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WHAT'S WRONG WITH IMPERIALISM?*

By Christopher W. Morris

I. Introduction

Few people today seem to doubt that imperialism is wrong. All one usually needs to do to condemn an act or policy is to label it as imperialist. There are good reasons for this, as we shall see. For the last two thousand years, many crimes have been associated with empires, and several of the empires of the last century have set new standards for human depravity and cruelty. Still, it is worth asking what exactly is wrong with imperialism. It is often good to raise critical questions about a consensus. And it may be that some features of empire are worthy of our respect.

II. The Wrongs and Horrors of Empire

In our time, the horrors of imperialism are well illustrated by the Japanese conquest of Manchuria or by Leopold II's administration of his Belgian Congo. The extermination of many of the peoples of North and Central America a few centuries ago is another illustration. The history of empire is very much a story of death and destruction. It is also a tale of plunder and exploitation. Spain's early conquests were motivated by the prospect of acquiring precious metals, and older empires always exacted tribute (in goods or gold or slaves). All empires until the nineteenth century were slave-owning. The picture is not attractive.

To the association of empires with death, plunder, and exploitation, we can add *domination.* Empires are systems of the domination of one society or group over another. In a number of ways, this formulation is ambiguous. Empires are typically imposed, established by conquest. In that sense, they are systems of domination. It is not clear how damning a criticism this is, given that most states, if not virtually all, have been imposed or established by conquest. More importantly, perhaps, all systems of governance involve some kind of "domination"—for instance, legislators establish laws and judges and administrators make decisions

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that must be obeyed. The kind of governance typically associated with empire often excludes what we now (ambiguously) call "self-government." Given that empires typically rule in considerable part indirectly, the absence of "self-government" here may not be very significant; historically, indirect rule often was relatively permissive, at least compared to available alternatives. Until recently, most states were not democratic, so the absence of democratic self-rule is not a damning criticism of older empires. The concern, however, is in the first instance with the absence of political institutions responsive to the interests and concerns of the governed. We can easily say of many, if not most, empires that the imposed institutions were thus unresponsive. Insofar as that is the case, they are systems of domination in an objectionable way.

Another way in which empires are usually objectionable systems of domination lies in the relation of superiority that the conqueror asserts over the conquered. The right of the imperialist is that of the strong to rule the weak and, more importantly, that of the superior to rule the inferior. Many think that imperialism is invariably racist. It is dubious that the empire of Rome or that of the Hapsburgs or the Ottoman invoked a concept of race anything like ours; but racism is a species of asserted superiority, and the latter certainly is important for an appreciation of imperialism. Imperial powers typically claim superiority. They, by virtue of something about them, are superior to the conquered, and this superiority is part of the basis for their rule. Certain forms of this claim are familiar to all students of history; rulers have often based their rule on ancestry or social class. As obnoxious and incredible a claim as it may appear to us, it is hardly novel, merely what most rulers did until a century or so ago.

More credible perhaps is one particular version of this assertion of superiority. Most empires claim a civilizing mission. Rome and most later empires claimed to bring civilization to the conquered. While this claim may at first seem self-serving and false to us, it should be taken seriously and distinguished from other more dubious claims. Most of us believe there are standards of civilization; the question, then, is whether a *mission civilatrice* has anything to say for itself. Today we are skeptical of talk of civilization. Believing that there are standards of civilization commits one to thinking that some social forms may not meet them, though it need not imply that it is possible to rank civilizations that meet minimal standards. Even if it were the case that all civilizations are equal and worthy of respect, it may still be that not all societies are civilized. More will need to be said here, and a distinction between claims to civilization and possession of the one true faith will need to be made. An important question will be whether this civilizing mission is compatible with respect for the subjects in need of instruction and development.

We associate plunder and exploitation with empire, as I indicated above; but it is not always clear that empires are, on net, beneficial to the impe-

rialists. There is a debate among historians and economists as to whether particular empires were in fact beneficial; many of the classical critics of empire stressed the harm to the mother country. Thus, it may be that inefficiency is another fault we may add to the list.

The score card, then, is not favorable: conquest, death, destruction, cruelty, domination, and perhaps wastefulness. It is hard not to condemn imperialism.

III. Preliminary Evaluation

Most modern empires stand condemned by their association with the conditions described above. I am not an expert, and I should expect that good historians will have much to say and much about which to disagree. Nevertheless, I should venture the suggestion that our evaluation of Rome would be mixed and not all unfavorable and that many of the consequences of the British Empire and, to a lesser extent, that of the French were in some respects salutary. Niall Ferguson's recent book *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* makes the case for the British Empire, and it is one worth taking seriously. The thought that "empire [may be] a form of international government that can work" is one source of my interest in the topic.[1]

The gross injustices associated with empires may, as I said, lead us to condemn them, but the question will be whether imperialism necessarily is to be rejected. The fact that most empires are established by conquest will also trouble us, but it will be worth noticing that the history of modern states is very bloody and that most, if not virtually all, modern states are founded in conquest. Many of the horrors of empire are familiar to students of the state. If the evils of states are not sufficient to condemn them—and most believe that some states at least are good and worth preserving—then we should ask whether the evils of empires suffice to condemn them.

IV. Features of Empires

We should say more about the characterizing features of empires. I do not hazard a "definition," as I do not believe that complex terms like this one can be characterized precisely in the manner required by a genuine definition. There are, in addition, features of classical empires like that of Rome that distinguish them from modern ones in interesting ways, ways that are hard to capture in short or simple definitions. This is not unusual

[1] "In short, what the British Empire proved is that empire is a form of international government that can work—and not just for the benefit of the ruling power. It sought to globalize not just an economic but a legal and ultimately a political system." Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 362.

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with terms of this kind used in different contexts to designate complex historical phenomena.[2]

Empires are typically *vast*. That is, their territories or domains are large compared to their respective cities (*poleis*) or (modern) states. The imperial possessions, typically acquired by conquest (or by intermarriage or inheritance), lie at some distance from the *metropolis*. Empires are composite entities, formed of previously separate political or social entities.[3] They consequently are typically marked by considerable diversity, to employ a fashionable term. The cultural or, as we now say, the national or ethnic makeup of the subjects of an empire is quite varied, at least compared to that of the metropolis or "center." This diversity, when coupled with unsavory kinds of "domination," may make us suspicious of empire. But this feature of empires is the source of other features that we now admire:

> Because of their size and sheer diversity, most empires have in time become universal, cosmopolitan societies. In order to rule vast and widely separated domains, imperial governments have generally found themselves compelled to be broadly tolerant of diversity of culture and sometimes even of belief, so long as these posed no threat to their authority.[4]

The governance of empires is usually a mixture of direct and indirect rule. Considerations of distance and of technology alone made direct rule an impossibility for virtually all empires, most importantly the classical ones. Subjects were for the most part governed directly by local officials, and the power of the metropolis was mediated by "colonial" governors. This feature of empire is of some interest to students of federalism and of systems such as the European Union.

The core or metropolis of an empire in the ancient world was usually a *polis* or similar political unit.[5] In the modern world, imperialists are almost always states. The existence of a dominant core and a subordinate periphery is an essential feature of an empire. Given the differences between

[2] I think the notion of a state is very difficult to capture in a short or precise definition. See Christopher W. Morris, *An Essay on the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 2.

[3] Stephen Howe, *Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

[4] Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), xxii.

[5] My potted story is somewhat Eurocentric. This is forgivable given the eminence of the European and Greco-Roman empires. The interesting question of how to classify premodern China—as an empire or a kind of state—is not easy to answer. Also, there are ways in which the nineteenth-century United States may be thought of as an empire. New York State still refers to itself as "the Empire State," and some of the thirteen original American states had "Western Reserves" or territories. See my remarks below about the ways in which empires characteristically view their boundaries.

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modern states and premodern forms of governance, there are significant differences in early and later empires. The world of modern states—the "state system"—in which we have lived for several centuries is one where the paradigmatic form of political organization is that of a state (or what many misleadingly dub a "nation-state"). One of the significant aspects of this system of "world" organization is a kind of plurality: necessarily, there are many states. As we see with the case of Rome—and perhaps in a different way with that of premodern China—premodern empires did not presuppose, or acknowledge, such plurality. States, as I have argued elsewhere, have *borders*; when not determined by oceans, state borders are contiguous with those of other states. Rome, by contrast, did not conceive of itself as one empire among many; its "boundaries were not borders, but merely frontiers—the furthermost point reached by conquest."[6] The terms we now use—"empire," "imperialist"—derive from the Latin *imperium,* the power to command or to order (in politics and war), a kind of authority.[7] The distinction we now make between "internal" and "external" sovereignty—the power to govern subjects and a certain independence from other powers—was inconceivable to Rome. The scope of its *imperium* was potentially the *cosmopolis.*[8]

We shall return later to some of the differences between ancient and modern empires. For now, let us think of empires as particular forms of political organization different from classical *poleis* or modern states.[9] They are typically large, composite and diverse, composed of different peoples and previously separate groups or societies, and usually created by conquest. And empires are constituted by a dominant core or center and a subordinate periphery.[10]

V. Must Imperialism Stand Condemned?

The characterization above, while quite general and imprecise, may be adequate for our purposes. The question before us is whether empires

[6] Morris, *An Essay on the Modern State,* 30–31. In this work I cite, among other writings, the important essay by Friedrich Kratochwil, "Of Systems, Boundaries, and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System," *World Politics* 39, no. 1 (October 1986): 27–52. He argues that "[t]he Roman Empire conceived of the *limes* not as a boundary, but as a temporary stopping place where the potentially unlimited expansion of the *Pax Romana* had come to a halt" (35–36).

[7] Pagden, *Peoples and Empires,* xxi–xxii.

[8] This feature of Roman imperialism permits it to be the source for what we now think of as cosmopolitan political thought. Given that cosmopolitanism is the most influential contemporary form of anti-statism, it is worth reflecting on its imperial roots.

The fact that empires typically claimed potentially universal jurisdictions is one of the reasons why it is more fitting to think of Vatican City not as a state but as the seat of a former empire. See my *Essay on the Modern State,* 47 n. 85.

[9] In my *Essay on the Modern State,* I characterize the (modern) state as a particular form of political organization and contrast it with a number of alternatives.

[10] This general characterization borrows from Howe, *Empire,* and Pagden, *Peoples and Empires.* See also Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), chap. 1.

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and imperialism (the pursuit of empire) stand condemned by the injustices and evils of most historical empires. I do not want to settle the question by a "definition" which arbitrarily makes the nasty features of empire essential or accidental. Instead, I want to have us think carefully about the central features of empires and of a number of similarities they have with states and other forms of political organization. Empire has a deservedly bad press. But much of it is earned unfairly; nasty empires are (implicitly) compared to reasonably nice states. We would all be anarchists if we were to judge states using similar comparative methods.[11] One of the aims of this essay is to give empires their due.

Let us focus our thoughts by considering a hypothetical empire, a particularly nice one. Suppose there is an empire that is not exploitative or cruel, much less genocidal or homicidal. Its institutions of governance are relatively responsive and relatively efficient—relative to the best alternatives that exist at the time of comparison. It is also relatively just. By this I mean two things: first, it meets most of the fundamental norms of justice and respects most of the fundamental rights of its subjects, and second, it does this, again, as well as the best alternative systems. I assume, implicitly and perhaps contentiously, that people do not have a fundamental right of justice not to be governed by an imperial power (but assuming the contrary would beg the question I wish to consider).

Assume as well that our nice empire is a beneficial venture, that most subjects are better off than in their previous condition. It will be hard to be very precise as well as realistic here. The question of whether *any* complex form of political organization clearly leaves most subjects better off is not a simple one or one that can be answered with precision. Still, this nice empire, like many real ones, builds roads and systems of irrigation, sets up railroad systems, establishes relatively efficient financial institutions and competent civil service institutions, and most of all, protects subjects against foreign invaders and prevents civil or ethnic conflict.[12]

I grant that most empires have not been this nice and that it is not easy to conceive of one that would be. I have intentionally made no mention of the imperial power's assumed sense of superiority or of its civilizing mission. Note that I do not want to exclude the possibility that the empire, even though nice, was founded by conquest. Many nice states have been founded by conquest; a relevant question is whether nice empires could also be.

[11] Many contemporary political philosophers are "philosophical anarchists" insofar as they are skeptical of the legitimacy of existing states. See A. John Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," reprinted in Simmons, *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 102–21.

[12] Economists and other social theorists appreciate the public or collective goods provided by institutions. Empires have provided some, and this is the core of Deepak Lal's case for them. See Deepak Lal, *In Defense of Empires* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2004).

My first reaction to this empire is that "it's not so bad."[13] Must nice empires be condemned? Could they not be justified?

I shall argue that empires, when nice, are no harder to justify than states. States that are significantly Pareto-inferior to feasible alternative arrangements are not justified (where an arrangement is Pareto-inferior to another if the move from the first to the second would make at least one person better off and no one worse off). And empires that are as nasty as Leopold's Congo or Japan's Manchuria are not justified either. But perhaps nice empires can be justified.

VI. Political Legitimacy: The Case of Empires

What does it mean to justify empires (or states or other forms of political organization)? We are asking a number of questions about empires, assuming that the case against them is strong. We might try to rebut that case by showing that empires—nice ones, with relatively just liberal institutions—could under certain circumstances be quite good and worthy of our admiration and support. This might be said, in one sense of the term, to *justify* empires or imperialist endeavors that meet certain standards.[14]

To justify a practice or an institution, in some contexts, often involves showing it to satisfy the appropriate standards for things of its kind—for instance, by showing how common criticisms are misconceptions, how things are much better than they appear.[15] Justifying empires in this sense might require showing that they are quite good or beneficial, or it might involve rebutting charges that they are (virtually) always unjust. Such a demonstration would show that the bad reputation of empires is undeserved and mistaken. It would not, however, show that nasty or barbaric empires have any merit. Similarly, justifying states or the institution of marriage would not validate the Soviet Union's legitimacy or the right of men to kill disobedient wives or daughters. More precisely,

[13] Woody Allen's character in the film *Love and Death* reacts thus to the prospect of Russia being conquered by the French under Napoleon—or so we surmise from his facial expressions. In a scene that takes place before a major battle, a Russian sergeant harangues his troops. Allen's character expresses skepticism about war, and the sergeant is astonished and outraged: "Imagine your loved ones conquered by Napoleon and forced to live under French rule." (A gasp from the gathered soldiers.) "Do you want them to eat that rich food and those heavy sauces?" ("*No-o-o,*" cry the soldiers, except for Allen who seems not in the slightest adverse to French cooking or conquest.) "Do you want to have *soufflé* every meal and *croissant*?" ("*No-o-o.*")

Imagine the prospect of being conquered by an imperial power with British political institutions, French cooking and wine, Japanese rail service, Federal Express running the mail system, etc. This prospect might dampen our anti-imperialism.

[14] In my *Essay on the Modern State,* I in effect consider "nice" states (without calling them that) and argue that they would be justified.

[15] See ibid., 105–12 and 158–61. See also A. John Simmons's important essay "Justification and Legitimacy," reprinted in Simmons, *Justification and Legitimacy,* 122–57.

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showing that a practice or institution has a number of good features, perhaps unnoticed or unappreciated, does not usually show that it is legitimate or specifically that it possesses the normative powers it claims (e.g., authority, powers and rights).

States or their partisans do not merely claim that they are justified, in the sense employed above, in existing and in acting as they do. They claim something more: a particular status, namely, *legitimacy.* If a state is legitimate in this sense, it has a right to exist and a right to rule. Minimally, this means that it is permissible for it to exist and to rule (the rights are mere liberties or Hohfeldian privileges). Presumably, however, these are also claim-rights, entailing duties on the part of others. A state's right to exist would thus entail a duty on the part of others not to destroy it or undermine its existence in certain ways. A right to rule would give the state, among other things, the right to establish laws and to adjudicate and enforce them as necessary for the maintenance of order and other ends.

I shall distinguish between weaker and stronger kinds of legitimacy. It turns out that there are a number of different understandings of the right to rule in the literature, and it is important to distinguish at least two. A legitimate state has a right to exist and a right to rule, as I claimed. I shall say that a state is *weakly legitimate* if its second right, the right to rule, entails that subjects are obligated not to undermine it in certain ways. It is *fully* or *strongly legitimate* if subjects or at least citizens have, in addition, an obligation to obey (each valid law).[16] Full or strong legitimacy tracks the notion that seems to dominate most contemporary discussions. Subjects or citizens of states with this status have a general obligation to obey the law, an obligation to comply with every law that applies to them except in circumstances licensed by the law.[17]

Elsewhere I have argued that states that are reasonably just and efficient are weakly legitimate.[18] Something more—perhaps "the consent of the governed"—seems necessary for full legitimacy. However, no state has been able to obtain the *genuine* consent of more than a small propor-

[16] The distinction between weaker and stronger kinds of legitimacy is not explicit in my *Essay on the Modern State.* It is developed in my essay "The Modern State," in *The Handbook of Political Theory,* ed. Gerald Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 195–209, and in my essay "Natural Rights and Political Legitimacy," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 22, no. 1 (2005): 314–29.

[17] The obligation to obey is typically understood to be stringent or preemptive, as well as content-independent. My understanding of these notions is as follows: An obligation is preemptive in this sense if it is a reason for the performance of an action "which is not to be added to all other relevant reasons when assessing what to do, but should exclude and take the place of some of them." Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 46. Preemptive reasons may, of course, be defeasible and need not be absolute. Furthermore: "A reason is content-independent if there is no direct connection between the reason and the action for which it is a reason." Ibid., 35.

[18] See my *Essay on the Modern State,* chaps. 4–6. My argument there is parallel to the case here for the weak legitimacy of nice empires. I argue, in effect, that "nice" states will be weakly legitimate.

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tion of its subject population.[19] Let us assume for the moment that I am right, that states are weakly legitimate to the extent that they are just and efficient, and that rarely, if ever, will they be strongly legitimate. Even if some of the details of my account are not accepted, the general position, skeptical of the general obligation to obey, is a familiar one in the literature and may represent an emerging consensus. On this view, it is very difficult to establish the strong legitimacy of states.[20]

It should be equally hard to establish the strong legitimacy of empires, even nice ones. I shall not try.[21] The more interesting question is whether some empires might be weakly legitimate. Such empires would have a right to exist and a right to rule, and others would be obligated not to destroy them or to undermine them in certain ways. Consider our nice empire. It is reasonably just (no slavery, no genocide, little exploitation), its institutions are relatively responsive, and it is beneficial to its subjects.[22] Surely its subjects (and others) have an obligation not to destroy it or undermine it in certain ways. I should think it would have the status ascribed to weakly legitimate states. At the very least, the features that give states weak legitimacy also ground the same legitimacy of empires.

What is missing from our nice, weakly legitimate empire, of course, is "self-government." The subjects of an empire are not permitted "to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them." Thomas Jefferson thought that *peoples*—collectivities of a proto-national kind—had this right, and we may differ with him.[23] We tend to think, however, that groups of people have some claim to govern themselves. The position is formulated vaguely, as there is considerable controversy and much confusion here. But however we differ on the details, we tend to think that groups of humans who were conquered and made part of an empire ought to be allowed, at some point, to govern themselves independently, when they

[19] See my *Essay on the Modern State,* 146–47. Note that hypothetical consent is something else, not a kind of genuine consent (see ibid., 126).

[20] For a good selection of the recent literature on obligations to obey—entailed by strong legitimacy—see William A. Edmundson, ed., *The Duty to Obey the Law* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). See especially the essays by M. B. E. Smith, A. John Simmons, Joseph Raz, and Leslie Green. See also Leslie Green, *The Authority of the State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[21] Thomas Hobbes thought that conquest and consent were compatible, but his understanding of consent is not ours. The second of the two ways in which a Sovereign may be established is "by acquisition": "A *Common-wealth by Acquisition,* is that, where the Soveraign Power is acquired by Force; And it is acquired by force, when men singly, or many together by plurality of voyces, for fear of death, or bonds, do authorize all the actions of that Man, or Assembly, that hath their lives and liberty in his Power." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 20.

[22] An analogue might be British Hong Kong for much of the twentieth century.

[23] The passage is from the opening paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, principally written by Thomas Jefferson. For more on Jefferson's view, see my essay "Peoples, Nations, and the Unity of Societies," in *Cultural Identity and the Nation-State,* ed. Carol C. Gould and Pasquale Pasquino (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 19–29.

so wish. The devil is in the details, of course, and I do not mean to sweep difficult questions under the rug, merely to set them aside for now.

VII. A New Imperialism?

The case I have made for the weak legitimacy of our nice empire may not be persuasive; for one thing, I did not offer much of an argument. More importantly, there may be reason to be skeptical of my thought experiment. The notion of a nice empire may turn out to be incoherent.[24] It may be that some of the terms of justice rule out empires, however nice they may be. Our rights to liberty may be very demanding, and it may be that the forms of domination characteristic of empire are unjust. We cannot evaluate this potential challenge without saying much more than we have about justice. Similarly, it may be argued that imperial institutions will rarely be responsive to the interests of subjects. Thus, there may be no nice empires. A defense of the coherence of nice empires against these objections cannot be brief or simple. The worry about the responsiveness of imperial institutions would require an examination of some of the practices, for instance, of British rule in nineteenth-century India. So I merely note these concerns and do not address them here. These and similar challenges may be equally applicable to nice states. Such states may not be just after all,[25] and their responsiveness to their subjects may require that they all be constitutional democracies.

If we grant the possibility of nice and weakly legitimate empires, there are nevertheless two reasons to think that they cannot achieve the same standing as states. The first reason is that empires are necessarily transitional. Our world today is one of states—what is called "a state system." There is a sense in which it is possible to imagine the world remaining such a system forever. It is true that states, in the sense in which I speak of them, are creations of modern times, and it is unlikely that they will continue forever in the form they take at present, without changing in significant ways. But they *could* remain unchanged. There is nothing about the form of modern states that dooms them to extinction or radical transformation.[26] It is different with empires. Most, as we noted, have civilizing missions. With regard to some empires, this may be window-dressing and cynicism, with regard to others it may not be. Or, to put the point differently, the civilizing mission of many empires seems crucial to their justification and to whatever legitimacy they may have. If the subject population were not in need of improvement, some instruction in civili-

[24] I am indebted here to different points pressed against me by Michael Evans, Samuel Kerstein, and Joe Oppenheimer.

[25] See my essay "Natural Rights and Political Legitimacy" for an exploration of the implications of a natural rights conception of justice for the legitimacy of states.

[26] A qualification: In my *Essay on the Modern State,* I argue that states do not live up to their self-image, and this fact may lead us to expect them to change.

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zation, then how might being part of an empire make the subject population better off? But that civilizing mission suggests that its success should bring an end to the empire. Speaking of the British Empire in the early twentieth century, Anthony Pagden notes that implicit in its conception of its civilizing mission "was the notion that one day, in however distant a future, the colonized peoples of the world would indeed become 'civilized.' When that happened, they would logically have to be given back control of their own lives."[27] In that respect, it is hard to imagine empires always being with us. Their very self-image (a self-image that implicitly provides part of their justification) is that of a transitional form of political organization.[28]

The second reason to think that empires cannot achieve the same standing as states is that they are anachronistic. In days long gone, it was customary to be governed by one's superiors. The eighteenth-century revolutions were rebellions in part against one form of such rule: rule by those who claimed political power by virtue of their parentage or inheritance. While we may accept the idea that talents are not evenly or equally distributed by nature's God, it is inconceivable to us, as it was to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, to think that any such talents are the ground, independently of convention, of powers to govern—that some are born to rule. The subordinate status of the subject peoples of empires is one that seems incompatible with modern sensibilities. Ours is a world where "self-rule" is thought to be essential to one's standing as a person or as a group. The notion of self-rule or self-government is ambiguous. One kind involves being governed by one's own and not by foreigners.[29] This issue of self-rule raises questions about "the politics of identity" that I do not want to address here. The second kind of self-government is familiar from republican and democratic political thought and movements. It is the idea that a self-governing group is autonomous in the original sense of giving itself its own laws. I call this latter kind "republican" self-rule and the former "post-colonial" or "national liberation" self-rule.[30] It may be that one of the most important features of democratic rule—which we now understand to be surprisingly inefficient in most of its forms[31]—is the fact that democratic citizens may periodically "fire" their rulers; the latter are, in effect, the employees or servants of the former. Autonomy of the republican sort seems important today to our status and conception of our-

[27] Pagden, *Peoples and Empires,* 151–52.

[28] Here and elsewhere, Stanley Kurtz's interesting article on democratic imperial ventures is instructive. See his "Democratic Imperialism: A Blueprint," *Policy Review,* no. 118 (2003): 3–20.

[29] For instance, for the British, being governed by the House of Windsor rather than that of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

[30] See my *Essay on the Modern State,* 240–42.

[31] I am thinking of the findings of the large literature on "government failures." For a recent survey, see Dennis C. Mueller, *Public Choice III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

selves, and the subjects of empires lack such autonomy. In this way, empires are anachronistic.

This second reason for thinking that empires could not achieve the standing available to states suggests that I may have erred in my description of nice empires. It is not that such things are unimaginable; it is that we would not call them empires, and this reveals something of our conceptions. The association of empire with subordination in more archaic senses than mere subjection to law is so deep that we have difficulties using the term for forms of political association that we value or admire. We would call my nice empires "commonwealths" or "federations" or "unions" (as in the European Union).

The labels are not that important as long as clarity is achieved and understanding not thwarted. My thought experiment about nice empires and our reluctance to use the term "empires" to describe them may reveal part of its meaning. The more important questions have to do with how we should organize the world, and here our antipathy to empire may have blinded us to the beneficial influences our imperial pasts have had and continue to have. The mention of the European Union above was not meant in jest. Insofar as the union ceases to be "European" and starts admitting countries that are not normally understood to be European, its borders will resemble imperial frontiers and the scope of its jurisdiction will be potentially unlimited.

It is especially Rome or premodern empires that we might well reflect upon. Rome was an empire in a world without states. I noted earlier the absence of borders; the empire's boundaries were merely frontiers, the farthest points of conquest. The scope of its jurisdiction was, in principle, universal. Unlike modern states, which have borders and which form part of a state system, classical empires are necessarily, at least in self-conception, limitless. It is this feature, as we noted, that permitted Rome to be such an important source for what we call cosmopolitan political thought. The cosmopolis could grow to encompass the world. In one respect—its potentially universal jurisdiction—it is like some of our "international" institutions.

Our world is not only one of states, but also one of nations, the source of additional complications.[32] And the self-conceptions of premodern imperial people are not available to us. But this particular feature of classical empire—the potentially universal scope of its jurisdiction—does suggest something of relevance to us today. Many today, not unreasonably, despair of the state of our world system, wishing for more order and less war; and some counsel strengthening the lawmaking bodies of the international

[32] I am thinking of nations in the cultural sense—namely, collections of individuals with common histories, cultures, languages, and the like, members of which recognize other members by virtue of their possession of these attributes. The strength and prevalence of nationalism and associated sentiments only strengthen the desire for republican self-rule—as well as for post-colonial self-rule.

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system as the way out of our present disorder. The questions or disagreements here are familiar and quite complex. My interest is in an assumption implicit in this view that bears on our topic, namely, the assumption that the path to greater international order is through international law and the means to the latter is the strengthening of existing "international" bodies (for example, the United Nations). The questions and controversies are too complex to be explored adequately here, but many people, myself included, are skeptical that the UN in particular, unless radically reformed, can offer a promising source of increased order in the world. It is not only that the UN is relatively impotent given the nature of the Security Council (action can be blocked by any of the five permanent members); it is by its nature an organization open to all (and only) states, however unjust or illegitimate.[33] And familiar, even if old-fashioned, worries about "world government" reinforce this skepticism.

Another alternative is suggested by classical empires. Rome spread slowly, mainly by conquest. Its spread established the rule of law, such as it could be, in many places where it never existed. Niall Ferguson argues that the British Empire did the same. The suggestion is that systems of law may come to be by a number of different means and that empire may prove to be a better mechanism than, say, the UN. If one thinks that strengthening existing international organizations may risk greater global disorder, then one must think of alternatives. Empire is an obvious possibility. It may be argued that empire is a more promising means, in our world, for securing greater global order and establishing the rule of law. The anachronistic nature of empires, as well as various nasty associations, may require the use of another term. I am suggesting, however, that the "imperial" imposition of order by the great powers—in particular, the United States or the European Union, or possibly India—may be a more effective road to global order than the available alternatives.[34]

VIII. Conclusion

The empires of the past—the Roman, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and British empires—continue to influence the present. Yet our interest in empire is not only to discern the shadow of the past; there is much to be said for empire. Nice empires are "not so bad," and empires are not harder to justify or legitimate than states. Lastly, empires may be better

[33] An organization of businesses which did not exclude illegal or unjust enterprises (e.g., the Mafia) could not be expected, say, to reduce corporate crime.

[34] I do not mean this brief discussion to suggest that the main route to greater world order must be imperial. For an important discussion of the multiple ways that order is being created by the development of multiple and multifaceted "government networks," formal and informal, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Philosophers who simply assume—in my view, naively—that world government is the best prescription for global order should read Slaughter's book.

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suited to securing global order today than the apparent alternatives. There is something good to be said about empire, and our automatic condemnations, although understandable, should not let us lose sight of this. Just as "philosophical anarchists" and other skeptics of the state can admire and support decent states, so anti-imperialists may after all be able to give one cheer for empire.

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