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Imperialism: Political Aspects

Imperialism is a form of international hierarchy in which one political unit, or polity, effectively governs or controls another polity. It is one of the oldest known political institutions, characterizing relations between peoples in ancient Mesopotamia, China, and Rome through modern Europe. It includes both rule within relatively contiguous areas—as in the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires—and the overseas colonies held by various European states after the age of discovery.

The term has a long and tortured history. It was apparently first used as an invective against the expansionist policies of Napoleon I, and has been employed most frequently to refer to the colonial practices of the European states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempts to revise the international territorial status quo, and the economic domination of one country by another (also referred to as ‘neo-colonialism,’ see below). Used as a tool of political rhetoric, the term is highly malleable and often devoid of any general meaning.

As an analytic concept, imperialism refers to the effective domination of one political community by another. According to Michael Doyle (1986, p. 19), ‘(e)mpires are relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies Imperialism is the process of establishing and maintaining an empire.’ By domination we mean the ability of the dominant polity, the metropole, to decide policy for the subordinate polity, the colony. This ability may entail substantial delegation of decision-making authority to elite members of the colony, but the metropole retains the power to decide what gets delegated and how, and when this authority is revoked.

Three corollaries are important. First, imperialism occurs only where distinct political communities exist. Subordinate communities may have a prior history of independence or a new political consciousness may

emerge that creates a relationship of imperialism. Without the possession of a distinct political identity, however, class conflict or unequal political opportunities may exist but not imperialism. Second, the colony lacks an international political ‘personality’; that is, while it possesses an identity as a distinct polity, it does not interact with other states as a sovereign equal. Finally, exploitation of the weak by the strong is not essential to imperialism, but it is an often natural outgrowth of effective domination. The affinity between domination and exploitation explains the typically pejorative status of the term.

Imperialism is an extreme form of international hierarchy in which the colony is, in principle, a subject of the dominant state. If imperialism forms one end of a continuum of international hierarchies, and ‘anarchic’ relations between sovereign equals forms the other, we can identify a range of increasingly hierarchical relationships. In spheres-of-influence, the subordinate members remain independent but are constrained by dominant powers from forming relationships such as alliances with other great powers. Latin America under the Monroe doctrine is a classic example. In protectorates, subordinate states yield control over their foreign and defense policies to dominant powers; although subordinates remain independent, they transfer control over specific areas of policy to other states. With continuing responsibility for their defense, the United States today retains protectorates over the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. In informal empires, subordinates are subject to imperial states across wide ranges of policy but retain their international personalities and interact with third parties on the basis of sovereign equality. Eastern Europe under the Soviet Union is a particularly clear example. Protectorates and informal empires are often grouped with formal empires as forms of imperialism.

Neocolonialism is a hierarchy produced through the functioning of an impersonal international market. In this variant, the dominant state need not intend to control the subordinate but the latter is sufficiently dependent upon the former economically that it has little choice other than to comply with (and even anticipate) the metropole’s desires. In this case, economic dependence produces political dominance—the core of imperialism—but the mechanism of control is indirect. For some, this is a virulent form of modern imperialism. For others, the absence of intent negates the political relationship. Neocolonialism remains a contested concept.

1. *Theories of Imperialism*

The major explanations for imperialism can be grouped into three general categories. Metrocentric theories focus on the dispositions or internal charac-

teristics of imperial states. Writing in 1902 (1965), for instance, John Hobson grounded the motivation for overseas expansion in the necessity for advanced capitalist states to export their surplus capital. This theme was later the foundation for V. I. Lenin's famous monograph, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, first published in 1917. Neo-Marxists later argued that the military-industrial complex and other features of capitalist states actually created a need for capital, leading states to create colonial and neocolonial relations with developing regions in order to extract wealth (see Magdoff 1969).

Pericentric theories emphasize conditions within the colonial polities. Where metrocentric theories focus on the push behind expansion, pericentric theories draw attention to the forces that pull imperialists into hierarchical relationships. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson's *The Imperialism of Free Trade* (1953) set the direction for much research in this tradition. Positing a constant drive for domination and a preference for indirect rule wherever possible, Gallagher and Robinson explained variations in imperialist outcomes by conditions in the periphery. In particular, where peripheral polities possessed stable regimes and effective collaborators, they argued, imperialists could govern indirectly through informal empires. Only where the peripheral societies were unstable politically or lacked elites willing to protect their interests would metropolises be forced to create formal empires and govern directly. As it was effectively ruled by landed interests tied to the British market, in their view, Argentina escaped the need for recolonization but was nonetheless caught within Britain's free trade web. Later work on neocolonialism further developed these insights.

Systemic theories of imperialism, typically part of larger realist theories of international relations, highlight competition between the great powers (see Cohen 1973). The struggle for survival and influence between great powers creates an ever widening gyre of competition, in this perspective, that both leads metropolises to seize territories to augment their resources and allows them to compensate one another using peripheral territories to maintain an effective balance of power. The classic case of imperialism driven by systemic competition was the so-called race for Africa in the late nineteenth century.

The best explanations of imperialism have always combined ideas from more than one of these traditions. Even Hobson and Gallagher and Robinson, for instance, augmented their theories with a focus on systemic competition, which they both saw as accentuating the metropolitan or peripheral causes of imperialism. More recently, synthetic works integrating all three approaches have appeared that provide relatively complete explanations of imperialism (see Doyle 1986 Smith 1981). Although different authors emphasize different dimensions and different episodes, any single instance of imperialism carries traces of all

three sets of factors. The 'state-of-the-art,' therefore, recognizes and builds upon metrocentric, pericentric, and systemic insights.

A fourth, nascent explanation is also being developed that draws upon neo-institutionalist theory, and especially theories of relational contracting as developed in economics. In this approach, imperialism is understood as simply another form of organizational hierarchy. Emphasis is placed on explaining why hierarchy, in general, and this form, in particular, is superior for obtaining the goals of the actors rather than alternative institutions, such as confederations, protectorates, and state-to-state relations. Three considerations are central. First, the larger the benefits from pooling resources and efforts between the units, in this case the metropole and colony, the more risks or costs the units are willing to accept in building a relationship. Second, the greater the expected costs of opportunistic behavior by the subordinate polity, the more important it is to the dominant state to control the actions of its partner. Especially significant here are assets that are specific to the two parties and which would be costly to the metropole if they were withdrawn. In the absence of some specific assets, we would expect an 'arms-length' relationship between independent units, as the benefits of cooperation could then be captured through market exchange. Only where there are substantial assets that are specific to the two parties is imperialism necessary. Finally, there are costs to governing any relationship, and these are likely to escalate with greater hierarchy. Imperialism is typically costly both for the colony, which gives up valued freedom, and for the metropole, which must either bind its own hands to limit its ability to exploit its partner or use coercion to impose its rule. Thus, states avoid empire if control is either unnecessary or can be achieved in some less hierarchical fashion. In this approach, empire is most likely when there are large benefits from pooling resources between the units, highly specific assets at risk, and the costs of governance do not rise sharply with greater hierarchy.

Employing this approach in the case of classic imperialism, Jeffrey Frieden (1994) argues that formal empires arose in the age of plantation agriculture and raw materials extraction as a means of preventing local elites from appropriating site specific assets in production: once foreign investors opened a copper mine, for instance, this site specific asset was then subject to expropriation by the local government. Knowing this, foreigners would not invest in such assets without the control made possible by the formal empire. As multinational corporations have increasingly taken the place of agricultural or raw materials investors, Frieden continues, formal empires have become obsolete. Multinational corporations possess firm specific assets such as technology or brand names that cannot be easily appropriated by host governments; a government can seize an axle assembly plant, for example, but it is of little value without access to

the multinational's worldwide production and marketing network. Thus, formal empire is less necessary to protect corporate assets. David A. Lake (1996) has applied similar arguments to the case of hierarchies motivated by national security needs. In its emphasis on comparative institutions, this approach brings an additional dimension to the study of empires.

2. *The End of Empire?*

Decolonization was one of the most significant events in modern world history. At the dawn of the twentieth century, most of the globe was ruled from Europe. By 1963, the overseas empires had seemingly evaporated. The strong norm against imperialism as affirmed in numerous United Nations declarations strongly suggests that the age of empire is over. Its imprint endures, however. In the periphery, imperial rule destroyed local structures of governance. In some areas, such as India, the foundations of parliamentary rule were erected in their place. In other regions, especially Africa, only weak state structures existed when independence arrived, producing political instability and continuing impediments to economic progress (see Jackson 1990). In the imperial states themselves, political elites underwent a wrenching process of accommodation to their now diminished international political and economic status (see Kahler 1984).

Although scholarly interest waned with decolonization, imperialism nonetheless remains a vibrant issue in the contemporary world. Weakly institutionalized groups within multinational states, such as the Chechens in Russia or the Tibetans in China, are pressing demands for independence, declaring in words and actions that the states within which they are embedded are empires. Other groups are rediscovering nationalist identities, like the Scots in Great Britain, and asserting new political rights—transforming intra-state politics into imperial politics. Even as the overseas empires have ended, a new age of imperial struggle is emerging.

This new age will be politically more complex than the old. The principle of national self-determination, articulated by President Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles peace conference, could be easily employed in the fight against overseas empires. Today, this principle directly contradicts contemporary notions of sovereignty as an inviolable whole. As demonstrated in the recent NATO intervention in Kosovo, Western nations abhor the political domination of the local Albanians by their Serb rulers but they cannot condone and even less promote the breakup of a sovereign state. As both old and new imperial relationships within multinational states become contested, politicians and analysts alike will need to rethink issues of political identity, statehood, and empire—and perhaps experiment with new forms of political hierarchy.

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See also: Balance of Power, History of; Balance of Power: Political; Colonialism, Anthropology of; Colonialism: Political Aspects; Colonization and Colonialism, History of; Dependency Theory; Geopolitics; Imperialism, History of; International Relations, History of; Multinational Corporations; Nation-states, Nationalism, and Gender; Post-coloniality

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Implementation: Political

Implementation studies are inevitably normative. In 1973, the field was created virtually overnight by Jeffery Pressman, and Aaron Wildavsky, in whose book 'Implementation' the guiding research questions were: 'how well was this authoritative mandate (law, regulation, program, official policy pronouncement) implemented?' and 'how might it have been better implemented?' Later researchers redefined the normative standard as achieving the values implicit in some mandate rather than in executing its prescriptive details. Then the guiding question became: 'how can a complex implementation process bring out the values implicit in, or improve upon the raw materials provided by, some authoritative mandate?' Such normative questions have provided an intellectual focus for a field unified by little else.