



Bringing the Empire Back In

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Regresar al imperio
Trazer de volta o império

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I propose that the classical analytical category of 'empire', as opposed to 'state' and other political forms, can account for a large number of historical and current experiences, including the United States of America, the European Union, Russia and China. An 'empire' can be conceived, in contrast to a 'state', as a very large size polity with a government formed by multiple institutional levels, overlapping jurisdictions and diverse formulas across the territory. According to the American experience and the most recent European one, the building of military and commercial large 'empires' can be a favorable formula for stability and progress in other areas of the world that have been subject to never-ending processes of trial and error in the art of building nation-states.

Propongo que la categoría analítica clásica de «imperio» en contraposición al «estado» y otras formas políticas, puede explicar un gran número de experiencias históricas y actuales, incluidos los Estados Unidos de América, la Unión Europea, Rusia o China. Un «imperio» puede concebirse, en contraposición a un «estado», como un régimen de grandes dimensiones con un gobierno formado por diversos niveles institucionales, jurisdicciones solapadas y diversas fórmulas a lo largo del territorio. Según la experiencia norteamericana y, más recientemente, la europea, la creación de grandes «imperios» militares y comerciales puede favorecer la estabilidad y el progreso en otras regiones del mundo que, de no ser así, estarían sometidas a interminables procesos de ensayo y error en el arte de construir estados-nación.

Advogo que a categoria analítica clássica de «império», em oposição a «estado» e outras formas políticas, pode explicar um grande número de experiências históricas e actuais, incluindo os Estados Unidos da América, a União Europeia, a Rússia e a China. Um «império» pode ser concebido, em contraste com um «estado», como um regime de dimensão muito ampla com um governo formado por diversos níveis institucionais, sobrepondo jurisdições e fórmulas diversas ao longo do território. Segundo a experiência americana e a mais recente experiência europeia, a construção de grandes «impérios» militares e comerciais pode ser uma fórmula favorável para a estabilidade e progresso noutras áreas do mundo que estiveram submetidas a processos intermináveis de tentativa e erro na arte da construção de Estados-nação.

1. The Empire

'Empire' is a classical category in the study of politics that has been neglected or even derided for several decades. The current world, however, is organized in a number of very large size political units that may fit a simple and exclusionary definition of empire. Among the current cases to be considered for inclusion in this historical and analytical category there are the United States of America, the European Union, Russia and China. As this very short list already suggests, an empire can be democratic or dictatorial, as well as a mixed regime, and it can be in expansion or in contraction, as has happened

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with a number of empires in other historical periods. The democratic or authoritarian character of the government and the stability of its territorial boundaries are not, thus, essential elements of the concept of ‘empire’.

An empire can be conceived as a very large size polity with a government formed by multiple institutional levels and overlapping jurisdictions. In this sense, ‘empire’ is an alternative formula to ‘state’, which can also be dictatorial or democratic or something in between, but is founded on fixed boundaries, external sovereignty and the aim of internal homogenization. Empires typically encompass a high number of small political units, including states, but also regions, cities and other communities, with different institutional formulas across the territory. The present flourishing of an increasing number of small-size political communities organized with different formulas in all parts of the world is the other side of the prevalence of a few very large empires.

In contrast to the potential fruitfulness of the analytical category of ‘empire’, ‘state’ is a category that has become decreasingly able to account for many collective processes and decisions in the current world. Yet political science is strongly state-centered. In this article I suggest that political studies could take benefit from a more diversified categorization of polities or structures of governments --by distinguishing empires, states and small communities-- in order to study traditional subjects such as political institutions, public agenda setting, voting and elections, the working of assemblies and councils, foreign policy, international relations and international organizations.

2. From ‘State’ to ‘Empire’

About a generation ago, a claim was made to “bring the state back in” the social sciences, as in Evans, Rueschmeyer and Skocpol (1985) and, especially, Skocpol (1985). This claim was initially addressed to correct “too society-centered” ways of explaining politics and governmental processes that had prevailed during a previous period starting in the 1950s and 1960s. Bringing the ‘state’ back in brought about much more attention to formal rules and institutions, governmental activities, and the impact of authorities on societal processes, including economic interests and social movements. New knowledge and science have indeed developed from that impulse and the subsequent turn in methodological approaches.

However, in a number of further scholarly studies, the ‘state’ was conceived not only as an institutional and organizational structure for different actor’s strategies and decisions, but as a unitary actor, especially in the field of international or transnational relations. The “explanatory centrality” given to the state as a potent and autonomous actor somehow neglected the role of both larger and smaller political units, especially as the scale of politics has been changing during the most recent period.

The promoters of the newly “state-centered” approach remarked that it derived in part from analytical developments and problems in previous “society-centered” approaches, since the explanation of many societal processes required to ascertain the impact of the

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political system and the state itself. Analogously, the development of studies directly or indirectly inspired on the assumption of state centrality has contributed to pay attention to alternative political units with an impact on states. In recent times scholars of the state have realized that the state cannot be taken for granted; its very existence is problematic; processes of state-building and nation-building show that there are different degrees of 'statehood' or 'stateness'; there are strong and weak states, as well as numerous failed 'states'; and the future of the national state in the current world is questioned by new issues of scale, space and territoriality. Both supra-state and infra-state institutional and organizational structures appear increasingly relevant to explain collective processes and outcomes in the current world.

Empire-wide political and institutional processes indeed disappeared from the field of academic political studies after the Second World War. A search in the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) since its foundation gives the following results. In the first period, from 1903 to 1949, as many as seven articles and 74 books reviewed included the words 'empire' or 'imperial' in the title. Most of them dealt with the "problems and possibilities" (as titled in one of the reviews) of the British empire, followed by the German empire, as well as the American, Chinese, Japanese and Ottoman empires. Articles and books approached such suggestive subjects as empire's unity, nationalism, federalism, government and politics, political system, governance, constitution and laws, legislative jurisdiction, administrative system, civil service or civil code --that is, the same kind of subjects that can be studied under the alternative framework of 'state'.

In contrast, not a single piece of work published in the APSR between 1950 and 1967 included the words 'empire' or 'imperial' in the title. This suggests that "society-centered" approaches which were prevalent during that period, at the same time that neglected the study of states did also forget the study of empires. Since 1968, the words 'empire' or 'imperial' reappear, although only in 40 book reviews, not in the titles of full-fledged articles. Most of the reviews in this period focus on history of past colonial empires, while only eight address imperial relations in the current world (mainly regarding American foreign affairs).

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A new source of interest in the concept of empire can be derived, however, from state-centered studies in state-building and nation-building. Two generations of political scientists ago, some fundamental discussion was collected by S. N. Eisenstadt and Stein Rokkan (1973). As they were embedded in the 'modernization' paradigm, the editors acknowledged they had been unable of "developing a general theoretical structure for comparisons across all regions of the world", but remarked on "the uniqueness of the Western experience of state formation and nation-building" and its inappropriateness for the "Third World". Specifically for Africa, for instance, "nation-building in the European style was a luxury when not a catastrophe". (See also Rokkan and Urwin, 1983).

Somehow following or paralleling this intuition, a number of historians have identified spatial and temporal limits for the validity of the concept of 'state': basically Western Europe and a few of its colonies since mid-17th century to late 20th century. A masterful survey of the modern states in this perspective is given, for example, by Martin L. Van Creveld (1999). Other enlightening studies on the formation of early states include William Doyle (1978), Charles Tilly (1975); Hendrik Spruyt (1994) and Philip Bobbitt (2002). The importance of ini-

tial violence, force and coercion in building a state has been particularly highlighted by social historian Charles Tilly, who went so far as to present both war-making and state-making as forms of “organized crime” (Tilly 1985). In the academic headquarters of political science more strictly defined, the role of violence and coercion in the formation of states has also been stressed by Margaret Levi (1988, 1997) and Robert H. Bates (2001). Bertrand Badie and Pierre Birnbaum (1983) remarked that the state is but one possible institutional formula in complex societies in the modern world. The failure of the state model beyond Europe was subsequently analyzed also by Bertrand Badie (1992).

A few works dealing more directly with political and governmental processes in empires can also be mentioned. Specifically, “the concept of empire” and its potential in the analysis of long term historical periods was discussed in an excellent book co-authored by an outstanding selection of historians and political scientists at the initiative of Maurice Duverger and published only in French (Duverger 1980).

More recently, Samuel E. Finer provided the only political science-oriented history of government in the world that goes beyond the last 200 years (Finer 1997). Finer states at the very first page of his impressive, indispensable and irregular three volume study that his “concern is with states”. However, he immediately acknowledges that most “pre-modern” polities did not fulfill the basic characteristics of ‘state’, namely the notion of territorial sovereignty (and far less that of “a self-consciousness of nationality”). Actually in his own “conceptual prologue”, Finer goes to provide a three-fold typology of structures of government based on the distinction between city, state and empire. In his extensive survey, the category of city-republics includes a number of cases in Mesopotamia, the poleis of Greece and the medieval Europe. The “formation of the ‘modern European state’”, in turn, “starts effectively with, and is built around, the erection of known frontiers... States were the product either of aggregation from small territorial units or the disaggregation of large territorial units”, according to Finer (pp. 9, 35). But it can also be argued that, in the current world, the states themselves are suffering processes of both disaggregation into small polities (along the revived tradition of city-republics) and aggregation into large territorial units of imperial size.

In fact, most of Finer’s work deals with empires, using regularly and explicitly the word. Specifically his analysis includes Assyria, “the first empire in our modern sense”; Persia, “the first secular-minded empire”; China, in fact a series of “multi-state empires”; Rome, which ruled through “imperial agents” like the provincial governors; the Byzantine empire; the Arab empire of the Caliphate; the Ottoman empire; and the Indian empires. Finer’s work provides, thus, highly valuable material for political science analysis of polities or structures of government through history, although his initial emphasis on ‘states’ is dismissed by his own substantive analysis of really existing governments. (See other interesting suggestion for further work from Finer’s materials in Von der Muhll, 2003).

3. Defining Empires and States

If it is well defined, the notion of 'empire' can account, in fact, for more than two-dozen cases of ancient, medieval, modern and current experiences of human government. They include the above mentioned ancient Chinese and Persian empires, the classical Roman empire, the colonial empires of Spain, Britain and France, the modern Russia, and also the present configurations of the United States of America and of the European Union.

The 'state', in turn, is a form of government that has achieved wide appeal in the modern world. Apparently, the current world is organized in almost 200 'states'. But only a relatively limited number of these political units can be considered to be successful 'states' in a strict sense of the word. Sovereign states succeeded in Europe within a historical period that began about 300 years ago and is today essentially finished.

Actually, the first modern states emerged from and consolidated themselves against previously existing empires. The earliest political units deserving to be called states were England, France, Spain and Sweden, which were formed on territories located at the periphery of the former Western Roman empire. During the 18th century all of these states combined occupied only between 2 or 3 percent of the earth's territory, while all other parts of the world were organized in small political units and larger empires of various formulas. New large states were also formed later in the core territory of the Roman empire, Germany and Italy, but in these cases in a much more decentralized way based on the aggregation of a networks of mid-size cities and regions.

The essential characteristics of 'empires' are in contrast with those of 'states'. On the basis of the above discussion, we can define 'empire' with the following elements:

- **Very large size**, in terms of both territory and population.
- **Absence of fixed or permanent boundaries**. Empires tend to expand over the territory, up to the point of conflict with other empires, and when in decline they may also contract. In general, 'territory' should not be considered a strong defining element of empire.
- **A compound of diverse groups and territorial units**. In ancient and medieval times, an empire could be comprised of cities, republics, counties, principalities, bishoprics and other varied forms of political organization. Today, multi-ethnic federations can be arranged with less heterogeneous institutional regimes. But democratic empires may also include political units organized with different forms of parliamentary or presidential, unichamber or multi-chamber, monarchical or republican governments. They may be linked to the center by diverse institutional formulas.
- **A set of multilevel, often overlapping jurisdictions**. Within an empire, no authority typically rules with exclusive powers. Rather, the central government may rule indirectly through local governments; the latter develop self-government on important issues; power sharing is widespread.

In contrast, 'state' can be defined for the following characteristics:

- **Large or mid size**, in terms of both territory and population.
- **Fixed territory and formal boundaries**. The clear establishment and foreign recognition of the territorial limits of a state are intended as protection from external attacks, invasions, immigrants and imports.
- **Sovereignty**. The state has supreme authority over a territory and population. It recognizes no other source of jurisdiction but itself. The state's power to make ultimate decisions is recognized by other sovereign states.
- **Monopoly and homogenization**. The state has reserved functions with exclusive jurisdiction within its territory. Whether dictatorial or democratic, it is organized with an internal hierarchy of powers. In order to facilitate the exercise of its functions and consummate its exclusiveness, it tends to establish a uniform administration over the territory, as well as to promote the homogenization of important social and cultural characteristics of its subjects or citizens.

4. The Evolution of Empires

Changes in the size and other defining characteristics of political units, that is, the prevalence of either vast empires or large states or smaller communities in different historical periods can derive from two factors. First, they are fostered by technological changes, especially regarding war, transports and communication. Second, institutional changes are produced by human decisions favoring security, freedom and well-being, such as can be provided by modern electoral democracies.

In the long term there has been an ever-continuing historical trend toward larger empires. The size and evolution of empires have been studied in four illuminating articles by Rein Taagepera (1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1997), which are largely based on data in Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones (1978). According to these data, there is no evidence of empires larger than 10,000 km² much before 3000 BC. The largest ancient empires, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, with about one million km², were still tiny compared to the present ones. The largest ones at the beginning of our era, in China and Rome, were already much larger, with about five million km². But modern empires, including Russia and the colonial empires of Spain and Britain, have encompassed double-digit millions of km².

This continuing trend toward larger sizes of empires has been enabled, indeed, by technological advances in transports and communications. Roads, canals, harbors, railways and highways have always formed the skeleton of empires. But things changed dramatically with the invention of the telegraphy in the 19th century, later followed by the telephony and the internet, which created the age of instant communication. The art of government at a distance has multiplied the size of viable empires.

Another historical trend is towards an increasing number of simultaneous empires, so that

the imperial form of government includes increasingly higher proportions of the world's population. Virtually none of the territories of the currently existing states in the world has been alien or outside some large modern empire. Among the very few exceptions are Thailand (which emerged from the old kingdom of Siam without Western colonization) and Israel (which was created from scratch in 1948).

The present world is organized in at least five very large, powerful empires. In alphabetical order, which may coincide with the order of their relative strength, they are: America, China, Europe, Japan, and Russia. These five political units encompass nowadays about 40 percent of the world's population (and 80 percent of the world's production). Five more very large units could also be considered of the imperial type, at least in terms of the size and variety of their population, and, in most cases, the multilevel federal-type of their internal organization; they are: India, closely linked to Pakistan and Bangladesh, Indonesia and Brazil (Australia and Canada have comparable territorial sizes to the empires mentioned, but they are heavily under-populated). In all ten units together live more than two-thirds of the world's populations at the beginning of the 21st century.

A world's single-government is not foreseeable from historical developments. If the tendency toward increasingly larger sizes of empire, as measured by territory, is extrapolated, we find only a 50 percent probability of a single world empire by a date placed between 2200 and 3800 (depending on the author making the calculation). If the extrapolation is based on the proportion of the world's population within the largest empire, that expectation should be deferred to nothing less than the year 4300.

5. Europe as an Empire

Nowadays, the traditional West European model of sovereign, homogeneous nation-state is obsolete even in Europe. After a few centuries of continuous and increasing warfare, the larger European states found a new way for peace and prosperity by building a new kind of Europe-wide empire after the Second World War. Its most recent expansion was a consequence of the end of the Cold War, which brought about the Soviet disunion of the Russian empire and the disintegration of the multiethnic Yugoslavia. Within a couple of years after 1991, 20 new independent republics were created in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. But many of these either sought their salvation by applying to membership to the increasingly large, democratic and market-oriented European empire, or languished isolated in the hands of dictatorial and ineffectual rulers.

One may hear that the current institutional formulas of the European Union are "unique", "exceptional" or "unprecedented". This is indeed a frequent assertion in certain journalistic literature and political speech. For a social scientist, however, this only means that we are not using a sufficiently broad analytical concept capable of including this case among those with common relevant characteristics. The appropriate concept could be that of 'empire', as defined above. The European Union is indeed a very large political unit (the third in population in the current world), it has expanded continuously outward without previously established territorial limits, it is organized diversely across the territory and has multiple,

overlapping institutional levels of governance. The point that the European Union may not be “unique” was addressed, for instance, by James Caporaso (1997). For a comparison between the process of constitutional building of the European Union and of the United States of America, see Richard Bellamy (2005). The war motives in building large empires like the European one were remarked by William H. Riker, (1987, 1996). The vision of the European Union as a new kind of empire was sketched by Robert Cooper (2003).

Elsewhere, the West European model of the sovereign state has been much less successful. The United States of America was created from the beginning, rather than as a nation-state, as a “compound republic” formed by previously existing units retaining their constituent powers. Instead of concentrating power around a single center like in the European-style states, the American empire is organized with a “checks and balances” regime based on division of powers, negotiations and jurisprudence. The model of the United States not as a sovereign state, but as a “compound republic”, has been elaborated, among others, by Vincent Ostrom (1987).

In Asia, a few very large, overpopulated empires have also escaped from the project of statization: China, the compound India-Pakistan-Bangladesh, as well as Indonesia and Japan, have maintained certain traditional imperial characteristics of internal complexity, not adopting the homogenizing features of modern European states mentioned above. Unlike in either North America or Asia, attempts to replicate the typical European ‘state’ form of government were made in Hispanic America, Africa and the Middle East as a consequence of the colonial expansion of European states and the further independence of their colonies. Indeed, the larger and more powerful states of Europe, which had been created as an alternative formula to empires, engendered new colonial empires in other parts of the world. But when the people of the colonies rid themselves of imperial domination, paradoxically, they also lost the large-scale networks of imperial size able to provide common security, open trade and other large-scale service. They did nothing but imitate the old ‘state’ forms of government of their former masters. The experience has been much less successful than it was in the metropolis --in many cases, a failure indeed.

6. Concluding Comments

The 200 or so members of the United Nations can be distinguished with a few categories, according to the definitions given above. There are, in the current world, about 10 very large empires. There are also about three-dozen successful large states, which coincide for the most part with the members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. The larger ones tend to be organized with federal formulas containing smaller political units. A similar number of about three-dozen states can be considered to have failed. And we can count more than 100 small formally independent countries that would hardly be viable without large networks of ‘imperial’ size; they include about 70 mini-states with a population between one and ten million inhabitants and 40 more micro-states with less than one million inhabitants, among them most members of the European Union.

In addition, there are more than 500 non-state political units with governments and legis-

relative powers located within a couple dozen decentralized empires or large federal states. There are also about 20 'territories' formally linked but physically non-contiguous to some large empire or state and in fact quite independent, and about 15 other territories de facto seceded from recognized states. About 150 of these non-state small units are in Europe, nearly 200 in the Americas, about 150 in Asia and about 40 in Africa. (Helpful data are provided by Kristian S. Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward and by the Correlates of War project at the University of Michigan. A good collection of cases of states in process of separation can be found in Tozun Bahcheli, Barry Bartmann and Henry Srebrnik, 2004).

In Western Europe the building of a few large states affirming their own sovereignty vis-à-vis other states resulted in several centuries of war-making between monarchies, weak democracies and new dictatorships. Most Europeans only achieved an equilibrium based on democracy, peace and prosperity when, after the Second World War, they undertook the construction of a large empire based on military, commercial, economic, monetary and political cooperation among states. Further members of the European club found in that membership a way to avoid the perils of unviable independence and the new dictatorships that would likely arise in such an environment.

If the American experience and the most recent European one are of any exemplary value, the building of military and commercial large 'empires' seems, thus, to be a favorable formula for stability and progress in those areas that have been subject to never-ending processes of trial and error in the art of building nation-states. The Organization of American States, the projected American Free Trade Agreement, the African Union, the League of Arab States and similar institutions have so far been revelations of intention and hope more than effective institutional networks. But only if 'imperial'-size tight networks of this sort are built and put into effect can the states and nations in those regions of the world find the opportunity to attain stable democracy, peace and prosperity. This is just as the European states and nations found stable peace and prosperity when they embarked on a Europe-wide, democratic and free-market empire. Given the spread and importance of these experiences and challenges, we may gain understanding and knowledge by calling empires 'empires'¹.

1. Interestingly, in this period 'empire' is also used in a different sense, as in expressions such as "empire of law", "empire of liberty" or "empire of reason", which may indirectly reflect the oblivion in which the political concept of empire had plunged.

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