

BOOK REVIEW

The United States and the Definition of Empire (アメリカ合衆国と帝国の定義)

Reviewed by Wm. Thomas Hill*

BOOKS REVIEWED:

Charles S. Maier. *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.

Bernard Porter. *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006.

Charles Maier begins his study by observing what he refers to as “a historical change in the public consciousness” (7). He writes:

Recall the political concept of “civil society,” which was the warm and reassuring mantra of the late 1980s and 1990s. Popularized by Eastern European dissidents, then widely adopted by academics and social commentators, the concept of civil society referred to the solidarities and institutions that communities generated from “below,” such as church congregations, clubs and trade unions, citizens movements. . . . We talk less of civil society these days. Empire has displaced civil society as the fashionable political concept for the new decade. (7-8)

Issues of civil society in the 1990s were horizontal and democratic, involving communities of people from all levels of the social hierarchy. But all of this has changed. The recent issues of *Empire* that have become so popular since 2002 from the work of Niall Ferguson, Chalmers Johnson, and others are vertical and

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unilateral involving a few people with high aspirations.

The works of both authors under review in this essay however, raise the question of whether the discussion is even a valid one. Maier's discussion of the Roman, Mongol, Chinese, British, and other empires left this reviewer with the sense that while they were quite interesting, they had nothing whatsoever to do with the reality of contemporary US foreign relations. In fact, after all the talk of other empires—which have nothing in common with the US abroad—Maier comes to the conclusion that the United States is not an Empire . . . not yet anyway. I do not believe that history has nothing to teach us in the present. But if history is to guide the reader in the direction of policy development as I feel it should, Maier provides us with little in this direction.

Porter would like to define the white invasion of the North American continent as empire building. The reason is that the US started out as part of the British Empire. It was a "settlement" colony which according to Porter is the most violent and damaging manifestation of empire. It is the most damaging because settlers who need the land would and did justify any action in order to get it. And then even before the US had either slaughtered or confined enough of the Native American inhabitants, it severed itself from the body of mother Britain and became its own "empire"—a term that some US founders actually used.

Porter acknowledges that there are problems with this definition. The same definition would apply to both Canada and Mexico. The British to the north, the Spanish to the south—all of North America is under the control of invading outside forces. Are we all empires?

That America is a hegemonic nation cannot be denied. In the areas of economics and culture its influence is felt all over the world. For example, when the Thai government, citing health reasons, outlawed American tobacco companies from selling cigarettes in their country in 1990, the US tobacco industry forced them through the WTO to change their laws and open their doors. US business interests since the Nineteenth Century has demanded access to foreign markets but the US has for the most part never had any desire to settle or directly rule over other countries.

In part one of Maier's book, titled "Recurring Structures," Maier begins by asking what an empire is and whether America qualifies. He then continues by examining the attributes of a number of empires and then asks to what extent the US mirrors any of these attributes. Maier is concerned with America's role and responsibility after the Second World War. And again as I pointed out, the United

States does not fully possess any of the attributes of previous empires and in those cases where it would seem to come close, it is finally a rather unhelpful comparison due to the age in which we live and a host of other rather obvious variables. Maier concludes, however, that the US is moving in the direction of being an empire though he is never very clear how or in what sense this is true.

The “hard power” of American military might is one variable that always enters into the equation. According to Maier, Democrats or, “liberals who enjoy the national power provided by this military margin” that is necessary to protect American economic interests abroad, have always ridden on the back of Republican accomplishments. Republicans like Bush are the achievers (the deciders to use Bush’s term), whereas the “soft power” of collaboration with other countries “sometimes seems to amount to a sort of feel-good influence for Democratic Party advocates of an activist foreign policy” (75).

Maier examines the issue of frontiers in general. How the frontier is maintained is critical to the credibility of the empire. This issue enters into the equation later when he examines America’s Cold War relationship with the Soviet Union. This conflict made it necessary for the United States to consider the military as well as economic and cultural domains.

Maier examines the terrible record of abuse and slaughter by the Roman and British empires, a record that is largely skimmed over and dismissed by Porter. In fact when discussing Kissinger’s way of dealing with US supported tyrants specifically and US foreign policy in general, Maier argues:

The trustees of “order” [by which of course he means the United States] face painful choices and must act according to history’s “tragic” demands against the agents of chaos or totalitarian savagery. Would not the suffering have been far greater, if the forces they had suppressed had themselves come to power? The statesman acts without malice; how can there be guilt when historical logic compels an action? (136)

Maier gives a similar argument in justification (he might prefer “explanation” though it remains “justification” nonetheless) of the atrocities committed by US GI’s in combat. He believes in the “beneficial” aspects of American empire and argues that some death and destruction is inevitable.

Part two of Maier’s book, titled “America’s Turn,” begins with a discussion of frontier borders. Between 1947 and 1951—especially after Churchill gave his

famous wake-up call in a small college town in Missouri—the US had to define its frontiers to meet Soviet advancement. His discussion of the notion of frontier is an interesting one. Whether the empire is that of the US or Soviet Union, imperial frontiers are always subject to violence and change. This is the difference between the border of a nation and the border of an empire. The border of a nation is fixed by agreement with the neighboring nation; whereas, the border frontiers of an empire are always in dispute.

Maier then distinguishes between the “Empire of Production” and the “Empire of Consumption.” Production in the US was phenomenal in the early fifties. We could afford to and did send an enormous aid package to Europe under the Marshall Plan in order to create stability in a region that was at the boiling point both politically and economically. People were literally starving in Europe. The US supported local government aid programs as well as European production. The US also supported strong foreign militaries so that European nations could handle their own security.

The Empire of Consumption gives a decidedly conservative slant to a US society which went through the transformation from a production oriented society to a consumer oriented society. The movement of jobs overseas is perceived as ultimately a positive thing. Carter is described as a “feckless” leader. Regan is regarded as a “tall” and “strong leader.” Clinton is described as “fitful” in his strength and willingness to use military power in the former Yugoslavia. Both Bushes are described as “resolute.” Kissinger is described as doing the best anyone could expect of someone in his position.

It isn’t just Democrats who get bashed around by Maier though. In his afterward, he writes:

If there was a continuing indigenous force that counteracted dynastic empire in the region over the millennia, it comprised the sporadic but stubborn Jewish aspirations to statehood that emerged to challenge Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans, British and Arabs. Jewish resistance raised enough disruption of empire to soften Persian policy, defeat the Hellenistic dynasty, compel the Romans to major operations, claim a state from the retreating British and the United Nations almost two millennia later, and finally provoke—if only in opposition—the disparate efforts of late twentieth-century Arab nationalism. (292)

Now it is true that “emerged to challenge” could be read as “emerged until it was capable of challenging”; but it could also be read as “emerged for no other reason than to challenge.” Furthermore, the use of the word “stubborn” in the first sentence encourages the antagonistic reading and the use of words “resistance,” “disruption,” “defeat,” “compel,” “claim,” and “provoke” in the last sentence serve not simply to reinforce it but to attempt to pound a negative view of the Jewish people into his readers’ consciousness. Maier seems to think that there was one group called Arabs that lived together in peace and harmony until the Jews returned to their homeland.

Bernard Porter is uneasy with the notion that American imperialism can be compared with that of the British variety; nevertheless he acknowledges that there are some parallels. Again and again, Porter portrays the British Empire as for the most part good and benevolent and meaning the best for the people they controlled:

There was a lot that was attractive and—I would say—‘good’ about many, perhaps most, of the men who actually ran the British Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: highly dedicated people, with a devotion to public service that is seen less and less these days; there for the long haul, not just fly-by-nights; benevolent for the most part in their *intentions*, at any rate; protective, especially against capitalist exploitation; and usually tolerant. (174)

While Porter agrees that there are some superficial similarities between the manifestations of US imperialism extant since its inception and the British imperialism of the nineteenth century, Porter believes that they are really quite different. For one thing, the British had a ruling class that was born and bred to rule. It was these people that ruled the inhabitants of the lands they controlled and not the capitalists who were there only to do business. The United States has no class of qualified “benevolent” leaders; it is therefore very bad at it. This is for the most part why the US has no stomach for annexation or control of other lands.

According to Porter, the British people in and around the 1880s rejected the idea of imperialism and the idea of a British empire in spite of the fact that they had one. He believes that this is essentially the same sort of denial that the US is involved in. As for the atrocities committed by the British, he perceives them as isolated incidents that mirror those committed by the US. But the US has

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something that the British never had and that is overwhelming military strength. The US, because it lacks a ruling class, relies more on military might and thus opens itself up to far more opportunities for abusiveness.

Add to America's might her sense of exclusivity, her sense that she is on a religious mission, assigned by God to bring liberty and freedom to all countries around the world, and you have a formula for the justification for a laundry list of crimes:

... one could understand if foreigners sometimes failed to discern its virtues clearly through the fog of atrocious behavior that America in the recent past had sometimes visited on them: anti-democratic plots, support for tyrants, murders of popular leaders—as I revise this chapter Pat Robertson, a prominent leader of the American 'religious right', is urging the assassination of a South American president who is hostile to US capitalism—and countless other smaller crimes, especially at the hands of her servicemen and women (though mainly the men) stationed in all those bases abroad. (123-24)

According to Porter, neither British leaders nor British people felt they were on a religious mission. Of course it is true that they were paternalistic and felt a natural right to govern what they thought of as the inferior races and Porter acknowledges this; nevertheless, it had nothing to do with God's plan or direction.

Neither Charles S. Maier nor Bernard Porter come to any solid conclusions in their discussions. Both remain somewhere in the middle of ongoing discussions. But as parts of those discussions they are both worth reading. If taken as a helpful comparison of US involvement overseas with that of other nations throughout history, the first part of Maier's book leads to several disjointed partial and non connections; but if read simply as history, it is interesting. Part two of his book, however, where he writes about the Empire of Production and the Empire of Consumption does not really offer anything new. In fact, these chapters seemed rather odd to me and rather out of place after his discussion of frontiers and forces in chapter 4, a discussion that I wish he had explored more fully.

Porter's book was the more focused of the two. While he loudly denies any bias from beginning to the end of his study, his biases are clear and obvious and at times even funny. At one point he actually says, "It is well known that Britain is one of the least patriotic countries in the world" (144). So of course he's not

biased. Those of us foreigners who have actually lived in England know that to be false. But biases aside, he does reveal the difficulty of trying to compare the British Empire with . . . whatever it is that America is.

