

Nation-states as empires, empires as nation-states: two principles, one practice?

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Abstract Empires and nation-states are generally opposed to each other, as contrasting and antithetical forms. Nationalism is widely held to have been the solvent that dissolved the historic European empires. This paper argues that there are in fact, in practice at least, significant similarities between nation-states and empires. Many nation-states are in effect empires in miniature. Similarly, many empires can be seen as nation-states “writ large.” Moreover, empires were not, as is usually held, superseded by nation-states but continued alongside them. Empires and nation-states may in fact best be thought of as alternative political projects, both of which are available for elites to pursue depending on the circumstances of the moment. Ultimately empires and nation-states do point in different directions, but it is not clear that the future is a future of nation-states. Empires, as large-scale and long-lasting multiethnic and “multicultural” experiments, may have much to teach us in the current historical phase of globalization and increasingly heterogeneous societies.

In theory, there is an abyss between nationalism and imperialism; in practice it can and has been bridged....

Hannah Arendt (1958: 153)

Much attention has been paid to the apparent conflicts between imperialism and nationalism; it would be at least equally profitable to study their real partnerships.

Anil Seal (1968: 342)

In a sense, every modern nation is a product of colonization: it has always been to some degree colonized or colonizing, and sometimes both at the same time.

Etienne Balibar (1991: 89)

Comparing empires and nation-states

There is a venerable tradition that sees nations, nationalism, and nation-states as the antitheses of empires and imperialism. Nations—especially as constituted in nation-states—and empires are seen as rivals, mortal enemies. It was the constant fear of

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nineteenth-century statesmen such as Clemens von Metternich that the empires they served would be undermined by the growing force of nationalism. The crash of empires—Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Romanov, Ottoman—after the First World War was widely regarded as confirmation of this belief.

An almost equally strong view, especially but not only at more popular levels, regards empires as old-fashioned and antiquated structures, destined to be replaced by the more modern form of the nation-state. Nation-states in this view follow empires in a sort of natural historical progression. If empires persist in the modern world they are—as Joseph Schumpeter (1974) held—“atavisms,” hangovers from the pre-modern world. They must be attributed to such things as the clinging to power of the old European aristocracies, with their warlike propensities and thirst for glory. Modern society, especially in its bourgeois form, is sober, rational, calculating—the precise opposite of the “irrational” excesses of imperialism.¹

This article does not seek to merge empires and nation-states into one seamless whole, or to suggest that the differences between them are illusory. What it does wish to do is to propose two things. One, that whatever their self-conceptions and self-presentations, empires and nation-states have much more in common than is usually allowed. Secondly, the idea of a natural succession “from empire to nation-state” is a misleading one, distorting both the actual history of recent times and the analysis of current forms and possibilities. Thus even if we concede that there are indeed differences of principles between empires and nation states, that they represent different “ideal types,” we must see that they often operate in similar ways. We must also see that empires—whether or not so-called—have not only persisted into our own times but remain distinct possibilities for the future. They have not been dispatched to the dustbin of history.

One intriguing possibility is to see empires and nation-states as variable forms of the “political imagination,” alternative possibilities that were open to political elites depending on the circumstances of the times (cf. Cooper 2005, 2007). Pursuing empire or pursuing “nation-ness” then might be a matter of calculation, a selection of strategy depending on the limits and opportunities of a given political environment, both domestic and international. While, pushed to the extreme, this might suggest an untenably “open” view of the social and political world, emptying it of its historical specificity—not everything is possible at any time—it might for the centuries under consideration be a quite accurate representation of the possibilities open to political actors. In the last two hundred years, say, empires and nation-states have indeed both been active and available models for elites. What choice they made, and how far they were successful in pursuing it, were to some extent contingent matters, dependent on the existing balance of power and the political opportunities available for particular strategies. Germany’s dilemma at the end of the nineteenth century, whether to remain and consolidate its strength as basically a continental European nation-state, or to rival Britain and France in the acquisition of a world-wide empire, well illustrates the varying possibilities open in the particular environment of that time.

¹ Of course Marxists such as Hilferding, Luxemburg, and Lenin—following upon the seminal analysis of J. A. Hobson (1988)—found ways of showing that imperialism was far from “irrational” and was indeed a matter of necessity for capitalism at a certain (late) stage of its development. Interestingly Max Weber, who provided the best-known account of “rational” capitalism, had no difficulty in seeing that motives of power and prestige would continue to favor imperialist ventures in even the most modern capitalist society. For a good brief discussion of these “classic” theorists of empire, see Mommsen (1982: 3–65).

I conclude with some observations on the differences between empires and nation-states. For all their similarities, empires and nation-states do ultimately embody different and in some ways opposite principles: in the manner of their origins, the way they work, and their sense of themselves. If empires have not disappeared, if they remain future possibilities—even if under other names—then they will produce a world significantly different from a world of nation-states.

Nation versus empire²

The view that the principle of the nation-state and that of empire are antithetical is a commonplace of the scholarly literature, especially the literature on nationalism. In this view, the idea of the nation and the ideology of nationalism lead to the emergence of a distinct form of state, the nation-state, that stands in principled opposition to empire. Ideally, nation-states express or strive to embody a common culture. Their principle is homogeneity, often seen in ethnic or racial terms. Nation-states accordingly espouse a radical egalitarianism: all members of the nation are in principle equal; all partake of the common national “soul.” As Benedict Anderson puts it, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006: 7). Nation-states moreover are intensely particularistic. While they do not deny the existence of other nation-states, and of their right to cultivate their ways, they are generally concerned only with their own way, convinced that it is superior to the ways of all other nations. “The significance of the ‘nation,’” says Max Weber, “is usually anchored in the superiority, or at least the irreplaceability, of the culture values that are to be preserved and developed only through the cultivation of the peculiarity of the group” (Weber 1978: 925). Although this can, as Weber suggests, be tied to the idea of a “providential mission” in the world, it can also lead to a high degree of self-absorption. John Breuilly remarks that “the nationalist idea has a peculiar appeal because of the way in which it asks people to celebrate *themselves* rather than anything beyond them” (Breuilly 2000: 217).³ Nations tend to celebrate themselves—“we English,” “we Germans,” “we French”—simply for their good fortune in being who they are, rather than for any cause or purpose in the world that might justify their existence. Hence the common tendency of nationalism to be intensely inward-looking, to regard the world outside the nation as irredeemably alien and other nations as inevitably hostile. Not for nothing have so many national groups claimed for themselves the mantle of “the chosen people” (see, e.g., Smith 2003; Balibar 1991: 95).

Empires by contrast appear to exhibit principles opposite to those of nation-states. They are multi-ethnic or multi-national. Far from having or seeking a common culture, they stress the heterogeneity of cultures, especially the difference between the elite and the local cultures. Empires are hierarchical, opposed in principle to egalitarianism. The lines of solidarity are vertical, between subject and ruler, not, as in nation-states,

² I have for convenience generally followed the convention of using “nation” as shorthand for “nation-state,” as in the “United Nations,” which is of course an organization of nation-states. But where it seems to matter I have used the more precise term, “nation-state.”

³ For a nation to declare its independence, to assert its national difference from other nations is, as David Armitage says, to claim “a special standing in the world,” one that sets them apart from other nations (Armitage 2007:5).

horizontal, between equal citizens or fellow members of the same ethnic group. Empires finally aspire to universalism, not particularism. As with China or Rome, they see themselves as being at the center of the known world, the source of civilization itself and the carrier of the civilizing process to all the corners of the globe. Far from celebrating merely themselves, they tend to see themselves as the instruments of larger purposes in the world, generally of a moral or religious character. Towards nationalism they are contemptuous, as something petty and self-centred. “I am not *nacional*; that is something for children,” declared the Count-Duke Olivares of imperial Spain, in an expression typical of the imperial mentality (in Elliott 1984: 74).⁴

A powerful statement of what Hannah Arendt saw as “the inner contradiction” of the two principles of nationalism and imperialism (Arendt 1958: 153), and what Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* calls “the inner incompatibility of empire and nation” (Anderson 2006: 93), is to be found in an equally famous study of nationalism, Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism*. For Gellner, empires—seen as essentially pre-modern in type—belong to what he calls “agro-literate” society, the central fact of which is that “everything in it militates against the definition of political units in terms of cultural boundaries” (Gellner 2006: 11; see also Gellner 1998: 14–24; Breuilly 2000: 198–199). Power and culture belong to different realms. Crucially, the culture of the elites—often cosmopolitan or international in character—is sharply differentiated from the myriad local cultures of the subordinate strata in the empire. Modern empires, such as the Soviet empire, perpetuate this division, which is why for Gellner they are anachronisms, inherently unstable in a world in which nationalism is the dominant principle.

For nationalism, argues Gellner, closes what in modernity becomes an increasingly intolerable gap between power and culture, state and nation. It insists that only political units in which rulers and ruled share the same culture are legitimate. Its ideal is one state, one culture—which is to say, its ideal is the “nation-state,” since it conceives of the nation essentially in terms of a shared culture. In the eyes of nationalists for rulers of a political unit to belong to a nation other than that of the majority of the ruled “constitutes a quite outstandingly intolerable breach of political propriety” (Gellner 2006: 1). What, to nationalists, could possibly justify the existence of an entity such as the British Empire, in which a handful of British ruled over millions of Indians, Africans, and other non-Europeans, all of whom contained within themselves the seeds of potential nationhood?

In pitting nation-state against empire, Anderson and Gellner work within a tradition that stretches back to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Anthony Pagden has drawn attention to the thought in particular of Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the fathers of European nationalism, in “setting up the unalterable opposition of nations and empires.” “For Herder, the concept of a people, a *Volk*, and the concept of empire, were simply incompatible. Sooner or later all the world’s empires were destined to collapse back into their constituent parts,” seen as peoples or nations (Pagden 2003: 131–132; see also Pagden 1994: 172–188; Muthu 2003: 210–258). “Nothing,” declared Herder, “appears so directly opposite to the end of government as

⁴ Max Weber made a similar point in his contrast between the “striving for prestige” characteristic of “great powers” and mere “national pride”: “such pride can be highly developed, as is the case among the Swiss and the Norwegians, yet it may actually be strictly isolationist and free from pretensions to political prestige” (Weber 1978: 911).

the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixture of various kinds of humans and nations under one sceptre” (in Muthu 2003: 248). This view became a commonplace of nineteenth-century liberal thought as it increasingly allied itself with the national principle. Even those liberals, such as Lord Macaulay and John Stuart Mill, who defended empire accepted that nationality was the “natural” principle, and that empires could be justified only insofar as they were leading “backward” peoples towards independent nationhood (Mehta 1999: 77–114; Pitts 2005: 123–162).

The history of the relations between nation-states and empires in the past two centuries would seem to bear out the truth of this view of difference and divergence. For what has that history been but one of a revolt against empire in the name of nationality? In the wake of the First World War, the great continental land empires, commonly denounced as the “prison-houses of nations”—the Russian, the German, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Ottoman empires—all came crashing down, to be replaced by independent nation-states that were widely regarded as their legitimate heirs. The victorious allies’ charter of 1918, President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, loudly proclaimed the triumph of the principle of nationality over that of dynastic empire (Seton-Watson 1964: 19–23; Hobsbawm 1994: 31; Kappeler 2001: 213; Ferguson 2005: 172–173).

Later came the turn of the oceanic or overseas empires of the French, the Dutch, the Belgians, and the British. In a spectacular series of “wars of national liberation” their colonies claimed and enforced their independence on the basis of the nationalist doctrine that had become the norm of the international system. It became common to speak of the movement “from empire to nation” (e.g., Emerson 1962) to sum up this post-war experience. Moreover, the break-up of these empires too had partly been the result of a cataclysmic war, the Second World War, and, as with the previous war, there was again official endorsement of the nationality principle in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (“everyone has the right to a nationality”). Later still, in 1989, the “informal colonies” of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe declared their independence, followed swiftly thereafter by similar actions among the various national republics or “internal colonies” of the Soviet Union itself (though, as Gellner rightly noted [1998: 57], it was not nationalism itself that brought down the Soviet Union).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 seemed to set the seal on the long-drawn-out encounter between nation-state and empire. Despite much talk about the new “American empire,” it was clear that formal empire in the classic sense had for the time being at least reached a certain historic terminus (the announcement of the “end of history,” and similar claims that liberal democracy had triumphed in the world, were some kind of recognition of this). The opprobrium that had, with increasing force since the Second World War, gathered around the terms “empire” and “imperialism,” seemed now to hold sway everywhere. No state called itself an empire anymore; only its enemies did so. If indeed there was or is an American Empire, as Niall Ferguson argued, it was “an empire in denial,” an empire that practiced “the imperialism of anti-imperialism,” an empire that “dare not speak its name” (Ferguson 2005: xxii, 6, 61–104; cf. Teschke 2006: 137).⁵

⁵ One of the best accounts of the “American empire”—which she calls the “empire of capital” (Wood 2005)—recognizes the difference between this form of empire and the historic instances of empire, though she finds the origins of this new kind of imperialism in aspects of earlier British rule, for instance over Ireland. See also on this Mann (2003) and Steinmetz (2005); and for an excellent collection of essays comparing America with other forms of empire, see Calhoun et al. (2006a).

So much for the received theory of the relations between empires and nations or nation-states and the received history of that relationship. What one must do now is to interrogate that theory and that history.

Nation-states as empires

There is another way, different from the above, of telling the story of the relation between nation-state and empire. In this account, nation-state and empire are not so much opposed as acknowledged to be alternative or complementary expressions of the same phenomenon of power. Empires can be nations writ large; nation-states empires under another name.

The great historian Sir Lewis Namier once said that “religion is a sixteenth-century word for nationalism” (quoted MacLachlan 1996: 15). This seems to be a typical case of a secular thinker’s refusing to accept the sincerity or authenticity of the participants’ own protestations. The sixteenth-century conflicts that tore apart most European societies *were* indeed “wars of religion,” and any attempt to convert or reduce them to nationalist (or even “protonationalist”) conflicts seems, *pace* Anthony Marx (2003), highly anachronistic.⁶ But what is insightful in Namier’s comment is the recognition that nationalism can take a variety of forms and expressions, and that something such as “imperial nationalism” therefore may not be as contradictory as it first sounds.

In the first place it is important to note that many early-modern states—among which were those that later evolved into some of the principal nation-states—saw themselves as *empires*. David Armitage (2000: 29–32), among others, has stressed that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries especially the term empire was often used in its original (Roman) sense of *sovereignty* or *supreme authority*, rather than in its later—and more common modern—meaning of rule over a multiplicity of lands and peoples.⁷ This allowed many absolutist monarchies, such as the French, and even small city-states such as Milan under the Visconti Dukes, to declare themselves empires. For English speakers, the best-known example of this is the famous pronouncement in Henry VIII’s Act in Restraint of Appeals of 1533, that “this realm of England is an empire, entire of itself”. By this was meant that the king of England acknowledged no superiors in his realm, that his rule was sovereign or absolute, and that there could be no appeal to a higher power, such as the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor (Ullmann 1979).⁸ Here then was an assertion

⁶ For similar objections to the discussion in Gorski (2000), which closely parallels Marx’s and on which Marx draws, see Kumar (2005).

⁷ See also Pagden (1995: 12–13). Koebner (1961: 18–64) emphasizes the importance of the Italian humanists in restoring the original meaning of “lawful authority” to the term empire, thus allowing those states outside the Holy Roman Empire—which had more or less monopolized the concept of *imperium* during the Middle ages—to declare themselves empires. It is worth emphasizing nevertheless that the more modern meaning of empire can also be found in the classical period. Both the sense of empire as sovereign rule and its application to rule over a variety of peoples can be found in Roman usage from a relatively early time (Koebner 1961: 4–6, 11–16; Lichtheim 1974: 24–26; Richardson 1991: 1; Woolf 2001: 313).

⁸ The general form of the argument that, like the emperor in his empire, the king was emperor in his own kingdom (*rex in regno suo erat imperator*), had long been deployed by the canon layers, especially in France, against the universalist claims of the Holy Roman Empire. See Folz (1969: 156–157, 160); Muldoon (1999: 143, 146).

of empire as sovereignty or self-sufficient authority very similar to one of the central claims of the nation-state.

There was a further way in which empire and (nation-) state might overlap. Many of the early-modern states were what have been called “composite monarchies” or “multiple kingdoms”—states, that is, such as Spain or Britain, where one monarch might rule over several territories.⁹ Thus Spain—leaving aside what we might think of as its more conventionally imperial possessions in the New World and elsewhere—contained Castilians, Catalans, Basques, and others, in their several territories; Britain, with the accession of James I in 1603, and more firmly with the Act of Union of 1707, was a composite state made up of English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish subjects of the monarch (Koenigsberger 1987; Eliott 1992; Russell 1995; Armitage 2000: 22–23). Such states, in other words, contained that variety and plurality of peoples and lands that empire connoted, both classically and in modern times. Whether therefore the stress was on sovereignty or multiple rule, state and empire were conjoint terms for much of the early-modern period—as found, for instance, in the writings of Bodin, Hobbes, Grotius, and Spinoza (Koebner 1961: 52; Armitage 2000: 14–23; Pagden 1995: 13–14).

But there is an even more compelling consideration that might lead us to see convergence rather than divergence between nation-states and empires. Most nation-states, or what became nation-states, are, like most empires, the result of conquest and colonization. The later ideology of nationalism of course disguises this unpalatable fact, just as it exhibits amnesia about many other aspects of the violent origins of nations (Marx 2003: 29–32). The rise of nationalist historiography in the nineteenth century drove a wedge between “domestic” and “extra-territorial” history, between the nation-state and empire—both the territorial empires that had preceded it and the extra-European empires that were constructed across the globe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, as David Armitage says, “the nation-state as it had been precipitated out of a system of aggressively competing nations ... functioned as ‘the empire *manqué*’”—within Europe itself as much as beyond it (Armitage 2000: 14).

Robert Bartlett (1994) has given the classic account of how European states were formed by a process of “conquest, colonization and cultural change,” in the High Middle Ages, from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. From their heartlands in the old Carolingian lands—modern France and western Germany—Frankish and Norman knights swept westwards, eastwards, and southwards. Normans conquered England, and went on to take Wales and Ireland. They put enormous pressure on the Scots, forcing them, on pain of survival, to adapt to Anglo-Norman culture and institutions. In the East, Germans cleared the forests, established new towns and

⁹ Some scholars have wished to distinguish between “composite monarchies” and “multiple kingdoms.” Thus seventeenth-century England can be said to be a composite monarchy because, with particular laws for such counties as Kent and the County Palatine of Chester, it “did not have a single uniform system of law characteristic of the single state”; whereas James VI and I, as king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, ruled over a multiple kingdom, the kingdom that he—but not the English or Scottish Parliaments—termed “Britain.” Conrad Russell, who makes this distinction, argues that “all multiple kingdoms are composite monarchies, but not all composite monarchies are multiple kingdoms” (1995: 133; see also Armitage 2000: 22). While the distinction may be useful for certain purposes, it is not one that has found favor with most commentators, who tend to use composite monarchy and multiple kingdom more or less as synonyms. See, e.g., Pocock (2005).

settled in old ones—such as Prague—in large numbers, opening the way to the eventual incorporation of these lands into Prussia and other German states. Burgundian families established their rule in Portugal and León-Castile and spearheaded the Christian Reconquest of Andalusia from the Moors.¹⁰ The Normans conquered Sicily and from this base spread the ways and institutions of Latin Christianity throughout the southern Mediterranean and many parts of the Levant (aided by the Crusading movement that established the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem). In this massive centrifugal movement, a uniform system of town charters, commercial law, coinage, language (Latin), and educational and ecclesiastical institutions came into being in a huge swath stretching from the Baltic to the eastern Mediterranean. “Europe, the initiator of one of the world’s major processes of conquest, colonization and cultural transformation, was also the product of one” (Bartlett 1994: 314).

This dynamic process of conquest and colonization meant that nearly all the states and kingdoms that were established in medieval and early modern Europe had the appearance of empires.¹¹ England, for instance, once united by the Norman Conquest of 1066, went on in its turn—largely at first under Norman auspices—to “unite” (*sc.* conquer) the peoples of Wales, Ireland and, eventually, Scotland, into another state, the United Kingdom, and another nation, the British.¹² Observing that “many of the most successful nation states of the present started life as empires,” Niall Ferguson asks, “what is the modern United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland if not the legatee of an earlier English imperialism” (Ferguson 2005: xii)?¹³ Just as Europe itself, so too England began its great colonizing venture in the world with an initial act of “internal colonization,” the construction of an “inner empire” of Great Britain that became the launching pad for the creation of an “outer empire” of “Greater Britain” overseas (Kumar 2003: 60–88; cf. Cooper 2005: 172).

¹⁰ “The Frankish warriors came to see themselves as men ‘to whom God has given victory as a fief.’ They anticipated an expansionary future and developed what can only be called an expansionary mentality.” By the late Middle Ages they provided kings and queens for eighty percent of European kingdoms. “The penetration of the British Isles by French knights, the participation of the Burgundian aristocracy in the wars of the Reconquest and the dominance of Franks in the crusading ventures of the eastern Mediterranean had resulted in the establishment of new Frankish dynasties from Scotland to Cyprus” (Bartlett 1994: 43, 90).

¹¹ The bare enumeration of the number of states at various times is a sufficient indication of this process of internal conquest and colonization. It has been estimated that there were something like a thousand independent polities in Europe in the fourteenth century. By the beginning of the sixteenth century this had shrunk to 500, by 1789 to 350, and by 1900 to just 25 nation-states. As Mark Greengrass says, “‘swallowing’ and ‘being swallowed up’ were fundamental features of Europe’s political past” (Greengrass 1991b: 2; cf. Armitage 2007: 106). See also the essays in Greengrass (1991a); Tilly (1992: 38–66); Spruyt (1994).

¹² The Scots, it is true, unlike the Welsh and Irish, were never formally conquered by the English; but there is no doubt that the Union with Scotland in 1707 had strong elements of a shot-gun marriage about it; everyone knew that England was prepared to invade if the Scottish parliament rejected the union (see Kumar 2003: 135–136, and references there).

¹³ Cf. Charles Maier (2006: 28–29): “Don’t many large states originate in a program of imperial conquest of people and regions within their own national borders? Were not all nations empires once ...?” Nevertheless Maier wishes to maintain the distinction between empire and nation, putting the stress especially on the egalitarianism of nation-states, and their “more militant sense of shared identity” formed around such aspects as a common language and religion. See further, on the similarities and contrasts, Maier (2002: 47–51, 54–56).

France achieved nationhood by a process of conquest launched by the Capetian kings from their base in the Île-de-France, and leading eventually to the forcible incorporation of Brittany, Burgundy, Flanders, Languedoc, Normandy, Gascony, Aquitaine, Provence, and several other once proud and independent principalities of the Carolingian successor kingdoms of West Francia, East Francia, and Lotharingia. At the point at which, in 987, Hugh Capet became king of West Francia, the kingdom, says Colin Jones, “looked more like a collection of potential future states than a single, unitary one” (1999: 75). It took several hundred years, and the suppression of many internal rebellions, for the French kings to weld together the disparate territories of their “inner empire” (Greengrass 1991b: 13–15; Collins 1995). Even the great centralizing influence of the French Revolution still left much to be done, at least in the countryside where the majority of the people lived. According to Eugen Weber (1976), it was only in the late nineteenth century that the process seriously began of turning peasants of many tongues and disparate traditions into Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. Rogers Brubaker points out that the idea of *la mission civilisatrice*, usually applied to justify France’s overseas empire, initially had reference to the civilizing mission of the French state in relation to its own domestic inhabitants. This “internal *mission civilisatrice*” was to be carried out by the *instituteurs*, the school teachers, “whose mission was to *institute* the nation” (Brubaker 1992: 11). As Eugen Weber says, “the famous hexagon [i.e., France in its current form] can itself be seen as a colonial empire shaped over the centuries: a complex of territories conquered, annexed, and integrated in a political and administrative whole, many of them with strongly developed national or regional personalities, some of them with traditions that were specifically un- or anti-French” (Weber 1976: 485; see also Kuzio 2002: 32).¹⁴

Spain shows even more clearly the pattern of unification through conquest—the more so as it remains in several respects still incomplete, with a persistent Basque separatist movement and intermittent calls for independence emanating from Catalonia. From the time of the union of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile in 1469, Spanish monarchs engaged in a strenuous and only partly successful effort to bring adjacent territories into a single state and to form a Spanish nation.¹⁵ That the process was tortuous, marked by frequent rebellions and civil wars, is made clear in the comment of an eighteenth-century Spanish civil servant, Olavide, that Spain was “a body composed of other smaller bodies separated, and in opposition to one another, which oppress and despise each other and are in a continuous state of civil war.... Modern Spain can be considered as a body without energy ... a monstrous Republic formed of little republics which confront each other” (in Carr 2000: 6).

¹⁴ The idea that France is a nation formed by conquest was clear to Ernest Renan. He reminds us of that uncomfortable fact in the context of his famous observation that “forgetfulness, and I shall even say historical error, form an essential factor in the creation of a nation.” The French, like all other nations, forget, and must forget, that “unity is ever achieved by brutality. The union of Northern and Southern France was the result of an extermination, and of a reign of terror that lasted for nearly a hundred years” (Renan [1882] 2001: 166).

¹⁵ The imperial ambitions of Castile were clear even before the union with Aragon in the fifteenth century. “Iberian unity, which remained a central political objective of the Christian kings as they moved south from Leon, found expression in terms of the recovery of the ancient Roman province of Hispania. In 1077 Alfonso VI was already using the title ‘imperator constitutus super omnes Hispaniae nationes’, and in 1135 his successor Alfonso VII actually had himself crowned ‘Hispaniae Imperator’” (Pagden 1995: 41). For the later attempts by the Spanish crown to unify Spain, see Lynch (1991: 1–48).

Spain, France, and England/Britain are the countries most regularly invoked in the literature on nationalism as early, well-formed, nation-states (see, e.g., Smith 1991: 55). It is salutary to remember then how much of conquest and colonization there was in the formation of these nation-states, and how imperfectly the word “nation,” with its suggestion of consensus, community and homogeneity, sums up the resulting product. “Spain,” “France,” “Britain,” and their respective nations, were the result of the more or less forcible integration of neighboring lands and peoples by dominant groups whose institutions and culture often differed considerably from those of the conquered peoples. This pattern has often been noted for later examples of nation-building. For example, it was common to say, in the nineteenth century and later, that “Germany” was made by Prussian conquest of the other German states; less commonly, but perhaps equally accurately, it might be said that “Italy” was made by the Piedmontese conquest of the other Italian states (which explains the famous remark of Massimo d’Azeglio in 1868, that “we have made Italy, now we must make Italians”).¹⁶ And it has frequently been pointed out that many of the “new nations” of Africa and Asia are so only in name, that they are artificial creations, the result largely of the wars and political maneuverings of the former imperial powers. What we need to stress is that this pattern is not simply typical of latecomers to nation-building but has been the norm since the very earliest examples. Many “nation-states,” to put it another way, are empires in miniature; they have been formed as empires have usually been formed. There is in that sense an inescapably imperial dimension to the nation-state.¹⁷

Empires as nation-states: “imperial nationalism”

If nation-states have often been conceived and constructed as empires, might the reverse also be true? If nation-states can be seen as mini-empires, can empires be seen as large nation-states? Does imperialism converge with nationalism? What are the degrees—and limits—of this convergence?

Anthony Smith has in several places (e.g., 1986, 2004) argued that all nations are constituted by “core” *ethnies*, around which may cohere other ethnic groups in subordinate roles. In the English case, for instance, it is impossible to ignore the contribution over the centuries of Norwegians, Normans, Huguenots, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Jews, Indians, Afro-Caribbeans and other ethnicities to that mix we call “Englishness.” But it is equally clear that, by about the sixteenth at the latest, there

¹⁶ Clark (2006) shows that not only was Germany a Prussian imperial creation, but that Prussia itself can be regarded as an imperial construct, built as it was out of the scattered and highly variegated lands of the Hohenzollerns by “the Great Elector,” Frederick William Hohenzollern, and Frederick the Great. Until the end of the eighteenth century, it was indeed conventional to refer to the Hohenzollerns lands as the “states of Prussia” (cf. the movement from “these United States of America” to “the United States of America” after the American Civil War).

For the “conquest” element in the unification of Italy through Cavour’s skilful maneuvering on behalf of the Piedmontese monarchy, and his outflanking of Garibaldi, see Mack Smith (1954, 1960); Duggan (2008). The Kingdom of Italy was “essentially a graft upon the former Kingdom of Sardinia” (Mack Smith 1960: 574). For d’Azeglio’s remark see Hobsbawm (1992: 44).

¹⁷ For some interesting reflections on the imperial dimension of the nation-state, with special reference to France, “the most talked-about model of the nation-state,” see Stoler and Cooper (1997: 22–23). See also on the French “imperial nation-state” Wilder (2005) and Cooper (2007), though in this case they include France’s formal empire in their understanding of its national character.

had emerged something like an English nation (which is—*pace* Greenfeld (1992)—quite a different matter from saying that we can find English *nationalism* in this period). The English language, for one thing, had by then come into its own, supremely with the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser and others. Protestantism was beginning to do its work, especially in its non-conformist forms. Parliament and the Common Law were already beginning to be acknowledged as emblems of the national culture. There was the beginning of something like “racial Anglo-Saxonism,” to use Reginald Horsman’s (1981) term, though it had little of the biological character ascribed to it in its nineteenth-century guise. It does though mean that by this time a distinctive and dominant *ethnie* had emerged in England, setting the terms and conditions within which later groups were invited to find, or to force, a place (for other examples, see Kaufmann 2004). It is this core *ethnie* that lends its peculiar qualities to the nation; it is this group that defines the “national character,” difficult as it always is to enumerate its attributes precisely.

Can we not say something similar about empires? Most empires are constructed by a particular people—the Romans, the Spanish, the English/British, the French, the Russians, the Turks, etc.¹⁸ It is they who name it and oversee its development.

¹⁸ One has to more than usually careful in making such an assertion about the relation between peoples and empires. As one of the reviewers for this journal pointed out, “empires made people as much as the other way round.” This is a fair point: as imperial peoples, clearly their development, even their definition, was as much the result of the development of their empires as of any original character or purpose they may have had. Nevertheless it still seems reasonable to associate—clearly at least in these cases—the English/British, the French, and the Russians (and the Romans before them all) with their respective empires. It was their culture and institutions, as initially formed *before* their main imperial expansion—their language, their laws, their religion—that came to dominate in the empires they formed, however much, for good pragmatic reasons, they might practice tolerance towards other customs and cultures, and to whatever extent they might associate other peoples in ruling the empire. With the Habsburg Empire—in both its Spanish and its Austrian guises—the case is less clear, at least initially. Neither the Spanish nor the German *people* can be said to have been the only or even the principal carriers of the imperial project. But over time there is no doubting the emergence of a particular culture—Spanish in the one case, German in the other—that came to exercise the greatest influence and to have the greatest prestige in the empire (which was one reason for the revolt, in the era of nationalism, of other, non-imperial, peoples against the empire—even the Hungarians in the Habsburg empire, who came to share co-dominium within it, resented German cultural predominance). Of the modern European empires the Ottoman case is the most complicated of all. “Turks,” clearly, did not rule the empire, certainly in the earlier phases; the Ottoman dynasty drew upon all groups—Balkan peoples especially, such as the Greeks—in administering the empire. But firstly, those who wished to share in imperial rule had to convert to Islam, the religion of the ruling dynasty and always the first religion of the empire; and secondly, with time, especially in the nineteenth century, the originally Turkic roots of the Ottomans came to be asserted with increasing strength, eventually leading to a Turkish nationalism that became the natural legatee of the empire following its dissolution in 1923 (for good accounts of this process, see Karpát 2001: 276–373, Aksin 2007: 20–112). Certainly it is anachronistic to see the Turks as the dominant *ethnie* or state-bearing people of the Ottoman Empire for much of its history; but so long as the necessary qualifications are borne in mind it does not seem to be stretching things too far to associate the Turks with the Ottoman Empire, as the main component of its culture. Undoubtedly that is how most people outside the Ottoman Empire viewed it—in Europe “Turks” and “Turkey” were the usual shorthand for the Ottomans and their empire from at least the eighteenth century onwards.

Finally it is important to be reminded—as again one of the reviewers pointed out—that most of the important European empires were dynastic, and dynasticism sets itself against nationalism (as was indeed a central point of an earlier article in this journal, Kumar [2000]). That does not, however, mean that dynasties have no ethnic or national affiliations, or rather perhaps it is no bar to their identification with and promotion of particular ethnic groups in their empires. The Habsburgs espoused German culture; the British Empire was clearly marked by the predominance of English culture; Russians and Russian culture (even where inflected with French and German influences) were the leading elements in both the tsarist and the Soviet empires.

Whatever their numbers, it is they who tend to define its character. They are, we may say, the “state-bearing” peoples of the empire. And, just as a particular ethnic group might come to identify itself with the nation it creates, so a particular people or nation might come to identify itself with the empire it founds. Nation-states and empires, we have said, tend to think of their purpose or destiny in the world in different terms, the one more inner, the other more outward looking. But it seems fair to say that in both cases we can discern a group or groups that identify with their creation and derive their sense of their collective identity from it.

I (Kumar 2000, 2003: 30–35) have argued that we can call the sense of identity of imperial peoples a kind of “imperial” or “missionary” nationalism. There is, no doubt, a double danger in so doing. In the first place, the ideology of nationalism does not emerge until the late eighteenth century, and it is therefore anachronistic and misleading to speak of nationalism in any form before that time. Since empires for the most part clearly pre-date the age of nationalism—even if they persist well into it—we obviously need to specify clearly what we might mean by “imperial nationalism.” In the second place, for all the suggestive parallels, empires are not nation-states (and nation-states are not empires), as we shall see. Hence to speak of imperial nationalism runs the risk of confusing two entities, nation-states and empires, that for many purposes need to be kept separate.

The reason for nevertheless thinking that “imperial nationalism” might be a useful concept is the gain that comes from seeing two disparate phenomena from a common vantage point. Like nationalists in relation to their nation, imperialists feel that there is something special or unique about their empire. It has a mission or purpose in the world. This may, again as with nationalists, endow imperial peoples with a sense of their own superiority, a feeling of inherent goodness as of a people specially chosen to carry out a task (cf. Smith 2003).¹⁹ Imperialists, like nationalists, are true-believers.

What are the causes or missions that have given imperial peoples a sense of their collective identity? For most Europeans, the pattern was set by the Romans with their belief that they were giving nothing less than civilization—Roman laws, Roman institutions, Roman culture—to the world. Hence it was possible for the Romans to identify their empire with the whole known world, the *orbis terrarum*. Later European empires, from the Holy Roman Empire onwards, repeated the claim, to an almost wearying degree, though the content might vary depending on the particular place or time. Thus, although the Spaniards, like most imperialists, saw themselves in the image of Rome, it was as a Catholic power that they saw their mission, in Europe and in the New World (a role intensified with the Protestant Reformation). The Austrian Habsburgs took up the torch from their Spanish cousins, putting themselves not just at the head of the Counter-Reformation but also—as the *Östmark* or *Österreich*—seeing themselves as the defenders of European civilization on its eastern flank, against the threat of the infidel Turks. The Russians, proclaiming Moscow the “Third Rome” and themselves the legatees of the doomed Byzantines, aspired to continue the struggle for Orthodoxy in the world. A similar resolve, but

¹⁹ Cf. Max Weber, who links the “prestige interests” of the great powers—which generally takes the form of a drive towards imperial expansion—with “the legend of a providential ‘mission,’” which he sees as a manifestation of “the idea of a nation” (Weber 1978: 925).

for a contrary cause, animated the English when as “the Protestant nation” they attempted to lead the Protestant crusade in Europe and the New World, especially against the machinations of the Catholic powers of Spain and France. The French, for their own part, having first hitched their empire to the Catholic cause, after their Great Revolution of 1789 and the turn towards republicanism increasingly came to identify French imperialism with *la mission civilisatrice* (as, in the later phases of the British Empire, did the British). This too, in its own terms, was the mission of the Russians in their second or Soviet empire, the spreading of reason and science to the benighted in the form of communism. In this renewed emphasis, begun with the Romans, on the mission to civilize and enlighten, the wheel had come full circle.²⁰

Merely to list these causes or missions is to question the analogy between nationalism and imperialism. Nationalist causes are not typically like these. For some time in the early nineteenth century, when a form of liberal nationalism flourished under the banner of Giuseppe Mazzini and his followers, nationalism did indeed ally itself with the noble cause of spreading freedom and enlightenment in the world (Alter 1994: 19–23, 39–65). But the period that followed, the period of “organic nationalism,” showed another face of nationalism: one that was vindictive and intolerant towards rivals, one that trumpeted the power and glory of particular nations, one that asked its citizens to die for the nation whatever the cause it chose to embrace. The Nazis’ celebration of the Teutonic or Aryan peoples, in and for themselves, indicated the logical end-point of this type of nationalism (Alter 1994: 26–38; Hobsbawm 1992: 101–130).

Imperialist ideologies are typically universalistic, not particularistic.²¹ That difference has to be borne in mind. Imperial peoples do not, unlike nationalists,

²⁰ For these examples, see Kumar (2000) and the references therein. For a good discussion of the Christianizing mission, differently conceived, of the Spanish and British in the Americas, see Elliott (2006: 57–87, 184–218).

The association of empire with some grand mission has, of course, to be treated with caution, as in the case of all ideologies. Whatever their self-proclaimed aims, most empires were prepared to compromise in the interests of power or security. Thus, the British were always ready to join forces with the Muslim power of the Ottoman Empire against their rivals, the Christian Russian empire; Catholic Austria was prepared to ally with Orthodox Russia against the radical currents emanating from Catholic France in the nineteenth century; in a similar vein, the “civilizing mission” of many of the European empires could often look hollow, not to say blatantly hypocritical, in the face of numerous instances of injustice and cruelty. Realism and *Realpolitik* can and often do trump ideology, especially in international relations (cf. Maier 2002: 44–7) But all this—the divorce between ideal and reality—is normal with any justifying ideology. It does not by itself render the ideology meaningless or inconsequential, nor does it nullify the role such an ideology might play in the identity of the imperial peoples. For some good studies of both the ideal and the reality of one example of the *mission civilisatrice*—the French one—see Conklin (1997) and Wilder (2005).

²¹ Once again we must see this contrast as relative, not absolute. Some nationalist ideologies carry strong universalizing features, blurring the distinction between nation and empire—e.g., the celebration of the American nation is not inconsistent with seeing America as having a special destiny in the world, to spread freedom and democracy (though it is precisely this missionary quality that leads many people to speak of the American *empire*). It is less easy to think of imperial ideologies which are as self-referring as nationalist ones typically are, though it can be argued that the Chinese empire is such a case, with the Chinese people as its sole referent (though, for a contrary view, see Perdue 2005: esp. 497–565). In any case what matters is the relative stress, inward looking or outward looking; and on that score the distinction between imperial and nationalist ideologies seems real, and significant. For a good example of a nationalist ideology, almost a template for a score of future ones with its declaration of a “national war, a holy war” on behalf of the oppressed “descendants of the glorious peoples of Hellas,” see the Greek “Proclamation of Independence” of 1822 (in Kohn 1982: 116–118).

celebrate themselves; they celebrate the causes of which they are the agents or carriers. It is from this that they derive their sense of themselves and their place in the world. But the parallel with nationalism is still instructive. In both cases we see the attempt to effect a fusion, a symbiosis almost, between a people and a political entity. Imperial nationalism plays down membership of a “mere nation,” with its tendency towards self-congratulation and self-importance; but it does so in order to insist on a higher form of nationalism, one that justifies the nation in terms of its commitment to a cause that goes beyond the nation.

It is somewhat ironic, in view of this, that the greatest apparent convergence between imperialism and nationalism is to be found in the very period—from the 1870s to the First World War—in which nationalism threw off its liberal mantle and presented itself in the guise of naked power-seeking. The historian Wolfgang Mommsen speaks of “the deformation of national politics” in this period:

The idea of the nation state progressively lost those elements which in the first half of the nineteenth century had made it an emancipatory ideology, directed against the arbitrary rule of princes and small aristocratic elites, and an intellectual weapon in the campaign for constitutional government. Instead it came to be associated with the power-status of the established national culture, and the imposition of its values on ethnic or cultural minorities both within and beyond the body politic was now considered essential (Mommsen 1990: 215; see also Mommsen 1978).

Mommsen sees this deformation as directly connected to the “high imperialism” of the times, when the great powers—in particular Britain, France, Germany—competed for dominance on the world stage through the acquisition of larger and larger territorial empires (Mommsen 1990: 212). This was the view too of another liberal thinker, J. A. Hobson, the great critic of imperialism, who saw imperialism as “a debasement of ... genuine nationalism, by attempts to overflow its natural banks and absorb the near or distant territory of reluctant and unassimilable peoples” (Hobson [1902] 1988: 6). For Hobson as for other liberal thinkers, nationality still appeared the natural and desirable principle—a “plain highway to internationalism”—with imperialism a “perversion of its nature and purpose” (Hobson [1902] 1988: 11).

Such a position has seemed too kind to nationalism, in the view of other thinkers. For them, nationalism is inherently imperialistic, just as it was inevitable at this time that imperialism would take the form of nationalist rivalries. Imperialism is then seen not so much as a perversion as a more or less natural extension of a power-seeking nationalism; in its turn, the nation-state comes to conceive of itself in the image of empire, the traditional emblem of grandeur and the supreme expression of great-power status. “Imperialism and nationalism,” says Christopher Bayly, “were part of the same phenomenon.... The rise of exclusive nationalisms, grasping and using the powers of the new and more interventionist state, was the critical force propelling both the new imperialism and the hardening of the boundaries between majority and assumed ‘ethnic’ populations across the world.... Imperialism and nationalism reacted on

each other to redivide the world and its people” (Bayly 2004: 230, 242–243; cf. Maier 2002: 52–54).²²

Once again, therefore, the ground between empire and nation-state, imperialism and nationalism, seems to crumble and disappear. If nation-states can be seen as empires, empires, especially modern empires, can seem no more than nation-states writ large. The British Empire, or “Greater Britain” as some termed it, is in this view no more than the expression of British nationalism, the desire to expand the British presence and power in the world (see, e.g., Seeley [1883] 1971); the French Empire, partly in rivalry with Britain, the expression of a wounded French nationalism in the wake of the crushing defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871 (see Schivelbusch 2004: 103–187). Imperialism appears as hypertrophied nationalism, perhaps; but nationalism nonetheless, expressing its ultimate logic and tendency.

Empire and nation-state: alternating possibilities?

Is this then the conclusion? Are Gellner, Anderson, and so many others wrong in drawing such a sharp distinction between the principle of empire and that of the nation? Is imperialism simply nationalism under another name? Or nationalism no more than a continuation—again under another name—of the imperial impulse that preceded the rise of nationalist ideologies?

It would surely be premature, not to say facile, so to conclude. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, reacting against the centrality accorded to the nation-state in conceptions of European history since the eighteenth century, rightly warn that “it is not clear that simply considering empire as an extension of nation will get to the root of the problem” (Stoler and Cooper 1997: 22). No more, perhaps, than reversing this

²² The view of an association between imperialism and nationalism is a long-standing one—almost, one might say, the traditional one, at least for this period. Joseph Schumpeter, in an early account, thought that imperialism “does not *coincide* with nationalism and militarism, though it *fuses* with them by supporting them as it is supported by them” (Schumpeter [1919] 1974: 97). With the rise of Italian, German, and Japanese fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, generally seen as a form of extreme nationalism and expressing itself in distinctly imperialistic form, the affinity between imperialism and nationalism seemed to many only too obvious. See on this especially Kohn (1932: 49–76) and Arendt (1958: 123–302). Several more recent writers take a similar view: see Lichtheim (1974: 81); Hobbsbawm (1987: 158–161); Armitage (2000: 14); Pagden (2003: 132–138); Zimmer (2003: 35–38). D. K. Fieldhouse remarks that “the rise of the imperialist ideology, this belief that colonies were an essential attribute of any great nation, is one of the most astonishing facts of the period [1870–1914].” It was also, he says, “an international creed, with beliefs that seemed to differ very little from one country to another.” He cites the German nationalist, the historian Heinrich von Treitschke, in 1879: “Every virile people has established colonial power... All great nations in the fullness of their strength have desired to set their mark upon barbarian lands and those who fail to participate in this great rivalry will play a pitiable role in the future to come. The colonizing impulse has become a vital question for every great nation” (Fieldhouse 1961: 207). Bernard Porter quotes Finland’s President Paasikivi in 1940, “Alle Grossmächte sind imperialistisch” in support of the view that “nations turn to empire-building when they are large and powerful” (Porter 2004: 310).

The Marxist view of imperialism, which sees it as the “highest stage” of capitalism, also tends to go along with this view, since Lenin and others regarded imperialism as the necessary expression of the rivalry of the leading nation-states of the period as they competed for markets. But in the long run Lenin thought that nationalism, especially in the colonial world, would turn against imperialism and become the agency of its destruction. See on this Mommsen (1982: 29–65).

procedure and seeing nations as extensions of empires, or as empires in miniature. We have to respect nation-states and empires for their differences as well as their admitted similarities. Nation-states are not empires and empires are not nation-states, whatever the gains in looking for parallels and commonalities.

Nevertheless it is important not to reify “nation-states” and “empires,” as unalterable and distinct “essences.” There are clear overlaps in their features; they may represent rather different or alternative strategies for pursuing or consolidating power. The behavior of states may tend at one time towards empire, at another time towards a concern with nation-ness. Hobson, Arendt, Mommsen, Bayly, and others may therefore be mistaken in privileging nationalism as the dominant force in the late nineteenth century, with imperialism as no more than its extension. It might be just as correct to say that at this time, for good pragmatic reasons, imperialism tended to array itself in nationalist clothes. Why not say that nation-states were empires in disguise, rather than the other way round? From the history of the period that is at least as plausible a formulation as the contrary. There is no reason to think that empire, as formerly constituted, had disappeared and was forced to re-invent itself as a species of nationalism. Nations and nationalism might now be rivals and alternatives to empires and imperialism; but empires remained powerful competitors, and indeed their dominance on the world stage until at least the middle of the twentieth century is plain to see.

Max Weber once observed that while all “Great Powers” tend, for reasons of prestige, to be imperialist and “expansive,” this was not the case with all nations, some of which sought their principles and sense of national pride from within themselves. “Not all political structures are equally ‘expansive.’ They do not all strive for an outward expansion of their power, or keep their force in readiness for acquiring political power over other territories and communities by incorporating them or making them dependent. Hence, as structures of power, political organizations vary in the extent to which they are turned outward” (Weber 1978: 910). Britain, France, and Germany might feel the need for empire, but not so Switzerland or Norway.

This perception might be one way of considering the fact that empire and nation can, at different times, alternate in the striving of states. In the early-modern period, the examples of the Spanish and Portuguese empires made it seem that empire was the only way of establishing one’s presence in the world. The British, Dutch, and French hurried to imitate the imperial style of those countries, with a considerable measure of success. Later, in the nineteenth century, as the national principle gained in strength, nation-state formation seemed to offer a more fulfilling, as well as for many a more practicable, option. This was especially so in the case of smaller or weaker countries, such as Italy, Poland, Ireland, Norway, and the Slav peoples of the Habsburg empire. Here empire was the enemy, not the goal.

But nationalism, rather than imperialism, was not just for small or weak countries. The tension between nation and empire could often be seen within the same country, including some of the most powerful, at the same time. Britain in the nineteenth century had its “Little Englanders” who, especially after the loss of the North American colonies, felt that empire was ruinous to British commerce and corrupting in its moral and political effects at home. The way forward was for Britain to renounce imperial entanglements and to exert its influence by the example of its

peaceful and prosperous existence as one nation among others; at best Britain should use its power to establish a global regime of free trade (see, e.g., Thornton 1968: 1–56; Gott 1989).²³ In France, after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine following the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, there was a bitter struggle between the imperialists, keen on matching Britain's imperial power, and the nationalists who felt that it was essential to France's national honor to recover the lost provinces, and for whom empire was a crippling distraction (Baumgart 1982: 55–68; Schivelbusch 2004: 176–87).

The idea that empire and nation are alternatives, variably pursued by different nations at different times, and by different groups within the same nation at the same time, gains strength from the observation that, contrary to the common understanding, empires have not disappeared as “pre-modern” entities, to be succeeded by the more modern form of the nation-state. There has been no such “natural” historical succession. Quite the contrary: empires have not only persisted alongside nation-states but can be said to have overseen both their birth and their evolution. The nineteenth-century is often labeled the “era of nationalism,” but we need to remember that formal empire lasted until well into the twentieth century, and that it is only with the end of the great overseas European empires in the 1950s and 1960s that the nation-state really came into its own.²⁴ If, as Christopher Bayly says, the period “1890–1940 was ... the age of hyperactive nationalism” (Bayly 2004: 462), it was also and equally, as several thinkers have stressed, an age of vigorous imperialism (Ferguson 2005: xi–xiii; Cooper 2005: 171). What were the dominant actors on the world stage in this period—Britain, France, Russia, the Ottomans, Austria-Hungary, Germany, China, Japan, America—but empires?²⁵ Not until after the Second World War was the hold of empire on the world loosened, and even then it was given a significant renewal with the expansion of the Soviet Union's “informal” empire in Eastern Europe. Charles Maier (2002) has indeed argued that the stabilization of the world order, after the settlements of 1918,

²³ A characteristic expression of the Little Englanders was William Cobbett's: “It is my business, and the business of every Englishman, to take care of England, and England alone.... It is not our business to run about the world to look after people to set free; it is our business to look after ourselves” (in Gott 1989: 94).

Free-traders, such as Richard Cobden and John Bright, were vigorous and vocal opponents of empire; but for some the regime of international free trade can best be seen as an expression of British “informal imperialism,” with Britain exploiting all the advantages of the being the world's leading industrial and commercial power at the time (see the influential argument of Gallagher and Robinson 1953). This once again illustrates the flexibility, not to say slipperiness, of the terms “empire” and “imperialism.”

²⁴ “In the 1960s,” says Frederick Cooper, “a world of nation-states finally came into being, over three centuries after the peace of Westphalia, 180 years after the French and American revolutions, and 40 years after the Wilsonian assertions of national self-determination” (Cooper 2005: 190; cf. Calhoun et al 2006b:8). It is worth remembering that a number of thinkers as early as the decades of the 1890s and 1900s—such as John Seeley, H. G. Wells, and Halford Mackinder—were already predicting that the future lay not with the nation-state, seen as petty and inward-looking, but with larger federations or conglomerations of states, of which the British Empire, or “Greater Britain,” might be the prototype. See Thompson (2000: 24–25); Deudney (2001); Bell (2007: 241, 246–247).

²⁵ Eric Hobsbawm has remarked that “the era from 1875 to 1914 may be called the Age of Empire not only because it developed a new kind of imperialism, but also for a much more old-fashioned reason. It was probably the period of modern world history in which the number of rulers officially calling themselves, or regarded by western diplomats as deserving the title of, ‘emperors’ was at its maximum.” As Hobsbawm notes, the title was claimed not just by the rulers of Germany, Austria, Russia, Turkey and Britain, but also China, Japan, Persia, Ethiopia and Morocco (Hobsbawm 1987: 56–57). In the American case empire was largely informal, though in the late nineteenth century, following the Spanish-American war of 1898, there were distinct currents of imperialism and even formal colonial acquisitions (see Go 2006).

1945, and 1989, turned critically on “imperial” supervision and co-ordination, principally by the United States but involving also the Soviet Union and, in a subsidiary role after 1945, the British Empire.

There is a further consideration. Not only did empires continue alongside nation-states, it can be argued that it was empires—and the rivalry between them—that were in many cases responsible for the birth of new nation-states over the past century or so. It was not so much—as commonly represented by nationalists—nationalism that destroyed empires, as empires that weakened or dissolved other empires, thereby allowing nation-states to step into the breach. It was the conquest by the Napoleonic Empire of the Iberian peninsula in 1808–14 that gave the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World their chance for independence. It was the defeat of the Russian Empire by the German Empire in the First World War that led to the downfall of the Romanovs and the resurrection, at least for a time, of the independent states of Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. The Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires likewise suffered defeat at the hands of the British, French—and American—empires during the First World War, allowing for the creation or re-creation of a host of independent nation-states in Central Europe and the Balkans. In the Second World War, crushing Japanese victories over the British, Dutch, and French empires in Southeast Asia gave encouragement and opportunity to the nationalist movements in Indonesia, Indo-China, and India, leading to eventual independence. And was it not the defeat of the Soviet empire—not in armed conflict but through military, economic, and ideological pressure—by the “American empire” that led to the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the construction of a host of independent nation-states on its ruins?

It might also be worth observing that, even if we allow the description of the twentieth-century international order as a Wilsonian world of nation-states, it was a world very closely supervised by two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, both of whom while denying the fact acted very much like the empires of old. Even the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 still left one “lonely superpower” (Huntington 1999) to carry on the imperial task of policing the world. The future of this venture remains highly uncertain; but even if it does not succeed, it is highly unlikely that an anarchical world of nation-states will be the outcome.²⁶ The world is too tightly intermeshed for the major nations to accept such an arrangement. Nationalism, said Ernest Renan over a century ago, is “the law of the age in which we live.” But, he predicted, “nations are not something eternal. They have had their beginnings, they shall have their end” (Renan [1882] 2001: 175). What is even more remarkable to contemplate is not just the end of nations, but the possibility that nations, or at least nation-states, never really had the world to themselves, even for a relatively short period. They have always lived in the shadow of empire.

Empire and nation-state: convergence and divergence

Empires are not simply fossilized hangovers from a pre-modern past, destined to be superseded by the more up-to-date model of the nation-state. They have shown a

²⁶ “I do believe that we relied on something ‘very like’ an empire in the postwar period, that it provided an undergirding of ‘peace and prosperity’, and that we shall need some equivalent territorial ordering to emerge successfully in the era that has followed 1989” (Maier 2002: 62).

remarkable tenacity, an impressive capacity for survival, suggesting that—at least as much as nation-states—they correspond to certain persisting features of the social and political environment. Empires may in recent times have lost ideological legitimacy—no state any longer wishes to be called an empire—but that has not stopped them from continuing under other names. Nation-states and empires, as Frederick Cooper (2005) stresses, have been variable forms of the political imagination throughout the recent period—at least since 1800, to go back no further. They have co-existed with and mutually influenced each other, even to the point where the same state might act or appear at one time as an empire, at another as a nation-state—even, depending on how one looked at it, both an empire *and* a nation-state at the same time. China and the United States—both ambiguous cases of empire in the literature—are two obvious examples of this (see, e.g., Osterhammel 1986; Perdue 2005, 2007), but one could say the same thing about Britain or France. Nation-states and empires are different ways of conceiving the world as well as the collective self, but that has not prevented each of them from being regarded at various times as alternative possibilities, depending on their perceived fitness for the occasion.

One must however resist the further move, tempting as it might be, of merging empires and nation-states into one, as if they were simply variable ideological expressions of the same underlying political form, the same power complex, with similar principles of operation. Nationalism and imperialism, despite their similarities, point in very different directions. A world of nation-states, accepting the particularities of different peoples, and promoting the cultivation of unique national cultures, is quite different from a world of competing empires—each intent on reforming the world in its own image. J. A. Hobson, the best-known writer on modern imperialism, and one who was fully alive to the connections between nationalism and imperialism, nevertheless felt the need to make it plain at the very outset of his study that the kind of imperialism that was collusive with nationalism was of a very novel and highly untypical kind. It was novel and untypical because it took the form of competing nations, each striving to magnify their empires; whereas the true principle of empire was unitary and universal.

The notion of a number of competing empires is essentially modern. The root idea of empire in the ancient and the medieval world was that of a federation of States, under a hegemony, covering in general terms the entire known recognized world, such as was held by Rome under the so-called *pax Romana*. When Roman citizens, with full civic rights, were found all over the explored world, in Africa and Asia, as well as in Gaul and Britain, Imperialism contained a genuine element of internationalism. With the fall of Rome this conception of a single empire wielding political authority over the civilized world did not disappear. On the contrary, it survived all the fluctuations of the Holy Roman Empire. Even after the definite split between the Eastern and Western sections had taken place at the close of the fourth century, the theory of a single state, divided for administrative purposes, survived. Beneath every cleavage or antagonism, and notwithstanding the severance of many independent kingdoms and provinces, this ideal unity of the empire lived. It formed the conscious avowed ideal of Charlemagne.... Rudolf of Habsburg

not merely revived the idea, but laboured to realize it through Central Europe, while his descendant Charles V gave a very real meaning to the term by gathering under the unity of his imperial rule the territories of Austria, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Sicily and Naples. In later ages this dream of a European Empire animated the policy of Peter the Great, Catherine, and Napoleon (Hobson [1902] 1988: 8–9).

There is not much to add to this masterly sketch, merely to say that its accuracy has been confirmed by most later studies of the imperial idea (see, e.g., Folz 1969; Muldoon 1999; Münkler 2007). Hobson goes on to say that the “internationalism of empire” was continued, with diminishing force, in the “humane cosmopolitanism” of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, only to “wither before the powerful revival of nationalism” in the nineteenth century. Nationalism properly understood and practiced, he continued to believe, was not in necessary contradiction with internationalism. But linked to an aggressive and competitive imperialism, which transforms “the wholesome stimulative rivalry of varied national types into the cut-throat struggle of competing empires,” it threatened “the peace and progress of mankind” (Hobson [1902] 1988: 10–12).²⁷

Hobson saw no hope, or even necessity, of reviving the universal empire. But he believed that “any reasonable security for good order and civilization in the world implies the growing application of the federation principle in international politics.” He could for a while strongly champion the idea of turning the British Empire into an “Imperial Federation,” “a voluntary federation of free British States, working peacefully for the common safety and prosperity,” which “might indeed form a step towards a wider federation of civilized States in the future” (Hobson 1988: 332). Hobson was later to feel that British imperial policies, by antagonizing the colonies, made such a prospect unlikely. But he was clear what had been lost, and what had been the consequence of the degeneration of both the national and the imperial ideal. They had come to feed off each other, turning their backs on the promise of their respective principles.

The recent revival of interest in empire has, no doubt, many sources. But one surely has to do with concerns over the recent excesses of nationalism, in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as in many areas of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, when nationalism was only just getting into its stride, Lord Acton warned against the oppressive and exclusive principle of nationality which, “by making the State and nation commensurate with each other in theory ... reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary” (Acton [1862] 1996: 36).²⁸ Against this he defended both the British and the Austrian empires as bastions of liberty. Something similar has recently been said by a historian of the Russian empire, Andreas Kappeler. “Studying the history of multi-ethnic empires,” he says, “can

²⁷ “While co-existent nationalities,” says Hobson, “are capable of mutual aid involving no direct antagonism of interest, co-existent empires following each its own imperial career of territorial aggrandisement are natural necessary enemies” (Hobson [1902] 1988: 12).

²⁸ A number of recent works have re-stated this point about the exclusionary, and potentially murderous, tendency of nationalism, e.g., Wimmer (2002), Marx (2003), and Mann (2005).

serve to remind us that there are alternative principles with regard to the structure of states and societies,” and can “also clarify the problematical nature of the (ethnically restricted) nation state”. Kappeler thinks that “as in the successor states of the Habsburg Empire there may even come a time when people will idealize and look back nostalgically at the Russian multi-ethnic empire whose geographical borders and intellectual horizons far exceeded those of the ethnic nation states” (Kappeler 2001: 3, 392).²⁹

There is a certain amount of nostalgia around, no doubt, as when certain enthusiasts for the European Union talk about a “revived Habsburg Empire,” or when people look back admiringly to the *millet* system of the Ottoman empire, as some kind of model for our “multicultural” societies. There are even those who see in the earlier empires some presage of present-day globalization, and praise, for instance, the *pax Britannica* of the British Empire as an exemplar of a possible world order (see, e.g., Ferguson 2004; Lal 2004). One can dispute all of these, if one chooses to. But there can surely be no doubt that empires have much to teach us about many of the problems that preoccupy us today: multiculturalism, transnationalism, diasporas, the nation state in an era of globalization, multinational corporations, and the possibilities of supranational organization. Empires are, almost by definition, multicultural, multiethnic and even multinational. They have been created by and in turn the cause of vast migrations of people across the globe. They preceded the nation-state and they, or something like them, may well succeed it. If they share certain features with nation-states, they also diverge sharply in their orientation. Empires and nation-states, for all the interesting ways in which they overlap, do in the end belong to different worlds.³⁰

As ideological formations, nations and nationalism may well have occupied center-stage in the modern world order, at least in the last two centuries. But empires have also been part of that order. Their disappearance has been relatively recent, and the signs of their existence are still all around us, not least in the large populations from the former empires that are now part of the life of most major Western cities. If empires belong to history, it is to that aspect of history that has an inescapable after-life. “The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world

²⁹ It is worth remembering that one of the first and most influential works in the revival of nationalist theory, Elie Kedourie’s *Nationalism* (1961), was a passionate protest against nationalism, and that a later work (Kedourie 1971) by him explicitly compares nations and empires, to the decided detriment of the former. See for a discussion of Kedourie’s views, O’Leary (2002). There are also decidedly positive readings of empire in several recent works, particularly those concerned with “the American empire” (e.g., Ferguson 2004, 2005: esp. 24–26; Lal 2004).

³⁰ It was objected by one of the reviewers for this journal that this vastly overstates the differences between empires and nation-states. Many nation-states—the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, India, etc.—are multiethnic and even multi-national; many—such as the United States, Israel, and most Latin American countries—have been formed by mass migrations. This is undeniable. But firstly what it points to is the difficulty of determining what is or is not a nation-state—is the United Kingdom a nation-state? Is India? Both can be considered from the aspect of empire as much as from the aspect of nationhood. Secondly this objection ignores the fact that what is being stressed in this paragraph, and generally in this article, is the difference of *principle* between empires and nation-states. Empires are more or less by definition multiethnic and multinational. Nation-states ideally—of course the reality differs—tend towards the principle, one state, one nation.

forever,” says the protagonist in V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men* ([1967] 1985: 32); “their passing away is their least significant feature.”³¹

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³¹ Cf. the remarks of Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks in emphasizing the wide-ranging imperial legacies in the contemporary world: “Colonialism played an active role in the cultural project of legitimation and in the technological development of new forms of state power. Colonialism also left active legacies in the form of the model Western states, in the constitution of postcolonial relations between the West and the third world, and in the new histories and states that have been constructed in the twentieth century. Colonialism is too important a subject to be relegated either to the history of nineteenth century Europe on the one hand or to the negative nationalisms of third world studies on the other.” Just as the European nation-state “was predicated on its own colonial experience,” so too third world nationalism was a “response to colonial experience [which] reproduced (though with crucial differences) the European experience” (Cohn and Dirks 1988: 229).

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