

Some Remarks on Empire

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Is the United States on the verge of becoming an empire? This much-discussed question is, like too many current public issues, a badly formed problem. Not because it is impossible to answer, but because it is far too easy to construct an answer to fit your purposes.

Nietzsche said: “only that which is without history can be defined.” The reason for this is that history is not a smooth unfolding, an essence realizing itself in reaching for its fulfillment. Another way to put this anti-essentialist point is to say that the historical and by necessity social world does not possess a stable categorical structure – there is no finite set of characteristics for, say, “empire” that serve as necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in that category. To use Louisiana metaphors, historical and social entities are not like an acorn developing into an oak tree. Rather history is a mess, a tangle, a bayou, and it needs a “genealogy” to begin to untangle some of its lines of growth.

If we persist with thinking categorically, we will play the definition game, and we all know how that goes. Let’s take the current US adventure in Iraq: is it imperialist or not? Well, you can predict the answer to that question if you know the stances on Bush and empire the person who asks the question possesses. Remember Nietzsche’s insistence that we ask the question “who?”: who is saying this or that about Iraq? All the person needs to do is to select a set a criteria so that Iraq does or does not meet those criteria, according to how they feel about the other two elements. In other words, the stance on Iraq is a mere function of more fundamental stances. Let’s make a grid:

Bush	Empire	Iraq as imperialist
Pro	Anti	No
Anti	Anti	Yes
Pro	Pro	Yes, and it’s a good thing!
Anti	Pro	No, or at least it’s insufficiently so

So all the definition game does is hide the fundamental positions. Why not just cut to the chase and say what your stances are on Bush and Empire and be done with it?

Now some would say we could rescue essentialist definitions of empire by comparing our lists of criteria and then applying them to a list of intuitively clear cases of empire: the Chinese, the Persians, the Romans, the British and French, and see if we can’t construct a list that picks out all the empires with leaving any out but doesn’t include any that aren’t intuitively clear. The problem here of course is agreeing on an exhaustive and clearly defined list of “intuitively clear cases”!

And that’s because the other problem with definitions and essences as ways to discuss categories is not only does the world not come that way (an ontological point) but also that we don’t actually operate that way (a naturalized epistemological point). Human beings instead categorize the world by prototype and deviation. So we might be able to pick out prototype empires, let’s say Rome. But as we’ll see, it’s always the marginal cases – our Iraq adventure – that are difficult to pin down.

All this does not say we can’t make any conceptual distinctions about empire, but it’s important to

remember that the historical tangle will always complicate things. Furthermore, what makes empire especially difficult to discuss is not just its historical complexity but also its tangled emotional valences. I'll first discuss the concept of empire and then its emotional valences.

CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

To start, the concept of empire belongs to a group of other concepts for ancient systems of geo-socio-political order, including nomadic warrior bands (with a leader who is first among equals -- *primus inter pares* -- and who divvies up the booty they plunder from other groups); central place cities (with large scale slave-based agriculture and tending to mixed regimes w/ monarchial elements); and gateway cities (tending to commercial republic; expansionist democracy; forming leagues and allies). These cities tended to have interludes of tyranny – one-man absolute rule – on their way from aristocracy to democracy or mixed regimes. Remember that conflict between *primus inter pares* and absolute rule – we will see it again and again.

Finally, there is an important concept, developed in the ancient world, for inter-state relations, “hegemony”, which is leadership by one unit of other units formally equal in “rights” but materially unequal in power. A *hegemon* usually lurks behind the façade of an alliance of cities. Now a *hegemon* as an example of *primus inter pares* does not, by definition, dictate the affairs of the other cities – otherwise it would be an imperial power dictating to its colonies – but often functions by means of so constraining the options of the other cities that they have little choice but to act in the interests of the *hegemon*: “you’re free to do what you wish, but if you displease us, we will invade you / foment a revolution to displace your regime / boycott or blockade you to economically cripple you”

There are also concepts relevant to modern systems we need to talk about: nation, state, and nation-state. A nation is a people, an ethnic group, a *Volk* as the Germans would say. A state is an entity that governs a territory through institutions (domestic government and defense). A nation-state is a people that governs and defends itself through its own institutions on its home territory.

When we talk about the concept of empire we must at first distinguish the geopolitical and civic political senses of the term. Geopolitically, empire is the domination by one group of a large number of other groups spread over a large territory. In civic political terms, we talk about imperial rule as absolute monarchy, large bureaucracy, elaborate regulatory codes: “big gummit” in other words. On the side of the people, an empire tends to be composed of a few influential rich families and a mass of isolated and relatively powerless “citizens.”

(Now if you insist that I answer the essentialist question at this point, I would have to say the US for the most part works hegemonically rather than imperially – the threats are enough to so constrain other states’ options in both domestic and foreign policy that we exert effective control over large parts of the world – but to show we mean business, an invasion is sometimes necessary, in which case we shift to imperial action. The long history of our control of Central and South America shows this: was fomenting the Pinochet takeover in Chile – that other September 11 – an imperial or hegemonic act? What about the IMF’s role in Argentina in past years?)

Now as I said, as soon as we talk history, these conceptual distinctions are problematized.

HISTORICAL GEOPOLITICS

There’s always lots of ambiguity between hegemony and empire: Is it the Delian League or the Athenian Empire? Was Athens the *hegemon*, first among equals, or the (absolute) ruler, who isn’t even first,

because there is no second?

This same tension between *hegemon* and ruler is repeated within a political unit. The relation of military groups to political command is endlessly complex. To be simple, the warrior, who fights in a blind rage for individual glory and the thrill of battle, is not the soldier, who obeys his superiors and, who, if he fights for glory at all, fights for the glory of the city or empire. The warrior might consent to being led by a charismatic leader, *primus inter pares*, but he doesn't take orders. Because of the tricky way rage works in the human body, there's always a rogue warrior lurking beneath the obedient soldier; the raging beast bursts through from time to time, a theme we see repeated from Achilles and Agamemnon all the way to Patton and Eisenhower and beyond to Rambo.

Furthermore, the dividing line between an empire and a mere kingdom with a central place city as capital is changeable. Did the Normans / English have an empire when they conquered Wales and Scotland? Ireland? What constitutes enough difference to count as "another group"? When the Franks conquered parts of Occitania during the Albigensian Crusade starting in 1209, did that create a Frankish Empire? (Actually, did it re-create part of Charlemagne's Empire?)

Also, given a long enough period of assimilation, what was once seen as an empire by conquest might come to be seen as a nation, as the cultural markers once seen to separate groups are overcome. The American situation is exceptionally complex in this regard as we have so many different kinds of assimilation projects: African slaves, European and later Asian immigrants, Native American and Spanish conquered in Texas, the Southwest, and California. So was our "manifest destiny" imperial or national? What difference does it make when that destiny leaves the contiguous territory of the North American continent and goes half way across the Pacific to Hawaii? Or all the way across it to the Philippines? Does it matter that Hawaii became a state but the Philippines not? And what about all those little "territories" we hardly ever talk about: what is the exact status of American Samoa – an "unincorporated and unorganized territory of the US", administered by the Department of the Interior, Office of Insular Affairs – vis-à-vis talk of American Empire? (How exactly is American Samoa "interior" to the US? Talk about your Derridean topologies!)

HISTORICAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Rome forms an interesting case where these ideal distinctions are finessed on the ground.

Most of the geopolitical expanse of what we call the Roman Empire was gained when its civic political structure was that of a republic. Julius Caesar and his nephew Octavian (later by vote of the Senate, "Augustus") are usually considered "the first Roman emperors," but in fact Augustus went to elaborate lengths to preserve the façade of Republican institutions.

He was always very careful to have the Senate vote him his titles, among them *imperator*, which was a title an army traditionally voted its general after notable victories and simply means, "You've done a good job, general." Basically, all he did was to collect the big offices of the time: consul and tribune; he explicitly notes that he never accepted the office of "dictator":

Even with all those titles, Augustus wanted to be called *princeps*, as in "first citizen." Remembering the fate of his uncle, Augustus preferred not to antagonize the senators, whose aristocratic warrior heritage – real or imagined – would allow them to accept leadership by a *primus inter pares* but never command by an absolute ruler – a lesson the Bush administration would be prudent to learn in its dealings with the UN. Here the question of "body politic" arises: is there a sense in which a nation or state becomes enraged, insulted, depressed? Are these metaphors, or is there a "political physiology" at work?

It's a testament to the way *Realpolitik* is our "folk ontology" in matters political that *imperator* as "successful general" came to mean "Emperor" as "absolute ruler." (There's a separate genealogy for "empire" from *imperium*, meaning "rule.") Likewise, *princeps* as "first among equals" came to mean "prince" as in "first in line to a position of absolute rule." As Aristotle says in the *Politics*, "those who control the arms control the regime".

THE LEGACY OF ROME

We in the West have mixed feelings about empire in general and Rome in particular. This brings me to my second topic: not only is the concept of empire eminently historical, and hence indefinable -- but only the target of a genealogical untangling -- it is a historical tangle with many different emotional valences.

On the one hand, all empire is foreign domination to be resisted by a small band: a myth dear to us from the American Revolution through Star Wars. On the other hand, empire is the establishment of reason, order and peace: the Pax Romana.

In particular, the foreignness of empire comes from the East, and resisting the Evil Empire in the East is the founding myth of the West, if you trace our Western identity back to the Greeks and the famous battles waged between the Greeks and the Persian Empire from 490-479 BCE (Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, Plataea). Evil Empires in the East have been a popular trope from the Hebrew Exile in Egypt and later Babylon all the way to Conan the Barbarian and Xena, Warrior Princess. Indeed when you add religion to the question of the West's resistance to the Evil Empire of the East, you bring Islamic / Christian history into the question, which is both -- to put it mildly -- tangled and emotional, from Charles Martel and the Battle of Poitiers in 732 CE all the way to George W. Bush's infamous "Crusades" gaffe.

However we can't forget that Western anti-imperial sentiment is paralleled by quite strong pro-imperial strands in the West itself. Now some of this tension can be settled by bringing back the East vs West split: their empire is dominating, arbitrary, decadent, mysterious, while ours is one of order, reason, peace and prosperity: the good old days of the Pax Romana.

But let's not go too fast. The image of empire within Europe is quite complex as well. It's not just East vs West. To a large extent we owe the notion that the Greeks are co-founders of the West along with the Romans to the German Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries who sought to posit a German -- Greek historical axis dedicated to freedom and daring over against the French -- Roman historical axis dedicated to Bourbon / Napoleonic empire. So the Germans helped revive an image of the brave Greeks, the forerunners of the West -- democracy and all that -- fighting the evil Eastern empires. But by extension, they were looking for help within Europe in resisting the French who wanted to reinstall Roman / Southern domination of the North. That's because the good old Pax Romana to some was always just the bad old decadent Roman Empire. In fact, just to turn the screw again, the German Romantics who praised Northern vigor and freedom over Southern decadence were also picking up a thread begun by ... the Romans themselves, as you can read in Tacitus.

One final word on Rome before we finish up with some thoughts on emotion and politics. Rome's strategy in matters of civic political structure and cultural politics in the conquered territories was generally lenient. "Pay your taxes, send us some troops, and come to our temple for holidays" seemed to be the extent of it. "Coming to our temple" to a "pagan" wasn't a big deal; it didn't mean you had to give up your local gods, just add a few days to the list of obligations. This relative leniency is no doubt because the Romans sensed it is hugely difficult and expensive to try to change the "hearts and minds"

of a population.

POLITICAL PHYSIOLOGY

This difficulty in changing “hearts and minds” is because any political system will offer an emotional attraction to its members. In fact, if you’ll let me use the term “political physiology” here, political systems work directly on our physiology, our bodily patterns. They select from our evolutionary heritage and compose new patterns by fiddling with primitive inherited patterns, adjusting the thresholds that divide these patterns and installing different triggers for these patterns.

Take the basic inherited pattern of rage – it has an adaptive value and was conserved in our evolution from our mammalian ancestors, a fact easily ascertained by enraging your cat. Look at the cat and then look at an enraged human being: what do you see? The same animal! The difference is that different triggers work to enrage cats and humans, and many different triggers work on many different people. By and large, you can see some distribution of triggers specific to populations raised in specific cultural and political systems, which is how rhetoric is possible. So burning the American flag as an act of rhetoric might enrage some Americans, but it’s not going to enrage many Iraqis today – it will probably thrill many of them.

Now how do political symbols act as triggers of emotions, triggers of bodily states? I’m not much on human nature narratives, but it is at least plausible that individuation is often felt as pain and community as joy. Being taken up out of yourself to join a larger unit – “91,600 of your closest friends” as the Tiger Stadium T-shirt has it – can be a hugely powerful emotional experience. We can even call it “erotic” if we remember that this notion of eros is wider than that of sexual union.

Now the symbol of a community -- the LSU Tiger, the Stars and Stripes – is a trigger that evokes that feeling of transport into a larger whole. So when you see a stinkin’ Georgia Bulldog fan trampling on the Tiger, the rage you feel is in relation to the joy you feel in being a Tiger – and that joy is related to the pain you feel in your everyday isolation and feeling of powerlessness. Imagine the power of the emotions we call “patriotism” then: the larger and more powerful the political unit you belong to, and the weaker and more isolated you feel on your own, the stronger the emotional surge, the more sacred the symbols. Now without invoking a “conspiracy theory” in the slightest, but the most rigorous of philosophical analyses – if you don’t believe me, read Spinoza’s *Ethics* some time – we can then say that the keepers of those symbols have a vested interest in increasing your pain in isolation in order to increase the power they get from controlling the keys to your joy in union. So an empire of isolated and powerless citizens would be a powerful and dangerous beast indeed!

Well, I hope I’ve demonstrated some of the historical and emotional complexity surrounding the concept and reality of empire here.

You can imagine the difficulty of the Bush Administration’s task in Iraq when you think about political physiology: it’s too expensive to “deprogram” – in the manner of *Clockwork Orange* – all the Iraqi citizens, yet it’s too dangerous to let their rage and joy patterns be triggered by anti-occupation rhetoric. Will the program of the New World Order of “globalization” we’ve been perfecting here at home since Reagan intensified the attack on the New Deal -- of individualization by privatization of social services and commodification of mini communities (remember, you have to pay for your Tiger t-shirts) – work there? That is, for how many Iraqis can buying a Britney t-shirt and feeling the joy of belonging to her worldwide Pepsi community ever compete with the shame and rage of belonging to a conquered nation?