

**Emile Perreau-Saussine**  
Fitzwilliam College  
Cambridge CB3 0DG  
ep207@cam.ac.uk

## Imperialism

in Bryan Turner (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, Cambridge U.P., 2006, pp. 280-281

In an article on the “Sociology of imperialism” (1919), **Joseph Schumpeter** defines imperialism as “the objectless disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion”. In this sense, “imperialism” describes the common tendency of a political unit to grow until it encompasses the earth. In so far as the purpose of any political unit is expansion, all polities are either potentially or actively imperialist. But polities do not all try to expand in the same manner or to the same extent. Only empires aspire to expand themselves indefinitely: both city-states and nation-states are based on a territorial sovereignty, while empires aim directly at a universal sovereignty, at *dominium* over the whole of humanity.

At its best, imperialism is a noble disposition to create a political structure that is both universal and concrete, a desire to unify humanity. At its best, imperialism is also a just disposition: not a disposition to conquer out of an unhealthy *libido dominandi*, but for the sake of peace, for the sake of an equivalent of the *pax romana* which political unity makes possible. However, imperialism has often been seen as problematic. In the book of *Genesis*, God condemns the project of building a tower “with its top in heaven”, Babel, by halting this symbol of human over-reaching with “the confusion of tongues”, thereby dividing humanity in many nations, making human attempts to build imperial projects to unify humanity more difficult. *Genesis* associates imperialism with hubris and pride, with a vain and evil desire to be like God.

Our present unease with imperialism has at least two specific roots. The first is the non-democratic character of empires. In an empire, a ruling individual or a ruling **oligarchy** imposes its will on the rest of the empire. Empires are built around the opposition of a core and a periphery, the periphery being subordinated to the core. In contrast, city-states and nation-states are not built around the distinction core/periphery but around an opposition between internal and external, with more firmly defined boundaries: these political forms are compatible with the idea of a unified people of equal citizen. Whereas empires exclude **democracy** as a political regime, city-states and nation-states are compatible with democracy; they are not necessarily hierarchical. A second root of our contemporary discomfort with imperialism is cultural **relativism**. In order to justify their imposed order, empires tend to claim that they stand for a higher degree of **civilization**, that this gives them a right to rule “barbarians”. In a world like ours, which considers itself to be disenchanted with any claim about the superiority of any aristocracy or civilization, empires appear to be lacking in legitimacy.

According to Schumpeter, imperialism is an irrational inclination towards war and conquest, and one which he associates with the survival of residual political structures: imperialism belongs to a pre-capitalist era and is an atavism destined to disappear. In order to defend their social position, a **ruling class** foments a jingoistic mood in which ideas such as national honour and prestige play an essential part. But according to Schumpeter, a purely capitalist world can offer no ground

for imperialist impulses. Schumpeter belongs to a tradition illustrated by Auguste **Comte** and Thorstein **Veblen** according to which commerce will replace war – a tradition analysed in Raymond **Aron**, *War and industrial society*, 1958. One dominant contemporary version of this theory, a theory of **globalization**, has two roots: a belief that commerce will replace war, and an argument turning the ideals of the **Enlightenment**, ideals which underpinned European imperialism, against imperialism itself.

However, imperialism should not simply be confused or conflated with an old-fashioned spirit of conquest, an anti-capitalist and an anti-democratic inclination. Not all empires have been tyrannies, not all empires belong to a pre-capitalist and pre-democratic age. Another school of explanation of imperialism stems from **V.I. Lenin**'s analysis of imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism”. The claims of this school are the converse of Schumpeter's: the accumulation of wealth will not be enough to get rid of war, as war is a necessary consequence of economic inequality. This argument and its posterity are described in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism*, 1977 [trans. 1980]. The preservation of capitalism requires expansionist opportunities. Imperialism is due to the acute competition of surplus capital which did not find profitable employment on the home market.

Lenin's theory echoes Machiavelli's political philosophy perhaps even more than Marxism. According to Machiavelli, imperialism is favoured by all those who try to avoid the conflict between the haves and the have-nots, the oligarchs and the people. Imperialism reorients the activity of the city or state in a way which enables it to avoid imploding through civil war. On this account, the sociology of international relations cannot be separated from the sociology of social classes and political sociology. As Machiavelli puts it in his *Discourses* (1532) (an analysis of Rome's imperial past), the passions of those who want to acquire and of those who do not want to lose combine to form a communal passion to acquire the world. The quarrel between the poor and the rich frees an energy that helps building up the power necessary to conquer. Imperialism sublimates class conflicts into wars of overseas conquest and external expansion.

One can reconcile in part Lenin and Schumpeter's teachings by noticing that there are various types of empires and imperialisms. Empires are more or less military and more or less formal. Although England built the immense empire that became the empire par excellence in modern times, her power was ordinarily exercised in an indirect way that made it easy to rule with a comparatively small army and civil service – Niall Ferguson's *Empire* (2003) offers an introduction to its history. In its weakest form, imperialism can be a form of loose economic hegemony. Today, deepening the spirit of commercial societies, the United States of America seem to have superseded the indirect character of the British Empire in exercising their empire without the real burden of an empire.

Imperialism is not necessarily incompatible with capitalism and democracy: it can be a product of both. Western nations ruled the world because their individual members set sail for science, victory and gain. The extension of political and economic liberty at home went hand in hand with the extension of the power abroad. The great discovery of Machiavelli, both a republican and an imperialist, is that freedom is not an enemy of power, but what produces it. The acquisitive passion is equally at work in democracy, capitalism and imperialism: it leads the have-nots to impose their own regime (democracy), a regime that will allow them to acquire more goods (capitalism) and more territory (imperialism).