Empires & Colonies

JONATHAN HART
EMPIRES
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Jonathan Hart
Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 1

1 First Expansion: 1415–1517 19
2 From the Reformation to English and French Settlements in the New World: 1517–1608 48
3 The Relative Decline of Portugal and Spain: 1608–1713 92
4 The Rise of Britain and France: 1713–1830 125
5 High Imperialism: 1830–1914 171
6 European Civil War and World Conflict: 1914–1945 224
7 Decolonization or Neo-imperialism: 1945 to the Present 255
8 Conclusion 286

Notes and References 293
Index 365
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.
Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

In memory of my mother, Jean Jackman Hart (1922–2005), and to my father, George Edward Hart
Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is relatively brief for the vastness of the topic. It cannot discuss all it should. Its main focus is on the expansion of western Europe and thus examines mainly the seaborne empires and their successor, the United States. Whether the United States is an empire is an open question, but some of its citizens and presidents, such as Thomas Jefferson, have thought so. It has governed, and governs, territories that are not full states in its union, and has an informal power, as the British empire did, over territories beyond its direct political control. The words ‘empire’ and ‘colony’ are sometimes loosely used, or at least rhetorically, and change over time, but they are important terms that I have tried to define. There have been empires in many parts of the globe, but I have concentrated most on the West, mainly from the Portuguese expansion into Africa to the present. In the story of empire, I have touched on Russia and its successor the Soviet Union, China, Japan and other key empires and states. The point of view of the book is as it is because of the unfolding of empires in what has come to be known as the West, even though an equally interesting story could be told about Russia, India, China and Japan, or the Aztec and Inca empires, from their vantage. This is not the story of triumph or superiority, but of how things turned out. Although I focus on western European empires, I also try to decentre that narrative with alternative points of view, like those of Natives, slaves and others who were not in power in those empires.

Another aspect of the book is that it assumes that economic, political and military history are key to an understanding of the expansion of empires but it brings to bear on them a cultural turn, in which culture and individual voices qualify the drive to patterns, systems and statistics. The focus on alternative voices, religion and human rights is meant to juxtapose the personal and cultural with the impersonal and larger economic
forces that underpin military and political power. I have wished to tell some of the story from those marginalized, traumatized and, at the time, almost left out. I have also wanted to stress the ambivalence and contradiction of empire within people as well as within their cultures and political institutions and practices. Tensions also occurred within and between empires and their colonies. A book can only tell so much, and so while too much will be left out by definition, it is my hope that what remains within this relatively short book opens up for the reader some vistas about empires and colonies. This is a subject not without controversy, which means it has a built-in tension.

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Introduction: Empires and Colonies

The interest in empires and imperial history in the past decade or so has been keen. Why are authors and readers and people generally interested in the rise and fall of western empires from the Portuguese to the present? Various reasons have arisen in the period during which I have worked on this topic. For instance, the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s landfall in the western Atlantic, the First Gulf War, the attack on New York and Washington, and the invasions of Afghanistan (with the sanction of the United Nations) and Iraq (without the approval of the UN) are all events that have generated contemporary interest in the colonial and imperial past. Other defining moments in a changing world developed this interest. The signing of the Helsinki Accord in 1975 guaranteed respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms among member states in eastern and western Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened up eastern Europe and weaned it from Soviet dominance. Moreover, in 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred; this took the world’s second industrial power and third most populous state and largely broke it up into Russian and non-Russian states. President Ronald Reagan and some members of his administration in the United States during the last phase of the Cold War called it the Soviet empire, or even the ‘evil empire’. Was the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) some kind of end of the last European empire? Alternatively, is the United States, which expanded into lands as a successor to the British, French and Spanish empires in northern America, an empire? Is this much-expanded Russia, which grew from Muscovy over the centuries into the lands of other peoples, yet an empire? Are these two great states in some form, even after the end of the Cold War and the loss of federated republics by the Russians, empires still? Given the Cold War from about 1945 to 1991, these two rival states, the United States mainly capitalist and the other mainly Communist or socialist, still
generate a great deal of interest in the case of empires and colonies and what constitutes imperialism. In the chill of propaganda wars, there were those on both sides who spoke in derogatory terms of the other state as an agent of imperialism. This move is telling because it means that in some sense being an empire and embodying imperialism was not considered good in this period. From the early part of the twentieth century to its end, V. I. Lenin and Ronald Reagan both used ‘imperialism’ and ‘empire’ as negative terms. So there was and is a lot at stake over terms like ‘empire’, ‘colony’ and ‘imperialism’. That makes the debate an exciting one and not something moot. In the conflicts, verbal, political and military, in whose midst we have been since the Second World War and where, unfortunately, we still find ourselves, these terms are still used as weapons. They do not have fixed definitions, so that makes it necessary to give some of the contours of the debate. In such a context, it is also important to provide a historical view of these persistent and vital themes. For instance, if the United States is not considered an empire, then, of the empires in Europe that began their expansion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Russian (Soviet) empire was the last to dissolve. It is also possible to think of Russia as being, like the United States, a continental empire that involved expansion overland. One difference, however, is that the English had to sail to the New World to expand, whereas the Russians just spread out from Moscow in all directions.

However that might be, the United States became the dominant superpower with the decline of the Soviet Union, although the USA and Russia, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, were great continental powers that were destined to become the great world powers. In the middle of the story at hand, during the 1820s de Toqueville looked beyond the past glory of Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands, the memory of the French Revolution and the recent rise and defeat of Napoleon, and declared the future to be American and Russian – something that came to be especially the case after 1945:

There are now two great nations in the world, which starting from different points seem to be advancing toward the same goal: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans.

Both have grown in obscurity, and while the world’s attention was occupied elsewhere, they have suddenly taken their place among the leading nations, making the world take note of their birth and of their greatness at almost the same instant.

All other peoples seem to have nearly reached their natural limits, and need nothing but to preserve them; but these two are growing. . . .

To attain their aims, the former relies on personal interest and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of individuals.

The latter in a sense concentrates the whole power of society in one man.
One has freedom as the principal means of action; the other has servitude. Their point of departure is different and their paths diverse; nevertheless, each seems called by some secret design of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world.¹

This prophecy shows that amid the shape of the world as it was and is, the configurations of what will be fascinate people, whether in de Toqueville’s time or now. A typology or double vision on power and expansion takes effect between the time not now and the present. While the British empire was the greatest state, de Toqueville was looking to future empires or powers.

Russia remains a power still, while Japan remains the world’s second economic power. The rise of China and India, or their resurgence, is also causing great interest: these states are products of non-European imperial expansion, but they have also traded with Europe. Furthermore, for between one and two hundred years, China was subject to Europe informally and India formally. Both asserted their independent paths during the late 1940s in the wake of the cataclysm in Europe and Asia. These are ancient places with a plethora of languages and cultures and have taken on various political shapes over the past few thousand years. Alexander the Great made it to India and died there: Robert Clive helped the British stay there. Both China and India have long played central roles in the world economy and they appear poised to resume leadership in that sphere. When Britain gave back Hong Kong to China in 1997 and Portugal returned Macao to China in 1999, a circle had been closed or the tag ends of European expansion had been gathered. Both religious and secular books tell about the coming and going of empires and about the hubris of those who think they will never end.

The Irony of Empire: Limitation, Ambivalence and Contradiction

The story is more complicated than that because most administrators of empire and their peoples know that empires do not last. Guessing when states crest and when they ebb is something for prophets and soothsayers. In a world of models, projections and computers, people try to be precise about these matters. A typology or a double image of past and present haunts great powers in trying to guess their fate. The translation of empire is a myth of continuity between empires as a means of making an empire without end, but there is also a fear of chaos from the fall of an empire. The end of Rome provides such an image.