
Introduction

Revisiting Empires and Connecting Histories

An empire formed by forcing together a hundred nations, and a hundred and fifty provinces, is no body public, but a monster.

– J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91)¹

OVER THE PAST MANY centuries, histories and historians have tended to focus repeatedly on around half a dozen major sites of reflection: cities, regions, communities or ethnic groups, kingdoms and their ruling dynasties, and empires.² Since the late eighteenth century – the epoch when Herder wrote his incendiary works – a newcomer in the form of the nation-state has been added to this list and has arguably even displaced a number of the others. To be sure, the specific themes and angles of intellectual attack can vary and will continue to do so. But regardless of whether one picks up a work of history written in 500 CE or 1500 CE or 1900 CE, it is more than likely that one or the other of these sites has found its way in as a fundamental way of structuring the historical enquiry. This

¹ Herder, *Reflections*, p. 130. For defences of Herder's views, see Muthu, *Enlightenment*, pp. 210–47, and Noyes, *Herder*.

² For an ambitious overview of themes and threads, see Woolf, *A Global History*. This is far more successful than the rather dull and unimaginatively organised compendium by Rabasa, *et al.*, ed., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*.

would be equally true whether one were located in China, India, the Mediterranean, or Scandinavia. To the extent that the survival of source materials slants and filters the modern-day historian's understanding of a distant past, it is inevitable that we remain even today constrained in some measure by these conceptual and organisational choices made by actors of another age: our histories cannot entirely liberate themselves from their way of seeing history.³ We may turn matters this way and that, read texts and other sources "against the grain", or claim to adopt a perspective "from below" while favouring or downplaying this or that group; in the end, however, there may be good reason consciously to accommodate our ancestors and their preferences in some measure, because the institutions and sites that mattered to them did not do so as a simple matter of hazard. Or, to put it in a more familiar language deriving from linguistics, our perspective – the "etic" one – can surely find a place for theirs – the "emic" one.

This book centres on one of these long-familiar sites, namely the empire. But it does so in a particular way. Many recent works continue to deal with empires, usually by focusing on a single imperial entity. Indeed, historians are often trained to see themselves as specialists of, say, the British empire, the Spanish empire, the Ottoman empire, or the Mughal empire. Often, their specialisations are even narrower, coming down to a specific time period within the trajectory of these empires, or – in the case of some of the more spread-out imperial examples – to picking one theatre rather than another. Thus, it has often been a complaint that historians of the British empire in Asia (or the Indian Ocean) and of the British Atlantic have few occasions for creative conversation, let alone ongoing intellectual cross-fertilisation.⁴

In this book, the strategy explicitly chosen is to break out of the straitjacket of the "single-empire" framework. This is not to deny that many important works have been produced in that framework, and will probably continue to be, whether for the Roman empire of antiquity or the imperial Qing in China. Nonetheless, the fact remains that few empires have existed in lonely splendour; rather, they were more often than not located in a wider inter-imperial

³ See Ginzburg, "Our Words", pp. 97–114.

⁴ See Bowen, Reid, and Mancke, ed., *Britain's Oceanic Empire*.

context. This is why it seems useful to conjugate the study of empires with the approach known as “connected histories”, which has been of particular significance for early-modern historians over the past two decades or so.⁵

These past years have seen no reduction in the intensity of debates and discussions concerning the place of empires in the early-modern and modern worlds. The debates have if anything been aggravated and sometimes become more confused in their conceptual terms, partly on account of the current called “post-colonial studies”, in which historians of India and South Asia have played a quite significant part.⁶ Three issues seem to be central in these debates, and I shall address each of them in turn here in the hope of allowing a possible dialogue to emerge between historians of different parts of the world – more particularly Latin America and South Asia – who work on the period between the late-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.⁷ The three issues I consider in turn are:

- (1) A “synchronic” problem, namely how to reconcile the very different trajectories followed by societies in Asia and America in the face of European empire-building projects.
- (2) A “diachronic” problem, namely the conceptual relationship between the empires of the early-modern period (say, 1450–1750) and those of the later period, which is sometimes read as a shorthand for the relationship between the Iberian empires and those of France and Great Britain.
- (3) The issue of the passage from empires to nation-states, and the consequent reflection on the “modernity” or “archaism” of empire itself as a political form.

⁵ See Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”, pp. 735–62. This essay drew on, but also modified, the view in the much-cited work of Joseph F. Fletcher, “Integrative History”, pp. 37–57. The second section of this introduction returns to these questions.

⁶ For a survey of historiography, albeit largely limited to the later British Empire, see Ghosh, “Another Set”, pp. 772–93. For a more wide-ranging consideration, see Cooper, “Empire Multiplied”, pp. 247–72.

⁷ I return here to issues addressed earlier in Subrahmanyam, “Imperial and Colonial Encounters”, pp. 217–28.

But before getting to these issues, it may be useful to look, if only briefly, at some central questions of definition. A recent and ambitious work of synthesis on the subject by two well-known historians begins by noting that an empire is a “type of state”, which for them must above all be defined in opposition to the nation-state. Burbank and Cooper write: “Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people”, and add that “the concept of empire presumes that different people will be governed differently.”⁸ This repeated insistence on the “politics of difference”, while helpful to a certain extent, is also somewhat reductive because of its anachronism. For greater clarity we may turn to two important and yet contrasting books, published a decade earlier, which address the question of empires. The first is a relatively succinct and synoptic essay of some two hundred pages by the historian and political theorist Anthony Pagden.⁹ The second, by contrast, is a collective enterprise over five hundred pages long (the outcome of a conference) simply entitled *Empires*.¹⁰

Pagden begins by discussing what an empire is for him, while noting that “today, the word is generally used as a term of abuse, although one that is often tinged with nostalgia.” Eventually preferring a form of description to a rigorous definition, he nevertheless notes that from the time of Tacitus (*ca.* 56–120 CE) anyone who alluded to “empire” usually had in mind a reference “as much to its size as to its sovereignty, and ultimately it would be size which separated empires from mere kingdoms and principalities.” Pagden goes on to note that “because they have been large and relentlessly expansive, empires have also embraced peoples who have held a wide variety of different customs and beliefs, and often spoken an equally large number of different languages.” We are thus already edging somewhat

⁸ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 8. The somewhat comparable work by John Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, unfortunately makes no real attempt at all to define empire, or even to distinguish it from other political forms.

⁹ Pagden, *Peoples and Empires*.

¹⁰ Alcock, *et al.*, ed., *Empires*.

closer to a definition, and this is confirmed by the statement that “because of their size and sheer diversity, most empires have in time become cosmopolitan societies”, structures of political authority in which rulers “have generally tolerated diversity [but] . . . have also inevitably transformed the peoples whom they have brought together.” The key elements can now be brought together in a sort of definition: an empire is a large sovereign state which is relentlessly expansive, embracing a wide variety of different customs, beliefs, and peoples who practice a vast array of languages; the imperial society tends to be cosmopolitan and the political system is tolerant of diversity, even if “empires have [also] severely limited the freedoms of some peoples”.¹¹ We may compare this to the false precision, and many unstated and indefensible assumptions, in the definition offered by another recent author, Charles Maier: “Empire is a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominant state – the ‘mother country’ or the ‘metropole’ – create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit (the ‘colony’ or, in spatial terms, the ‘periphery’).”¹²

It seems that Pagden’s purpose, unlike Maier’s, is to permit a broad and inclusive notion of what the category “empire” means, one that allows him to run the chronological gamut from Alexander the Great and the Romans through to the Safavids and the Ottomans, to the Habsburgs, and as far down as Queen Victoria.¹³ The editors of the second volume referred to above (namely the classical archaeologist Susan Alcock and her co-editors) chose, however, to limit their temporal ambit in order to explicitly exclude empires from the

¹¹ Pagden, *Peoples and Empires*, pp. 10–11. Also see the discussion in Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, pp. 8–13.

¹² Maier, *Among Empires*, p. 7. A simple examination of the histories of the Roman, Mongol, Ottoman, Mughal (Timurid), and other empires points to the fallacies of this definition.

¹³ However, it is considerably more rigorous than the view of a recent historian of the “Comanche Empire”, who appears to believe that a large space and an expansionist drive are criteria enough. See the problematic discussion in Hämäläinen, “What’s in a Concept?”, pp. 81–90.

eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. While saying that the division between on the one hand the “early” empires – such as those of the Achaemenids, the Satavahanas, the Assyrians, and classical Rome – and on the other the empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were artificial, and even expressing scepticism about “the intellectual legitimacy of this divide”, they nevertheless reiterate that the Iberian empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were quite distinct from the British and French empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴ I shall return to this problem later, when discussing the “colonial empire” – usually schematised as a particular sub-category of empire within which exploitative economic relations between an imperial core and a subject periphery are a crucial element. An empire may possess all the characteristics set out by Pagden and yet show neither systematic unequal exchange nor tributary economic flows towards the imperial centre.

In this respect the Iberian experiences in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century America and Asia were obviously quite markedly different. From the second quarter of the sixteenth century, massive tribute in the form of precious metals flowed into the Habsburg imperial centre from its American possessions, first through de-thesaurisation and then through the direct exploitation of celebrated mines such as Potosí in Bolivia. The structure of empire, whether in New Spain or the Peruvian viceroyalty, remained deeply dependent on raising resources through systems of forced labour or *corvée*, and also in some areas on the creation of plantation systems that exploited slave labour. Whether one looks at the Spanish or the Portuguese possessions in America, therefore, it is clear that their relationship to Iberia was in economic terms that of a dependent and tributary. This did not mean of course that locally implanted elites – and even some descendants of native Americans – did not benefit from imperial processes. Nor did it mean that the net effects of these tributary flows were necessarily positive for the Iberian economies – where they produced inflation and a social redistribution of wealth, but not necessarily high rates of

¹⁴ Alcock, *et al.*, *Empires*, p. xix. The Iberian empires are dissected by several contributors, including myself.

growth either in agriculture or artisanal production.¹⁵ Yet the contrast in the relationship with Asia at the very same period is striking. Trade on the Cape Route for the Portuguese was essentially balanced and bilateral, with bullion and other goods being sent out to Asia in order to purchase pepper, spices, indigo, and textiles. The financial resources raised through fiscal means in Asia by the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* did not constitute a sizeable surplus that allowed the state to finance intercontinental trade on a tributary basis, and it is difficult to talk of systematic “unrequited flows” from Asia to Iberia in this period. And the Spanish presence in the Philippines did not permit the exaction of a net tribute large enough even to finance a small proportion of the trade between Manila and Acapulco. Both Portuguese and Spaniards undoubtedly had imperial ambitions in Asia at this time, but the notion of empire that existed among them was based on the idea of extensive dominion and layered sovereignty (an emperor being a “king over kings”), rather than on a “colonial empire” in the American sense. Obviously, this does not exclude the possibility of relatively restricted and classic comparisons, such as between the Jesuits in Peru and China, or the workings of city councils in Goa and Bahia.¹⁶ But such comparisons must take into account that the Jesuits in China – however glamorous they appear as individuals – were minor players in both a political and strictly missionary sense, and pretty much at the mercy of the Chinese imperial system, while those in the Peruvian viceroyalty were not.¹⁷

Thus, the synchronic problem of “empire” poses itself directly when one attempts to think through the Asian and American cases in the same movement. For the moment when the Iberian colonial empires are being established and take root in America is a moment of relative political impasse in Asia. Rather than the Spaniards or the Portuguese, the great territorial expanses are in the hands of the Ottomans, the Mughals, and the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. Far from being

¹⁵ See Elliott, *Spain and Its World*, pp. 217–40; and Costa, Lains, and Miranda, *Economic History of Portugal*, pp. 52–108.

¹⁶ See the classic exercise in Boxer, *Portuguese Society*.

¹⁷ See Brockey, *Journey to the East*.

subject as passive victims to the imperial drive of the Iberians, these other powers often powerfully repulsed them, and even when they did not they limited the extent to which the Spaniards and Portuguese gained footholds in Asia. Now, the same synchronic problem poses itself in a reverse sense when one turns to the nineteenth century. For the great moment of decolonisation in America, and of retreat for the Spanish empire, is equally the moment when first the East India Company and then the British crown extend their control over India and some parts of South East Asia and West Asia. The conquest of India begins in the 1740s and 1750s, accelerates around 1800, and is finally consolidated after the bloody events of 1857–8, when a major peasant and urban rebellion over much of northern India is brutally suppressed. This is rather difficult to explain if one assumes, as does Joseph Schumpeter, that “empires” were themselves archaic political forms, representing the carry-over of atavistic impulses from an earlier era.¹⁸ Here is a classic passage in Schumpeter’s work:

It [modern imperialism] too is – not only historically, but also sociologically – a heritage of the autocratic state, of its structural elements, organizational forms, interest alignments, and human attitudes, the outcome of precapitalist forces which the autocratic state has reorganized, in part by the methods of early capitalism. It would never have been evolved by the “inner logic” of capitalism itself. This is true even of mere export monopolism. It too has its sources in absolutist policy and the action habits of an essentially precapitalist environment. That it was able to develop to its present dimensions is owing to the momentum of a situation once created, which continued to engender ever new “artificial” economic structures, that is, those which maintain themselves by political power alone. In most of the countries addicted to export monopolism it is also owing to the fact that the old autocratic state and the old attitude of the bourgeoisie toward it were so vigorously maintained. But export monopolism, to go a step further, is not yet imperialism. And even if it had been able to arise without protective tariffs, it would never have developed into imperialism in the hands of an unwarlike bourgeoisie. If this did happen, it was only because the heritage included the war machine, together with its socio-psychological aura and aggressive bent,

¹⁸ Schumpeter, “Zur Soziologie der Imperialismen”.

and because a class oriented toward war maintained itself in a ruling position. This class clung to its domestic interest in war, and the pro-military interests among the bourgeoisie were able to ally themselves with it. This alliance kept alive war instincts and idea of overlordship, male supremacy, and triumphant glory – ideas that would have otherwise long since died. It led to social conditions that, while they ultimately stem from the conditions of production, cannot be explained from capitalist production methods alone.¹⁹

If this is the case, Britain, which is usually seen as the paragon of nineteenth-century industrial modernity, appears to be the laggard by comparison with the far more politically advanced Iberian world. In any event, leaving Schumpeter aside, a comparison of the Latin American and Asian cases can only lead to deep synchronic embarrassment of one or the other kind. This is a problem that the theoreticians of “postcolonial studies” do not appear to have posed when suggesting that this category be transferred to Latin America from India. For, in any normal sense of the term, the post-colonial in much of Latin America must refer to the latter half of the nineteenth century, rather than to events and processes after the Second World War.

This leads us logically to consider the other major issue outlined at the outset, namely the diachronic relationship between the Iberian empires of the early-modern period, and the British, French, and to an extent Dutch and Belgian, empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The common assumption here – shared by the editors if not the contributors to Alcock, *et al.* – is that a radical break occurs somewhere in the eighteenth century, and that the “modern empires” that exist subsequently have a different character from those of the “early-modern” period. This break may be seen as primarily ideological in nature (post-Enlightenment empires being presumably different from their precursors), or primarily functional in character. A problem immediately arises, though, with respect to both the Portuguese and Spanish empires, since they in fact survived into the post-1800 period, and, in the case of the Portuguese, their empire was conserved until as late as the 1970s. The usual response to this problem is to state

¹⁹ Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, pp. 128–9.

that the Iberian empires in fact reinvented themselves in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading to what has been termed the “second” and “third” Portuguese empires, for example. This conception is clearly present in a rather well-known work by W.G. Clarence-Smith, which is largely concerned with economic relations between metropolis and colonies.²⁰ This “third empire” is hence assumed to have been rewired after the Napoleonic wars and the loss of Brazil, to have been broadly modern in character, and also to have been conceived within the context of a form of “economic imperialism”. Yet, to state the contrast so baldly between early-modern and modern empires may be somewhat abusive, and may even mean that the historian is participating in the Whiggish view of history put out by apologists of the British and French empires in the nineteenth century. For, whatever the institutional and conceptual continuities between Iberian and northern European empires, it was characteristic enough for British historians, administrators, and travellers (from Richard Burton to F.C. Danvers) to insist that their imperial *mission civilisatrice* had nothing to do with the half-breed empires of the “dago”.²¹

The issue of the nature of continuities (or the lack thereof) between the “early-modern” and “modern” empires is brought starkly into focus if we consider the history of a particularly long-lived empire, namely that of the Ottomans. Emerging as a petty polity on the eastern fringes of a declining Byzantium in the early fourteenth century, the Ottoman empire truly came into its own only in the fifteenth century, after having suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the Central Asian conqueror Timur (d. 1405). It is thus possible to talk of a first phase

²⁰ Clarence-Smith, *The Third Portuguese Empire*. Compare with Lains, “An Account of the Portuguese African Empire”, pp. 235–63, and Alexandre, “The Colonial Empire”, pp. 73–94.

²¹ An online etymological dictionary informs us incidentally that “dago comes from the Spanish given name Diego. It is nautical in origin and originally referred to Spanish or Portuguese sailors on English or American ships. This usage dates to the 1830s. The meaning eventually broadened to include anyone from southern Europe, before narrowing again and restricting usage to Italians.” See <http://www.wordorigins.org/wordord.htm>.

of uncertain emergence lasting a century, and then a second phase of a century and a half, taking us from the time of Mehmed the Conqueror (in the mid-fifteenth century) to the close of the sixteenth century and the reign of Murad III (1574–95). These three centuries to 1600 are taken then to constitute the “classical period” in Ottoman history, followed by a phase which was once described as that of “Ottoman decline”, but which is now more generously termed “a period of transition”, leading first to eighteenth-century “decentralization” and then to the “radical westernisation reforms” of the nineteenth century, culminating only with imperial dissolution after the First World War. Now the Ottomans have a curious place in the comparative history of empires. As Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert – editors of the massive *Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (1994) – state in their general introduction, “it can be said, without exaggeration, that the Ottoman superpower in the East substantially contributed to the shaping of modern Europe.” But the same authors also note that, from the eighteenth century, the study of the Ottomans is largely one of “a traditional Muslim society trying to determine to what extent it should follow European ways.”²²

This still leaves open the question of how the Ottomans compare with the Spanish Habsburgs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the viewpoint of comparative imperial history. The parallels are clear in terms of the characteristics laid out by Pagden: elite cosmopolitanism, a multilingual culture, the protection of a certain sort of cultural diversity in the two cases, even if the Ottoman sultans were aggressive Sunni Muslims and the Habsburgs aggressive Catholics. But certain stark differences also emerge. In the first place, the Ottoman empire was almost entirely a contiguous state with no separated territories excluding a few islands in the Mediterranean. Second, and this is a related point, the Ottoman state was during the greater part of its career not a state with a Turkish core and a non-Turkish periphery subordinate to it. Anatolia and Rumelia did not systematically exploit and draw in resources from the outlying

²² İnalcık and Quataert, ed., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. xlii.

territories in the way that Castile drew resources from its American territories. Moreover, the two empires witnessed contrasting processes of acculturation. If, as Serge Gruzinski and others have shown, the Spanish empire in the Americas was a case of the *colonisation de l'imaginaire*, no such conquest of minds took place in Ottoman Hungary or Iraq.²³ There was no attempt at a comprehensive programme of the top-down imposition of an Ottoman *Leitkultur*, whether in the Balkans, Iraq, or the Maghreb, even if we are aware that some forcible conversion to Islam did take place.

In this sense, the Ottoman empire stands apart from other empires that were based either on programmes of economic exploitation or cultural homogenisation or both. Even if sixteenth-century observers often compared Charles V to Süleyman the Lawgiver, the empires that the two presided over were in fact fundamentally different. And no matter what measures of reform the Ottomans attempted in the nineteenth century, these were simply not designed to make their structure conform to something like the Habsburg or, after the accession of Philip V in 1700, Spanish Bourbon model. True, the slogan of the Tanzimat reforms of the years 1839–76 was centralisation and westernisation, but this was paradoxically meant to transform the Ottoman empire into a sort of sprawling unitary state rather than into a colonial empire in the European style.

In other words, the true heirs of the Spanish Habsburgs and Bourbons in the matter of empire may well have been the British in the late-eighteenth century. Some late-twentieth-century historiography, such as P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins' ambitious two-volume work on the British empire, admits that too much has been made of the "modernity" of the nineteenth-century British empire, and prefers to see long-term continuities in terms of the "gentlemanly capitalists" who presided over that empire from as early as 1688.²⁴ In similar vein C.A. Bayly, in an important work of the late 1980s, wrote of the British empire between 1800 and 1840 not in terms of its precocious modernity imposed over a set of traditional societies

²³ Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*.

²⁴ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 2 vols.

elsewhere, but rather as a set of “proconsular despotisms” which in fact “complemented features of a revived conservative régime at home.”²⁵ While Bayly agreed with Vincent Harlow in perceiving a “Second British Empire” that emerged with the Seven Years’ War and then more fully after 1783 and the loss of the American colonies, he nevertheless argued that one cannot see British developments as *sui generis* in character, as exceptionalist historians have usually argued.²⁶ The parallels with the empire of the Habsburgs are equally brought out when Bayly notes that he “would agree with Hopkins and Cain that the economic value of empire to Britain continued to lie much more in its contribution to finance and services than to the emerging industrial economy.”²⁷

This view implicitly poses a challenge to the dogma of “postcolonial studies” which sees Europe as a *deus ex machina*, and thus takes a curiously old-fashioned view of “modernity” – seen as first a European monopoly and then as a European export to its peripheries. This in turn explains the emergence of the nation-state from within the residue of empire.

It could be argued instead that at least four distinct trajectories of the formation of nation-states can be detected in the past two centuries. The first case, the classic one, is of the coalition of smaller contiguous polities to form a nation-state, as with Italy or Germany in the nineteenth century. A second possibility is the fragmentation of a multi-ethnic structure – the empire – into national polities that claim a more or less unitary internal ethnicity and linguistic structure. Such a model may fit rather diverse instances, from those of Ireland, Malaysia, or Mexico, to Turkey, though we should naturally be cautious in assuming that “ethnicity” is itself a natural category. The third possible trajectory is the case of the nation-state which is itself also the imperial centre, as in the instances of Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain, and where national identity is produced simultaneously with empire rather than after it. The fourth and final

²⁵ Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, p. 193.

²⁶ Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire*, 2 vols.

²⁷ Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, p. 253.

case, often treated as exceptional, is where the nation-state continues to possess many key imperial features: multi-ethnicity, a variety of languages, a certain degree of cosmopolitanism, as well as large scale. Instances from the twentieth century can be found, ranging from the Soviet Union and China to India, with the United States being a limiting case. Thus, just as we cannot assume a single imperial model in the early-modern world – as the contrast between Habsburgs and Ottomans shows – we cannot assume a single mode of transition between the world of empires and that of nation-states. From an Indian viewpoint, the national boundaries between Chile, Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela make little sense, for what separates these countries is certainly not more significant than what separates the various states within the Republic of India. And if the Peruvian may detest the Argentine, the Tamil nurses his own negative stereotypes of the Bengali (and vice versa).

To conclude this first section, then: the purpose of this brief reflection has been to reopen a certain number of assumptions, and to question some pieces of conventional wisdom with regard to the empires of the early-modern period, especially those with an Iberian centre. It provides fewer answers than questions but is based on the belief that the facile acceptance of fashionable slogans and stereotyped trajectories is no substitute for posing the difficult problems summoned up by a connected history of the early-modern and modern worlds. Nor will it do to throw the baby out with the bathwater and insist on jettisoning categories such as “imperialism” and “colonialism”. If our discussion has demonstrated anything, it is that all empires were not colonial empires, and nor were they necessarily based on similar economic and cultural logics. This does not require us to abandon the concept of empire, it only makes us employ it with greater caution and precision. Similarly, while the economic exploitation of the colonies by metropolises does not sum up the totality of relations between the two, and while it certainly does not rule out the possibility of various forms of internal exploitation (for example, of slaves by free settlers), it is difficult to justify a vision of the viceroyalties of Mexico or Peru, or of the colony of Brazil, where these political structures are treated as similar to Tokugawa Japan or the kingdom of France. The tyrannies

imposed by political correctness are of course many, one of which is to make us feel obliged to be politically incorrect even at the risk of abandoning all forms of good sense.

II

The classic method long espoused by those seeking to break out of the “single empire” framework was obviously the comparative one. Comparative history was particularly popular among economic historians in the middle decades of the twentieth century, as evident in the work of Alexander Gerschenkron and Simon Kuznets; its wider use in the profession was given a considerable fillip in 1928 by a programmatic statement by the great French medievalist Marc Bloch.²⁸ Bloch was careful to limit his examples to the fields of European history that he knew well, but he was surely aware that his caution was not shared by all the partisans of comparative history. Perhaps the grandest example of its application to imperial history was provided in the work of the historical sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt, who in the 1960s drew explicitly on the example of Max Weber to make very large trans-historical comparisons.²⁹ In his view, empires could be defined above all as very large “bureaucratic societies”, characterised moreover by a constant struggle between rulers, bureaucracy, and a variety of other traditional as well as emergent interest groups. Over time, a number of forms familiar to us from the Weberian vocabulary make an appearance in this analysis. The historical trajectory thus begins with societies largely defined by ascription, then witnesses the emergence of feudal and patrimonial structures, followed by more clearly bureaucratic empires, and finally by “modern” empires in an industrialised context. Eisenstadt’s vast canvas, which included some sixty-four empires indifferently drawn over the centuries, naturally lent his work a certain power and legitimacy for several decades, though it was clear even to early reviewers that the historical examples were being straitjacketed into quite rigid schema. The persistence of models

²⁸ Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparée”, pp. 15–50.

²⁹ Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*.

claiming as late as the 1970s and 1980s to frame the Mughal empire as a patrimonial-bureaucratic structure owe as much to Eisenstadt as to Weber's earlier writings.³⁰

One of the principal difficulties with Eisenstadt's method lies in its deliberate neglect of issues both of synchrony and diachrony. In other words, each empire becomes a mere "data point" with characteristic diagnostic features that can be fitted in either as explained or explanatory variables. The fact that this can lead to both radical reification and to a certain flattening out does not appear to be of great concern. In one of his essays of this period, Eisenstadt writes, for example, of how his aim is

to analyse systematically the relations between certain types of religions and a particular type of political system – the so-called "centralized bureaucratic empire". The main examples of such empires are the Ancient Egyptian, the Sassanid, the Chinese from the Han onwards, the Roman and Byzantine empires, various Indian kingdoms (such as the Gupta, Maurya and Mogul empires), the Caliphates (especially the Abbaside [*sic*] and Fatimide [*sic*] ones), the Ottoman empire, the European states in the Age of Absolutism and the European colonial empires of that period. The religions with which we are concerned were among the major developed world religious systems: the Mazdean religion in Iran, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in China and India, Islam, Eastern Christianity in Byzantium, Catholicism in Europe and in Spanish America, and, later in Europe, Protestantism.³¹

If not much of analytical consequence is gained by such indiscriminate lumping, the best response may still not be a simple recourse to splitting. To be sure, Eisenstadt did have some devotion to one construct that was based on a broadly synchronic vision, namely Karl Jaspers' idea of an "Axial Age", when – over a period of several centuries ending in the third century BCE – profound innovations in

³⁰ See the much-debated essay by Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals", pp. 77–94, wherein the first footnote reference is to Eisenstadt.

³¹ Eisenstadt, "Religious Organizations and Political Process", pp. 271–94 (quotation on p. 271).

religion and philosophy simultaneously seem to have occurred over the Eurasian space. However, in Eisenstadt's appropriation of the idea the chronology became progressively looser, to the point that it became virtually impossible to identify an "age" when the changes in question actually occurred.³²

If such large macro models found some devotees amongst historians, by the early 1980s sceptical notes were also being struck. One of the most important examples may be found in the work of Joseph Fletcher, a historian of China with a considerable (and somewhat atypical) interest in the Mongols, Tibet, and Central Asia more generally. Fletcher had jointly taught a course on empires with Eisenstadt in the 1970s, and this lends his view a particular edge. Making bold generalisations, but resting them on a careful historical and philological foundation, he argued forcefully against the conventional or "exceptionalist" model of imperial Chinese historiography made popular by the culturalism of the so-called Fairbank School, which liked to radically contrast the Chinese worldview with that of the Europeans. Instead, Fletcher argued for the need to read sources in Chinese along with those in Manchu, Tibetan, and Persian, thus inadvertently founding what came to be known as the "New Qing" historiography.³³ At the same time, in a celebrated posthumously published essay he proposed that many parallel patterns could be found across Eurasian societies between about 1500 and 1800, namely "population growth, a quickening tempo of social change, the emergence of new cities and towns, the rise of urban commercial classes, religious revivals and missionary efforts, rural unrest, and the decline of nomadism."³⁴ Such parallels could at times be explained by ecological changes over vast spaces, such as those which may have prompted Mongol expansion and empire-

³² Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. Eisenstadt began with a loose chronology that included "Ancient Israel, Ancient Greece, Early Christianity, Zoroastrian Iran, early Imperial China and . . . the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations". However, he did not provide a convincing causal or relational model bringing these together.

³³ See Biran, "Periods of Non-Han Rule", pp. 134–5.

³⁴ See Wong, "Review", pp. 325–7 (citation on p. 325).

building in the thirteenth century. At other times, they were the result of the movement of powerful ideological currents, such as the “Turco-Mongolian” political model that traversed the space between China and the Ottoman empire. In any event, Fletcher considered it important to propose a synchronic form of “integrative history” which would break down the conventional barriers that separated imperial spaces and their historiographies.

Fletcher’s contribution is often all too easily forgotten in recent accounts of “global history” as practised in the later-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries.³⁵ Instead, great – perhaps exaggerated – prominence has been given to some other formulations of disputable utility and coherence. Amongst these is the term “entangled histories”, which appears already to have at least two quite distinct usages, one especially employed in Europe, particularly in Germany, the other in the United States. The first of these often seems to connote little more than the study of the “borderlands” between conventional political units, such as nation-states, which are “entangled” in the sense of having overlapping, or superposed, jurisdictions. An example is a recent study of north-eastern China in the first half of the twentieth century, which considers the jostling and competition of Chinese, Russian, and Japanese imperial interests in the area.³⁶ In another quite distinct but spatialised instance, a collective work has proposed an “entangled Ottoman history”, which consists of a study of the varied links between the Ottomans and their European neighbours through modes such as diplomacy and trade.³⁷ However, a second recent usage, from a mainly post-colonial perspective, sees the entanglement as a largely socio-cultural phenomenon. It thus claims that only by entangled histories can one get away from studying “the unilateral impact of one culture upon another”, and instead “paying attention to the agentive capacities of all actors, particularly those whose stories and agencies . . . have traditionally been ignored as a result of

³⁵ See, for a striking example, Conrad, *What is Global History?*

³⁶ Ben-Canaan, Grüner, and Prodöhl, ed., *Entangled Histories*. Far more intellectually ambitious is the single-authored effort of Rawski, *Early Modern China*.

³⁷ Firges, et al., ed., *Well-Connected Domains*. Compare with Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks*.

both Eurocentric historiographic paradigms and the nature of the sources.”³⁸ Any reasonably sophisticated social history of even a specific space like Oaxaca, Bahia, Zanzibar, or Kolkata in the eighteenth or nineteenth century must surely, in this view, be replete with issues of “entanglement”. If this is indeed the case, nearly three-quarters of what has been produced in the last decades on Latin America, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean could qualify as some form of “entangled” history, and one would actually be hard pressed to find examples of any other kind of history-writing. Nevertheless, one can comprehend that the term “entanglement” is intended to gesture to the multiplication of sources and historical voices, usually in a situation of interaction between a European actor and his or her non-European Other; and as such this trend inherits the intellectual legacy begun by Latin Americanists in the 1950s and 1960s in works claiming to represent “the vision of the vanquished”.³⁹ While the individual studies may remain valuable, it is still somewhat unclear how much analytical ground has in fact been gained by deploying the concept of “entanglement”.

Less success has been enjoyed by a slogan that emerged some years ago entitled *histoire croisée* (or “crossed histories”), born of the collaboration of a sociologist and a literary-cum-cultural scholar. In this construct, it was argued by the Werner–Zimmermann team that the traditional comparative history which took the nation-state as its natural unit of analysis had run its course. Instead, they proposed to contribute to “the family of ‘relational’ approaches that, in the manner of comparative approaches and studies of transfers (most recently of ‘connected and shared history’) examine the links between various historically constituted formations.”⁴⁰ The authors began however with an extended reference to “cultural transfer studies”, wherein it was demonstrated that a cultural object that had moved (for example, from France to Germany, or vice versa) evidently witnessed a change in its

³⁸ Bauer and Norton, “Introduction”, pp. 1–17.

³⁹ Portilla, *Visión de los Vencidos*; Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus*.

⁴⁰ See Werner and Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison”, pp. 30–50. The essay had appeared earlier in French in 2003, and was also included along with other texts (not always participating in the same framework) in Werner and Zimmermann, ed., *De la comparaison à l’histoire croisée*.

meaning. They then argued that an entirely new approach to history could emerge by engaging in a multilateral study of such “crossed” cultural transfers (or “intercrossings”, in their infelicitous neologism), which would presumably escape the traps of a simple and rather familiar diffusionist narrative. In one of the few concrete historical examples they provided, they thus proposed that the modern social security systems of France and Germany had mutually influenced each other, and that in this sense they must be studied together rather than separately. To this was added a set of disparate propositions, in the form of a sort of tool box, which must have left the historian-reader who wished to follow this approach more than a little nonplussed. We may consider these in sequence.

Werner–Zimmermann devoted a section of their exposition, for example, to the pressing need to “historicise categories”, since what the terms “landscape” and “unemployment” meant in 1500 were surely not what they meant in 1800. The true relevance to their particular exercise of this perfectly reasonable (if banal) proposition remained unexplored. They further made a plea for the use of “pragmatic induction” as a historical method, an epistemological proposition that also remained divorced from the overall logic of their argument. And finally, they claimed that historians had a great need for “reflexivity” in their work, bearing in mind that this “is not empty formalism, but is rather a relational field that generates meaning.” Reproaching other “relational” approaches for engaging in “the mere restitution of an ‘already there’”, they saw their own exercise (once again) as “generative of meaning”, and concluded with this evaluation of their own invented method: “with respect to questions such as the choice of scales, construction of context, and processes of categorization, *histoire croisée* engages in a to-and-fro movement between the two poles of the inquiry and the object.” Sebastian Conrad has since assured us that “double reflexivity is the epistemological core of the notion of *histoire croisée*”, and so from the analysis summarised above we may conclude that “global perspectives and the course of global integration are thus inextricably interrelated.”⁴¹ From a more sceptical viewpoint it may be asked how much this proposal, with its focus on the France–Germany

⁴¹ Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 13, and p. 241, n. 16.