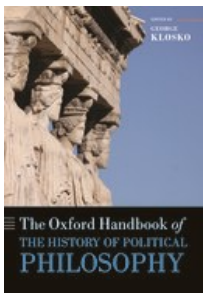

The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy

George Klosko (ed.)

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238804.001.0001

Published: 2011 **Online ISBN:** 9780191728365 **Print ISBN:** 9780199238804

CHAPTER

39 Imperialism

Krishan Kumar

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238804.003.0039 Pages 647–659

Published: 02 September 2011

Abstract

Imperialism relates to the theory and practice of the European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There were European empires before that, many of which had a continuous history from those earlier times well into the twentieth century. These include some of the best known: the Ottoman; Portuguese; Spanish; Austrian; Russian; Dutch; British; and French empires, all of which had their origins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Running alongside these was the even longer-lasting though sometimes ineffectual Holy Roman Empire, whose important role in keeping the imperial idea alive in the Middle Ages and beyond has unfairly been slighted owing to the popularity of Voltaire's quip that it was "neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire." For some students of empire, empire represents an ever-present possibility, because imperialism is a drive that is inherent in the very nature of human society and politics. The most influential theory of modern imperialism was penned not by a Marxist or even a socialist but by a self-professed English liberal, J. A. Hobson.

Keywords: J. A. Hobson, empire, imperialism, society, politics

Subject: Social and Political Philosophy, History of Western Philosophy, Philosophy

Series: Oxford Handbooks

Empire and Imperialism

THERE have been empires aplenty in the past—indeed much of recorded history is a history of empires. But imperialism, as an idea and a doctrine, is of relatively recent vintage. In its common understanding, it was first established not much earlier than the middle of the nineteenth century. This both simplifies and complicates our task. It simplifies it because we have to deal only with the most recent period of empire. It complicates it because this temporal constriction involves a severe narrowing of the field. It can lead us to ignore the varieties of empire that are to be found throughout history, in all parts of the globe. It also has the tendency to play down the legacies of past empires, the ways in which they influenced both the thinking and the practices of modern empires. There is a traceable imperial tradition, certainly in the West, that can be occluded or ignored by too strong an emphasis on those empires, and that historical period, that gave rise to systematic theorizing about empire and imperialism.

Imperialism relates to the theory and practice of the European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There were European empires before that, of course, many of which had a continuous history from those earlier times well into the twentieth century. These include some of the best known: the Ottoman; Portuguese; Spanish; Austrian; Russian; Dutch; British; and French empires, all of which had their origins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Aldrich 2007). Running alongside these was the even longer-lasting though sometimes ineffectual Holy Roman Empire, whose important role in keeping the imperial idea alive in the Middle Ages and beyond has unfairly been slighted owing to the popularity of Voltaire's quip that it was ‘neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire’ (Muldoon 1999).

Most important of all, perhaps, are the memory and legacy of the Roman Empire (and behind that, the empire of Alexander the Great) (Koebner 1961: 18). No modern empire could forget Rome; all aspired in
p. 648 some way or the other to imitate it. Themes ↳ from the Roman Empire—the idea of universality, of the civilizing mission, of the inevitable decline and fall of empires—haunted modern empires. From the end of the Roman Empire in the West also came the concept of *translatio imperii*, the transmission and handing-over of the imperial mission from one culture and civilization to another. The Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne first established the idea. It was challenged by the Byzantine Empire, which, as the Roman Empire in the East, with uninterrupted existence right up to 1453, saw itself as the legitimate successor to Rome. Later the Spanish, with their Christianizing mission in the New World, laid claim to the title—a claim disputed later by the French, British, and other modern empires (Pagden 1995). Even the Ottomans in the early years, newly installed in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, saw themselves as the heirs of Rome.

Thus one can see the artificiality of cutting off one period of history and designating it the period of imperialism. The cross-cutting ties and influences, across space and time, are too great (one should remember the enormous impact of Alexander on Middle Eastern and Asian concepts of empire). Empire is a multifarious and many-stranded project, making easy definition treacherous. Noting that ‘the imperial historian…is very much at the mercy of his own particular concept of empire’, two of the best-known scholars of empire observed that, ‘since imperial historians are writing about different empires…it is hardly surprising that these historians sometimes contradict each other’ (Gallagher and Robinson 1953: 1). No doubt there are ‘family resemblances’ between all instances of empire, else we would not use the same word to describe them. The fact that there is a tradition of empire also indicates similarities and continuities of meaning and purpose. Nevertheless, it would be well to be warned in advance that one cannot, for any useful purpose, expect to find a sufficiently all-embracing concept of empire to cover all cases, let alone a ‘theory’ of imperialism that adequately accounts for their rise, development, and fall.

Two complications are particularly important. The first is that empire, as a derivation of the Latin *imperium*, originally and for much of the time afterwards meant primarily authority: sovereign and central authority. That meaning persisted through the Middle Ages, and can still be seen clearly, for example, in the famous

pronouncement of the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals of Henry VIII that 'this realm of England is an empire, entire of itself'—meaning that there was no appeal—say to Rome—from the supreme and final authority of the English king (Armitage 2000: 35).

The meaning of empire as sovereignty can be quite independent of the second main meaning that also developed—though somewhat later—with the later Roman Republic and especially the Empire itself. The sheer size of Rome, its expansion to so many corners of the known world, and its rule over a multiplicity of peoples, led to the use of *imperium* to designate rule over a large space and many peoples. Here was conceived that principle of universality that is so common to empires: all aspire ultimately to be the only empire, the sole source of civilization and security, the empire *totius orbis*, of the whole world. Here too was accepted the principle of plurality that marks such large domains. Empires incorporate people of many kinds. They aim to civilize and enlighten them, through the agency of law and other common institutions, including ↳ language. They may, as the Romans eventually did, extend citizenship to all the subjects of
p. 649
empire. But they rarely aim at cultural homogenization; they are rarely exclusive in a racial or ethnic sense. To do so (as was practised by the Nazi Empire, for instance) is to invite a swift demise. Empires are multicultural and multinational almost by definition, in this second and, in the modern period, increasingly popular sense.

The distinction—in principle separable—between empire as sovereignty and empire as rule over diverse peoples is one of the things that complicates attempts at a unified concept or definition of empire. Another that became increasingly prominent with the development of modern empires is the distinction between formal and informal empire. It was noted, particularly with the growth of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, that formal possession of territories in the form of settlements and colonies was only one way in which empire expressed itself. Equally important were all the informal ways that states can put pressure, often of a determining kind, on the policies and practices of other nominally independent states and peoples. Thus the British did not formally rule Egypt at any time; but for much of the period from the 1880s to the 1950s no one doubted that it was British interests and British policies that determined the affairs, internal and external, of Egypt. Similarly, Britain never formally annexed Argentina; but, for much of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, Argentinian development, political and economic, was overwhelmingly dictated by British financial and commercial interests. Empire means rule; but it can also mean simply control. For many purposes, effective control is more efficient and economical than formal rule. In any case, say John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson in a highly influential account, to understand empire by focusing only on its formal elements is 'rather like judging the size and character of icebergs solely from the parts above the water-line' (Gallagher and Robinson 1953: 1).

These distinctions, and the differing forms and aspects of empire that they highlight, illustrate well the problems of achieving consensus on the meaning of empire. For some theorists the inclusion of informal empire, for instance, throws open the door intolerably and impossibly wide, making it almost impossible to study empires as specific political formations (e.g. Baumgart 1982). Others argue that to ignore informal aspects of empire would, as Gallagher and Robinson suggest, be to leave out some of the most important ways in which large states can control the politics of other states without taking them over—and thus to leave out a large part of the impact of imperialism (e.g. Fieldhouse 1973; see also Louis 1976). It looks as if we must remain content with some broad characterization that allows us to include most of the best-known varieties of empire without its being so comprehensive as to be useless.

A widely accepted definition of empire, in these terms, is that of the political scientist Michael Doyle: 'Empire…is a system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the external and external policy—the effective sovereignty—of the other, the subordinate periphery' (Doyle 1986: 12). There are various helpful elements to this definition. The emphasis on 'two political entities' indicates the *foreignness* of imperial rule, the fact of imposition of rule by one
p. 650
polity (the metropole) over another (the periphery). Note that this ↳ allows us, in relevant cases, to speak

of the creation of several well-known nation states as 'imperial', and the resulting creations as in effect empires in miniature, or 'mini-empires'. This might apply to Great Britain, Spain, the France of the 'hexagon', perhaps even united Italy and Germany. In all these cases what came to be thought of as nation states was the result of an internal process of conquest and colonization, akin in many cases to the construction of more conventionally regarded land empires such as the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires (Kumar 2009).

The focus on 'control' allows for the existence of both formal and informal systems of power and influence. It is this, for instance, that gives rise to the widespread discussion of 'the American empire', since, although America has conspicuously turned its face against the formal acquisition of overseas territories, to many commentators its global power is nothing if not imperial (e.g. Mann 2003). The controversies surrounding the 'American empire' (see Steinmetz 2005; Maier 2006) show well the problematic nature of the concept of informal empire. If America sometimes behaves in an imperial way, it has also often—consistent with its own anti-imperial foundation—supported the anti-imperial cause, even if sometimes in a self-interested way. A good example would be Franklin D. Roosevelt's well-known hostility to the British Empire, and the important role he played in forcing on the pace of British decolonization after the Second World War. It may in some ways be necessary to hold on to the idea of informal empire, but we need to be careful about how we apply it; it runs the risk of being too widely and indiscriminately used.

Doyle's definition of empire also points to the radical inequality of the relationship between metropole and colony, centre and periphery. This too, of course, can be replicated in the conventional nation state, many of which—such as Italy—have 'backward', less-developed regions that are sometimes considered—and that sometimes consider themselves—to be in the nature of internal 'colonies'. The United Kingdom has, for instance, been discussed in terms of 'internal colonialism', with the 'Celtic fringe' of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland being considered the colonial peripheries in relation to the English metropole (Hechter 1999). But, although these parallels can be illuminating, it is usually fairly clear how empires differ from nation states in this respect. It is not simply that great physical distance often separates the metropole from the colonies or peripheries, as is obvious in the case of overseas empires. There are also frequently great differences of race and culture, such that the interaction of metropole and colony has a very different character from that between the centre and periphery of even the most unequally divided nation state. There is an 'otherness' in empire that is generally one of its most striking features, greater even than the actual degrees of inequality, which can indeed often be approximated by nation states.

If this is empire, then naturally 'imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire' (Doyle 1986: 45). But this simple statement conceals an important historical divide. It was only in the nineteenth century that people began to ask seriously why states became empires, what drove them to it, who benefited most from empire, and similar questions of ideology and interest. The empires of the past
p. 651 certainly had both apologists and critics—the great debates over ↳ the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century are proof enough of this, as are the equally well-known controversies within the Roman Empire about its purpose and mission. But they had not been self-conscious about empire as such, and about imperialism as an explicit policy and goal. It was only when, in response to what seemed to them novel in its scope and intent, nineteenth-century thinkers began to reflect systematically on empire, that such thinking could be redirected to past empires, as instances (perhaps) of a common pattern. Then, too, attempts could be made to distinguish between 'modern' and 'ancient' imperialism, and other such questions relevant to the study of empire. But first of all empire had to become imperialism, the theory and practice of empire.

Theories of Imperialism

For some students of empire, empire represents an ever-present possibility, because imperialism is a drive that is inherent in the very nature of human society and politics. States will always strive to subdue and control other states, because it is in their manifest interest to do so. All that inhibits or prevents this is the like motivation of other states, leading to the characteristic pattern of the rise and fall of empires, as some states acquire empires only to lose them to other, rising, states. In this view, the only thing that prevents a powerful state from becoming an empire is the existence of other empires that, for the time being at least, populate and possess the world. Given the opportunity, all states wish to be empires (e.g. Baumgart 1982; Doyle 1986: 26–47; Münkler 2007: 28–46; Go 2008).

This realpolitk view of empire gets considerable support from the history of empire in the West, though it is somewhat problematic in other cases. China, for instance, was easily the wealthiest and most powerful state in the world in the early fifteenth century, sending great fleets across the oceans and clearly capable of establishing an overseas empire. Yet, for reasons much discussed, it chose not to do so. In the early Ming period it destroyed its fleets and turned in on itself (Abu-Lughod 1989). Whether or not China is itself to be considered an empire—another controversial matter (Purdue 2005)—there seems no doubt that it gave up the opportunity to become an even greater one. Imperialism perhaps needs a greater explanation than simply human propensity, or at least the universal propensity of states.

Such a view gained conviction in late nineteenth-century Europe. Commentators were, of course, aware of earlier empires, and freely made comparisons between them and modern empires—Rome being an especially popular point of comparison (e.g. Lucas 1912). But they also felt that there was something new about modern empires, and especially about the phase of empire-building that took place in the late nineteenth century—the phase sometimes called the 'new imperialism', and associated particularly with the 'scramble for Africa' among European powers. The intensity of the struggle, the rivalries it called forth,
p. 652 and the sense among the players that what was at stake was ↳ nothing less than their survival as great powers, lent to that period of imperialism a special character, and seemed to call for a special explanation (Mommsen 1982; Hobsbawm 1987: 56–60).

'Imperialism', as a term, came into the European political lexicon trailing clouds of suspicion and disapproval that it has never quite been able to dispel. It seems first to have been applied by the British to express their revulsion from the 'despotic' regime established by Louis Bonaparte and his Second Empire following the *coup d'état* of 1851. Imperialism—seen as an unfortunately persistent French trait—here recalled the First Empire of Napoleon; it connoted not simply popular authoritarianism and Caeserism but military adventurism and the search for glory through conquest. In this sense—which also harks back, though with disparaging overtones, to the original meaning of *imperium* as authority—it came to be employed in the 1870s by English critics of Benjamin Disraeli's imperialist policies, also seen as inimical to peace abroad and freedom at home. Imperialism thus moved from being a description, mostly unflattering, of a system of (French) domestic politics to a way of conceiving the policies—initially in a negative light—of the largest and most powerful empire of the time—the British Empire (Koebner and Schmidt 1964: chs 1–6).

But, in the hands of politicians such as Disraeli, Chamberlain, and Rosebery, and such great proconsular figures as Cromer, Curzon, and Milner, not to mention popular writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Rider Haggard, imperialism could also be presented positively, as the noble and necessary task of civilizing the world. Such a view was widely found across the political spectrum in France, Germany, and Italy as well as Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was perhaps precisely because imperialism became so popular, so taken for granted by a large section of public opinion, that there was so little attempt to *theorize* empire from the perspective of those who favoured it. There were indeed several important

commentaries, by sympathetic travellers, publicists, and historians—Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain* (1868), John Seeley's *Expansion of England* (1883), and James Froude's *Oceana* (1886) being among the most influential in the British case—but little in the way of systematic theorizing about empire and imperialism by imperialists themselves (Koebner and Schmidt 1964: 166–95; Bell 2007).

What have come down to us as 'theories' of imperialism are almost wholly critical. This is largely because of the essentially Marxist character of most of them. Even non-Marxist theories, being largely reactions and responses to Marxists ones, retained the critical edge. They merely argued that economic explanations of imperialism were wrong or insufficient. Especially in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and in tandem with the gathering wave of anti-colonial nationalist movements of the twentieth century, accounts of imperialism generally accepted that imperialism was indefensible on moral grounds and, if necessary for the purposes of economic or political development, a regrettable necessity.

The most influential theory of modern imperialism was in fact penned not by a Marxist or even a socialist but by a self-professed English liberal, J. A. Hobson. Though not unsympathetic to the imperial idea—as expressed, for instance, in the ↳ Roman case—Hobson considered that modern imperialism had irretrievably corrupted that idea by its collusion with capitalism. This to him was clear from both the Boer War (1899–1902) and the Spanish–American War (1898), which he regarded as imperialist wars. In his *Imperialism* (1902) Hobson argued that imperialism was the more or less inevitable product of 'underconsumption'—a lack of purchasing power due to the poor standard of living of the industrial working class—and the resulting need to find new outlets for 'surplus capital' that could not make profitable investments at home. The undeveloped areas of the world, in Asia and Africa especially, provided rich opportunities for such investment—hence the scramble to occupy as much of them as possible for one's own nation. Thus, while in the past it was the warlike aristocracy that had been the driving force of imperialism, now it was the capitalist class—the bankers and financiers especially—and its hangers-on (such as the press magnates who whipped up popular sentiments of jingoism) that were the principal agents. Compelling economic motives had taken over from power and glory as the mainsprings of imperialism.

p. 653

Hobson's account of imperialism had curiously little impact, at least initially, in his home country, even on the Left. But on the European continent it had a spectacularly successful career. It was quickly taken up by Marxists and other socialists, ensuring that it became the single most important theory of imperialism in modern times. One of the reasons that the Left turned to Hobson rather than Marx was that Marx himself had so little to say on the question of imperialism (he uses the word only once in his writings, to describe the political system of Napoleon III in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Marx, like many other mid-Victorian writers in the era of free trade, believed that formal imperialism or colonialism was a feature mainly of early capitalism. He expected that the capitalist powers of his day would indeed divide the world up between them, but the imperialism this represented was what was later to be called the 'imperialism of free trade', not that of formal conquest and colonization. Late in the nineteenth century, however, shortly after Marx's death in 1883, the capitalist nations everywhere seemed hell-bent on just that struggle for empire that Marx thought should disappear with the further development of capitalism. How to account for that? Hobson provided a satisfying explanation, fitting nicely within orthodox Marxist theory, with his theory of imperialism through proletarian impoverishment and the resulting crisis of underconsumption.

Marxists could conveniently ignore the other parts of Hobson's argument—crucially the view that imperialism was not inherent in capitalism as such, but resulted from the plutocratic and radically unequal class structure of the most advanced European societies. Hence imperialism could be avoided, and capitalism preserved, by measures of radical social reform and by state policies designed to redistribute wealth (that is, something similar to what John Maynard Keynes would later urge with greater success). For Marxists, this view simply reflected Hobson's liberal-bourgeois class position; for them, eliminating

imperialism would demand nothing less than socialist revolution. Nevertheless they always acknowledged the importance of Hobson's pioneering analysis of imperialism.

p. 654 It was Lenin, in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), who did most to popularize Hobson's theory and, through the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, to ensure that it remained central to debates about imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century. Together with Hobson, the other admitted influence on Lenin was Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capitalism* (1910), the subtitle of which—'the latest phase of capitalist development'—provided Lenin with his own. Hilferding also complemented Hobson in showing imperialism not simply to be an offshoot of capitalism—and hence one remediable by reform—but an intrinsic part of capitalism's development, one that corresponded to its monopoly phase, the phase of 'finance capital' with its massive concentrations in trusts and cartels, and its dominance by banks. Finance capital called for a strong state, protectionist measures, and the conquest of foreign markets, if need be by acquiring colonies. Lenin followed Hilferding in seeing this latest, or 'highest', monopoly stage of capitalism as leading more or less inevitably to war between the imperial powers—clearly demonstrated to Lenin by the First World War—and so to the collapse of capitalism. 'In the violent clash of hostile interests', said Hilferding, 'the dictatorship of capitalist magnates is turned into the dictatorship of the proletariat.' For Lenin, the year 1917 was to prove the confirmation of Hilferding's prediction, even if the world revolution of the proletariat that Lenin and the Bolsheviks expected did not materialize. Such a failure also attended the hoped-for outcome of an imperialist war as analysed in another powerful Marxist work of these years, Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), a rigorous extension of Hobson's basic argument that imperialism was the result of capitalism's need to look to overseas, non-capitalist regions, to make good the deficiencies of the home market and the lack of opportunities for profitable investment there.

The Leninist and more generally Marxist theory of imperialism has been endlessly and extensively debated (Kemp 1967; Kiernan 1974; Lichtheim 1974: 97–142; Etherington 1982; Mommsen 1982: 29–69; Semmel 1993: 131–76; Wolfe 1997). Much of it has been discarded, though the core remained to inspire a wave of Marxist 'dependency' theorists in the second half of the twentieth century. But, just two years after Lenin's pamphlet, there already appeared a vigorous counter-Marxist account of imperialism by the Austrian economist and sociologist Joseph Schumpeter. In his 'The Sociology of Imperialisms' (1919), Schumpeter argued that, far from imperialism's being a necessary product of capitalism, as the Marxists held, it was actually more evocative of pre-capitalist society. The 'new imperialism' was a continuation of the old imperialism, with the significant twist that it was now grafted onto a new society, a bourgeois capitalist society, which was still struggling to be born. Late-nineteenth-century imperialism, argued Schumpeter, was an 'atavistic' throwback to an earlier period of European history. Imperialism—'the objectless disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion'—expressed the ethos and aspirations of the warrior aristocracy of feudal Europe, a class that had with a remarkable degree of success clung on to power in the industrializing societies of nineteenth-century Europe, and had indeed plunged the nations of Europe into world war. Sooner or later, though, the bourgeoisie would throw off the aristocratic
p. 655 encumbrance and with it the lust for ↳ empire and glory. Bourgeois society would develop according to its 'natural' principles, which were those of free trade and peaceful exchange.

Schumpeter's sparkling and provocative account was not entirely original. It borrowed much from the German sociologist Max Weber, with his stress on the prestige factor of empire and its link to old-fashioned 'predatory capitalism', as opposed to modern 'rational capitalism'. It also had in it something of an echo of Hobson. Like Hobson, Schumpeter saw imperialism as something unnatural, something anachronistic. The difference was that the anachronistic class in Hobson's case was the parasitic plutocracy, while for Schumpeter it was the old European aristocracy. But both—like Weber—denied the necessity of the link between capitalism and imperialism. Capitalism—sober, rational, calculatin—had little need of the violence and aggression of imperialism, to which indeed it was in principle resolutely opposed.

Imperialism after Empire

Marxists theories of empire predominated in the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s. They added little new to the fundamental contributions of Hobson, Hilferding, Luxemburg, and Lenin. Essentially they remained commentaries and, increasingly, calls to action, as in the Maoist version. Whether or not they were actually Communists, most writers were sympathetic to the Soviet Union and felt constrained to work within the basic Leninist paradigm.

On the Right, too, thinking turned increasingly to activism rather than analysis. Both Mussolini and Hitler, for instance, saw themselves as imperialists. Mussolini hoped to reinstitute the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, and Hitler's 'thousand-year' Third Reich was a self-conscious revival of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Peoples. But neither in their writings nor those of their apologists does one find any fresh insights into the nature of empire and imperialism. The only novel thing perhaps was the adulation of empire, in an era in which the European empires were increasingly on the defensive. Later, in post-fascist analyses, the main development was to link fascism to earlier European imperialism, and to see the latter as a form of 'hyper-nationalism' and racialism that prepared the ground for fascism (e.g. Arendt 1958).

Right-wing imperialism was thoroughly discredited by the Fascist and Nazi experience. The Left's assaults continued into the post-war period, accompanied now by the worldwide movements against colonialism. In the decades from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, these culminated in a more or less complete process of decolonization. The great European empires of Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal broke up. To some observers there still remained two great empires, the American and the Soviet. But, if these were empires, they were empires of a peculiar kind, both founded explicitly on anti-imperialist premises and both promising, in the increasingly strident tones of the cold war, aid and assistance to anti-colonial 'national liberation' movements everywhere (though in the case of the United States such rhetoric
p. 656 was soon ↳ toned down, as it turned out that many of the new nations were of a distinctly socialist, if not communist, cast of mind).

But what could a theory of imperialism be in a world without formal empires? Here the concept of 'informal empire' proved highly serviceable. The tendency, in Marxist writing, to make capitalism and imperialism more or less synonymous became distinctly more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, as the colonial empires dissolved. For it appeared that the new nations of the 'Third World' were independent only in name. Economically and politically they remained highly dependent on the great northern powers, either of the capitalist West or the Communist East. Soviet imperialism had its critics, in the West and increasingly among dissidents in Eastern Europe. But it was the impact of an increasingly global capitalism on the less-developed nations that produced the most important attempts to rethink imperialism. Here one seemed to be in face of the 'imperialism of decolonization', the continuation of Western imperialism by other means (Louis and Robinson 1994).

Marxists had always, without necessarily naming the concept, operated with the idea of informal imperialism. It was implicit in their view that imperialism was simply an offshoot of the wider and more fundamental operations of capitalism, which sometimes made use of formal empire, and sometimes was content with more informal forms of control. But, just as the non-Marxist Hobson gave Marxists their lead, so too in the post-1945 period it was two non-Marxist historians of the British Empire, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, who most fully elaborated the concept of informal empire, in their influential article 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). The British, they pointed out, had always been pragmatic about how far their interests were best served by formal empire and how far by less direct forms of influence and pressure. Informal 'control' was always an alternative, often cheaper and more effective, to formal 'rule'. In their work on the British Empire in Africa, they showed how the British government only reluctantly intervened in the activities of merchants and missionaries. It was in response to a spiralling

series of local crises, fuelled by European rivalries, that it found itself forced to take over rule of particular territories (Robinson, Gallagher, and Denny 1961). As John Gallagher put it: 'people do not become imperialists as a matter of ideology; they do so as a matter of necessity' (Gallagher 1982: 141). One further consequence of the work of Gallagher and Robinson was to displace the emphasis on the metropolis, as the focus of study hitherto by both Marxists and non-Marxists, onto the colonial peripheries, as the source of many of the concerns that brought about European rule. Key among these were the interests and conflicts of local elites, whose collaboration with the imperial powers was seen as essential to European rule in nearly all the European empires (Robinson 1972, 1986; see also Fieldhouse 1973).

Informal imperialism, but with a strongly Marxist bent, was at the heart of the analysis of a powerful school of scholars that went under the label of 'dependency' theory (e.g. Frank 1967; Cardoso and Faletto 1979). Late-twentieth-century capitalism, they argued, no longer had need of formal empire; it instead proceeded
p. 657 by the informal means of 'neo-colonialism'—'the last stage of capitalism', as the Ghanaian leader ↳ Kwame Nkrumah hopefully pronounced. Through the agency of the great multinational corporations, headquartered in the West, Western capitalism was able to exert effective control over the development—or rather 'underdevelopment'—of Third World societies. An important aspect of this control—similar to earlier formal imperialism, in the Robinson–Gallagher model—was the collaboration and collusion of local elites and 'puppet' regimes, which benefited from Western aid and the trading regime set up by the Western corporations, and which could count if necessary on Western force to maintain them in power and see off challenges from local radicals and revolutionaries.

A particularly powerful variety of dependency theory was the social–psychological approach of Frantz Fanon, who stressed the psychic damage to native populations wrought by imperialism (Fanon 1967). This entailed that a colonial mentality of low self-esteem and lack of confidence persisted in the nominally post-colonial society. Merely political independence brought no mental or cultural independence. Fanon deeply influenced a group of literary and cultural theorists of empire, notably Edward Said, whose books *Orientalism* (1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) became the bibles of 'post-colonial' scholars attempting to trace the deep psychological and cultural effects of empire. The 'age of imperialism' may be, as Wolfgang Mommsen says, 'dead and buried' (Mommsen 1982: 113), but to these thinkers, as to many others, imperialism has a long afterlife. It lives on in the hearts and minds of colonized and colonizers alike.

The danger of these approaches, as in the Marxist approach generally, is that imperialism becomes such an inflated concept that its usefulness is seriously endangered. It loses all specificity. It becomes no more than a synonym for capitalism, in whatever phase or condition the theorist chooses to find it—'financial', 'monopoly', 'late', 'global', and so on. Such a tendency reaches an extreme in such works as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), in which empire is everywhere and nowhere, a kind of spectral presence, symbolizing global capitalism, that haunts the world and checks all efforts at liberation. Such a view may have its uses; but, for an understanding of empire and imperialism as they have actually operated in human history, we need finer and more precise tools. Empires have indeed been powerful and pervasive presences in world history; but they have not been the only kinds of political communities. We need to examine them in terms that suit their own forms and principles.

References

Abu-Lughod, Janet (1989). *Before European Hegemony: The World System ad 1250–1350*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Aldrich, Robert (2007) (ed.). *The Age of Empires*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

p. 658 Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Origins of Modern Totalitarianism*. 2nd edn. New York: Meridian Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Armitage, David (2000). *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 10.1017/CBO9780511755965
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC Crossref

Baumgart, Winfried (1982). *Imperialism: The Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion, 1880–1914*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Bell, Duncan (2007). *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Cardoso, F., and Faletto, E. (1979). *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, trans. M. M. Urquidi. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Doyle, Michael W. (1986). *Empires*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Etherington, Norman (1982). 'Reconsidering Theories of Imperialism', *History and Theory*, 22/1: 1–36. 10.2307/2505147
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Fanon, Frantz (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Fieldhouse, D. K. (1973). *Economics and Empire 1830–1914*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Frank, André Gunder (1967). *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Gallagher, John (1982). *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 10.1017/CBO9780511523847
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC Crossref

Gallagher, John, and Robinson, Ronald (1953). 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 6/1: 1–15. 10.1111/j.1468-0289.1953.tb01482.x
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Go, Julian (2008). 'Global Fields and Imperial Forms: Field Theory and the British and American Empires', *Sociological Theory*, 26/3: 201–29. 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00326.x
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Hechter, Michael (1999). *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*. 2nd edn. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Hetherington, Norman (1982). 'Reconsidering Theories of Imperialism', *History and Theory*, 21/1: 1–36. 10.2307/2505147
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1987). *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kemp, Tom (1967). *Theories of Imperialism*. London: Dobson.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kiernan, V. G. (1974). *Marxism and Imperialism*. London: Edward Arnold.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Koebner, Richard (1961). *Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Koebner, Richard, and Schmidt, Helmut Dan (1964). *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kumar, Krishan (2009). 'Empire and Nation: Convergence or Divergence?' in George Steinmetz (ed.), *Sociology and Empire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Lichtheim, George (1974). *Imperialism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Louis, Wm Roger (1976) (ed.). *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy*. New York: New Viewpoints.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Louis, Wm Roger, and Robinson, Ronald (1994). 'The Imperialism of Decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22/3: 462–511. 10.1080/03086539408582936
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Lucas, C. P. (1912). *Greater Rome and Greater Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Maier, Charles S. (2006). *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Mann, Michael (2003). *Incoherent Empire*. London: Verso.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Mommsen, Wolfgang J. (1982). *Theories of Imperialism*, trans. P. S. Falla. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Muldoon, James (1999). *Empire and Order: The Concept of Empire, 800–1800*. Houndmills: Macmillan. 10.1057/9780230512238
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC Crossref

Münkler, Herfried (2007). *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*, trans. Patrick Camiller. Cambridge: Polity.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Pagden, Anthony (1995). *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Purdue, Peter C. (2005). *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Robinson, Ronald (1972). 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (eds), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*. London: Longman, 117–42.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Robinson, Ronald (1986). 'The Excentric Idea of Imperialism, with or without Empire', in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*. London: Allen and Unwin, 267–89.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Robinson, Ronald, Gallagher, John, with Denny, Alice (1961). *Africa and the Victorians: The Climax of Imperialism*. New York: Anchor Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Said, Edward W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Said, Edward W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Schumpeter, Joseph (1974). *Imperialism* and *Social Classes*: *Two Essays by Joseph Schumpeter*, trans. Heinz Norden. New York: New American Library.

Semmel, Bernard (1993). *The Liberal Ideal and the Demons of Empire: Theories of Imperialism from Adam Smith to Lenin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Steinmetz, George (2005). 'Return to Empire: The New US Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective', *Sociological Theory*, 23/4: 339–67. 10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00258.x
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref

Wolfe, Patrick (1997). 'History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism', *American Historical Review*, 102/2: 388–420. 10.2307/2170830
Google Scholar WorldCat Crossref