a federation, an empire has no fixed borders, it involves different links of the territorial units with the center, and has pervading asymmetries, whether regarding the territory, the economy, the powers of the units, and the institutions.

The Evolution of Empires

Changes in the size and other defining characteristics of political units, that is, the prevalence of either vast empires or large states or smaller communities in different historical periods has been derived from two factors. First, they can be fostered by technological changes, especially regarding war, transports, and communication. Second, institutional changes are produced by human decisions favoring security, freedom, and well-being, such as can be provided by modern electoral democracies.

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The size and evolution of empires was studied in four illuminating articles by Rein Taagepera (1978A, 1978B, 1979, 1997), who demonstrated that all imperial trajectories of empires expansion and contraction resemble parabolas of various heights and slopes—a finding “as close to ‘lawlike’ as is possible in the social sciences” (Motyl, 2001). At the same time, in the long term, there has been an ever-continuing historical trend toward larger empires. According to the data provided by Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones (1978) and Taagepera (1997), there is no evidence of empires larger than 10,000 km² much before 3000 BC. The largest ancient empires, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, with about one million km², were still tiny compared to the present ones. The largest ones at the beginning of our era, in China and Rome, were already much larger, with about five million km². But modern empires, including Russia and the colonial empires of Spain and Britain, have encompassed double-digit millions of km².

This continuing trend toward larger sizes of empires has been enabled, indeed, by technological advances in transports and communications. Roads, canals, harbors, railways, and highways have always formed the skeleton of empires. But things changed dramatically with the invention of the telegraphy in the 19th century, later followed by the telephony and the Internet, which created the age of instant communication. The art of government at a distance has multiplied the size of viable empires.

Another historical trend is toward an increasing number of simultaneous empires, so that the imperial form of government has been established over increasingly higher proportions of the world’s population. Virtually none of the territories of the currently existing states in the world has been alien or outside some large modern empire. Possibly the only exception is Thailand (which emerged from the old kingdom of Siam without Western colonization).

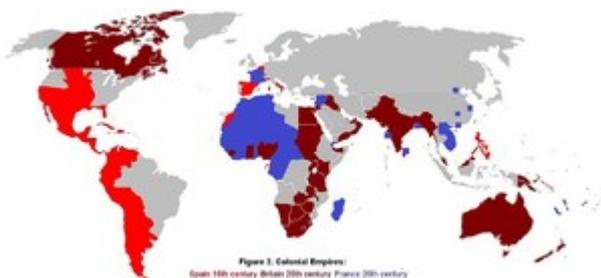
The present world can be seen as organized in at least four very large, powerful empires. In alphabetical order, which may coincide with the order of their relative strength, they are the following: America, China, Europe, and Russia. These political units encompass nowadays near 40% of the world’s population (and 80% of the world’s production). Four more very large units could also be considered of the imperial type, at least in terms of the size and variety of their population, and, in most cases, the multilevel federal-type of their internal organization; they are India, closely linked to Pakistan and Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, and Brazil (Australia and Canada have comparable territorial sizes to the empires mentioned, but they are heavily underpopulated). In all these units together live more than two-thirds of the world’s populations.

A world’s single government is not foreseeable from historical developments. When the tendency toward increasingly larger sizes of empire, as measured by territory, has been extrapolated, it has been found only a 50% probability of a single world empire by a date placed between 2200 and 3800 (depending on the author making the calculation). If the extrapolation is based on the proportion of the world’s population within the largest

empire, that expectation has been deferred to nothing less than the year 4300 (Carneiro, 1978; Marano, 1973; Naroll, 1967; Taagepera, 1997).

Europe as an Empire

The concept of empire has been used to analyze, in particular, the current European Union. After a few centuries of continuous and increasing warfare, after the Second World War the larger European states found a new way for peace and prosperity by building what some authors have called a new kind of Europe-wide empire. The union has based on military, commercial, economic, monetary, and political cooperation among states. Its most recent expansion was a consequence of the end of the Cold War, which brought about the Soviet disunion of the Russian Empire and the disintegration of the multiethnic Yugoslavia. Within a couple of years after 1991, 20 new independent republics were created in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.



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Figure 2. Colonial empires: Spain 16th century, Britain 20th century, France 20th century.

But many of these either sought their salvation by applying to membership to the increasingly large, democratic and market-oriented European Empire, or languished isolated in the hands of dictatorial and ineffectual rulers.

One may hear that the current institutional formulas of the European Union are “unique,” “exceptional,” or “unprecedented.” This is indeed a frequent assertion in certain journalistic literature and political speech. For the social sciences, however, this only means that there is not a sufficiently broad analytical concept capable of including this case among those with common relevant characteristics. That’s why the European Union has been associated to the idea of empire, as it is indeed a very large political unit (the third in population in the current world); it has expanded continuously outward without previously established territorial limits; and it is organized diversely across the territory and has multiple, overlapping institutional levels of governance. The point that the European Union may not be “unique” was addressed, for instance, by James Caporaso et al. (1997). For a comparison between the processes of constitutional building of the European Union and of the United States of America, see the symposium organized by Richard Bellamy (2005). The war motives in building large empires like the European one were remarked by William H. Riker (1996).

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More explicitly, the idea of the European Union as an empire was early suggested by historian Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, who wrote “the construction of the European Economic Community could seriously be taken as the reconstitution of an empire in compensation for colonial loss by the major Western European states” (Ucelay-Da Cal, 1995, 1999). The vision of the European Union as a new kind of empire was also sketched by Robert Cooper (2003). Further works developing the analysis of the EU as a democratic empire include the books by Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2004, 2007), Josep Colomer (2006, 2007, 2015), Jan Zielonka (2007), as well as a series of articles and symposiums by Magali Gravier and Noel Parker (2011), Gary Marks (2012), John W. Boyer and Berthold Molden (2014), Gravier (2015), and David Engels (2016).

The referendum for Brexit, that is exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2016, may have reinforced this vision. The EU is actually formed by different groups of countries with different degrees of commitment with the Union: the 19 in the Eurozone, 8 more member-states in the East, other countries in the periphery with free trade and in some cases open borders (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, possibly the United Kingdom), and diverse influence areas including the neighbor countries with preferential treaties, the microstates using the euro, and other links. During the most recent period, while some core countries have strengthened the elements of union, others have confirmed their detachment, thus confirming and amplifying the imperial-type asymmetries of the EU.

Some of the authors mentioned above have developed a more explicit historical analogy between the current European Union and the medieval Holy Roman Empire.



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Figure 3. Three continental empires: the United States, the European Union, and the Russian Federation.

The analogy is suggestive enough in many respects, as both the medieval empire and the current union have common features such as the following: movable frontiers for a very long period until relatively

more stable borders were fixed, pegged currencies, and broad trade, rule by a permanent body formed by representatives of the territorial units with votes weighted by their size, decisions made by broad negotiations and compromises, as well as overlapping authorities and diverse institutional formulas across Europe—that is, strong links of unity together with remarkable religious, language, and cultural diversity.

Consider also the following comments by engaged politicians. For Jose-Manuel Durao-Barroso, by then president of the European Commission, stated in 2007: “Sometimes I like to compare the European Union as a creation to the organization of empires. Empires! Because we have the dimension of empires. But there is a great difference. The empires were usually made through force, with a center that was imposing a diktat, a

will, on the others. And now we are what some authors call the first ‘non-imperial empire’” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I8M1T-GgRU>). For former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the current European Union is “more like the Holy Roman Empire than the Europe of the nineteenth century”; the current institutionalization of the European Union has “produced a degree of unity that had not been seen in Europe since the Holy Roman Empire” (Kissinger, 2014).

Concluding Comments

The concept of “empire,” as distinguished from “state” and “federation,” can enlighten the variety of forms of polity in the current world. These analytical categories should facilitate the study of political processes at different scales in historical and comparative perspectives. According to the definitions given above, there would be nowadays about 10 very large empires; about three-dozen successful large states, which coincide for the most part with the members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (the larger ones tend to be organized with federal formulas); a similar number of about 3-dozen states which can be considered to have failed; and more than 100 small, formally independent countries that would hardly be viable without large networks of “imperial” size; the latter include about 70 ministates with a population between 1 and 10 million inhabitants and 40 more microstates with less than 1 million inhabitants, including most members of the European Union.

From this point of view, the study of smaller political units should also take relevance. In the current world, there are more than 500 non-state political units with governments and legislative powers located within a couple dozen decentralized empires or large federations. There are also about 20 “territories” formally linked but physically non-contiguous to some large empire or state and in fact quite independent although not recognized as sovereign, and about 15 other territories de facto seceded from recognized states. About 150 of these non-state small units are in Europe, nearly 200 in the Americas, about 150 in Asia, and about 40 in Africa. Besides, other alliances and unions, such as the Organization of American States, the American Free Trade Agreement, the African Union, the League of Arab States, and similar institutions have so far been revelations of intention and hope more than effective institutional networks. (Helpful data for these estimates and further research are provided by Kristian S. Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward and by the Correlates of War project at the University of Michigan). It is about time, thus, to bring the empire back in political studies.

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