QUICK STUDIES



QUESTION AND PENSÉES

Question: What is a strikingly new characteristic of imperial projects—or the way they are analyzed—in the Middle East?

Pensée 1

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Ever since the great wave of European overseas colonization in the late 19th century, the notion of "imperialism" and the promotion of imperial projects has been a highly political one. Use of the term has been prompted for specific historical reasons and, usually, in response to debates which have arisen as a result of particular acts of imperial expansion. On some occasions, and generally when debates have been particularly intense, it has also encouraged the development of general theories designed to explain not just the drive for empire but also the dynamics of a world system in which an unequal distribution of economic and military power leads some nations to create empires based on the domination and control of others.

This process can be seen at the core of three waves of interest in imperialism both as a political process and as a global phenomenon. The first was clearly a response to the period of late 19th century European expansion, notably the fierce debates surrounding the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Exponents of the occupation defended it as a temporary measure designed to protect British strategic interests in a country lying across the route to India, whereas its opponents, such as William Blunt, were quick to portray it as an avaricious attack on an incipient Egyptian nationalism concocted entirely to safeguard the considerable British holdings in Egyptian debt.

Later, a powerful elaboration of these same themes can be found in J. A. Hobson's pioneering attempt to provide a coherent theory of imperial expansion,

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Imperialism: A Study (1902). This remarkable work was the first to theorize that Britain's overseas expansion was driven by a search for investment opportunities and new markets which were unavailable at home. He was also one of the first to link the expansion with the interests of a particular class, in his case a strata of rich capitalists.

Hobson's book was to set the terms for most early 20th-century debate, particularly in the period just before and just after World War I. On the one hand, it provided ammunition for a whole array of critics, including Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, as well as various liberals and pacifists anxious to attack imperial adventures as exploitative and, as a result of the competition for resources that underlay them, dangerous to world peace. On the other hand, the book stimulated a variety of attempts to provide what were increasingly regarded as noneconomic and therefore anti-Marxist explanations for imperial expansion, including those of Joseph Schumpeter, whose influential essay "The Sociology of Imperialism" (1919) argued that the force behind modern empire was not capitalism but atavistic relics of precapitalist groups and structures such as the landed gentry.

The second period of interest in analyzing imperial projects began soon after World War II. The trigger was clearly the challenge to European empires posed by colonial nationalism and the Cold War, allied to a growing interest in theories of development, underdevelopment, and backwardness. A seminal contribution from the early part of this period was Ronald Robinson and J. A. Gallagher's distinction between formal and informal empire.[1] However, it was the same authors' *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (1961)—with its avowed intention of providing an anti-Marxist explanation for the creation of Britain's African empire, as well as their subsequent attempts to account for the process of decolonization as a response to a failure to find willing local "collaborators"—that set the tone for an unusually bad-tempered debate between rival schools largely defined in terms of the weight they gave to the economic as opposed to the strategic or nationalist motives of the imperialists themselves.[2]

Debate was further intensified by passions raised by a series of political events such as the Anglo/French/Israeli attack on the Egyptian-held Suez Canal in 1956 and a series of colonial, or postcolonial, wars in Algeria, Angola, and, above all, Vietnam. None of this, it must be said, produced any very interesting theoretical insights, with the possible exception of the new notion of "gentlemanly capitalism" developed by P. A. Cain and A. J. Hopkins. It seemed to bridge the gap between the "economic" and the "nationalist/strategic" school with its emphasis on the close cooperation between financiers and bankers, on the one hand, and the government, foreign office, and ministry of defense, on the other—all in close touch with another from their office within a few square miles of central London.[3]

The third and most recent wave of interest in notions of imperialism and empire has its roots in American responses to its victory in the Cold War, as well

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as Washington's decision to reinvade parts of the non-European world as part of President George W. Bush's "war on terror." Once again the notion of world empire was placed prominently in the public arena, along with all its attendant debate involving imperial justification or the rival merits of solving international disputes through negotiation and recourse to the United Nations. Meanwhile, the often uncanny similarities between the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the previous British invasion beginning in 1914 made it seem to many that an older cycle of overseas military intervention, problems with collaborationist governments, and anticolonial resistance had simple returned in an amended form.

Nevertheless, if we look more closely at the process, we can see two very important new features. First is the surprising adoption by neoconservatives and others in Washington of *empire*, which had previously only been used as a term of abuse—for example, Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire." As John Dunn suggests, this can probably be explained in terms of an effort to make sense of a puzzling post Cold War reality characterized by the disappearance of any external constraint on U.S. hegemony by a power of the same size.[4]

Second, as far as the Middle East is concerned, external power has been increasingly exercised by the development of new forms of occupation as can be seen in Iraq and to a somewhat different extent in Palestine. For one thing, contemporary occupiers are constrained by the need to observe the vital distinction made in 20th-century international law between what has to be a temporary event and previous forms of long-term colonization. This, in turn, raises important practical questions about how to maintain control after formally withdrawing all military forces. In Gaza, and, it would seem, southern Lebanon, the preferred Israeli option is external control from the air. The same strategy may be about to unfold with the use of airpower from the gigantic American bases inside and just outside Iraq.

The second novel feature of the modern military occupation is the way it brings with it not just the major features of the administrative and political life of the occupier—including its structures of bureaucratic infighting—but also many of its attendant practices, for example the outsourcing of military contracts to private organizations. Baghdad's infamous Green Zone contains almost exact replicas of the Washington-based infighting between the State Department and the Department of Defense. It was a party to huge scams, almost unbelievable corruption, and the kind of whole-scale administrative incompetence later revealed in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

Hence, while existing theories of imperialism may have provided some kind of guidance to the predictable racialism, ignorance, corruption, and secrecy and to the inevitable outrages, like Abu Ghraib and the destruction of Fallujah, which stem directly from almost any serious imbalance of power, they cannot have much to say about the core processes at work, reflecting as they do a new world system in which what many now call the American empire is one of the most important component parts.

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NOTES

[1]Ronald Robinson and J. A. Gallagher, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6 (1953).

[2]For an interesting application of the "collaborationist" theory to the 20th century Middle East, see D. K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[3]P. A. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London: Longman, 1993).

[4]John Dunn, "Great Ambitions," *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 September 2006, 9–10.

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