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IMPERIAL TRAJECTORIES

We live in a world of nearly two hundred states. Each flaunts symbols of sovereignty—its flag, its seat in the United Nations—and each claims to represent a people. These states, big and small, are in principle equal members of a global community, bound together by international law. Yet the world of nation-states we take for granted is scarcely sixty years old.

Throughout history, most people have lived in political units that did not pretend to represent a single people. Making state conform with nation is a recent phenomenon, neither fully carried out

nor universally desired. In the 1990s the world
36 Highlighters witnessed attempts by political leaders to turn the
state into an expression of “their” nationality: in
Yugoslavia—a country put together after World
War I on terrain wrested out from the Ottoman
and Habsburg empires—and in Rwanda, a former
Belgian colony. These efforts to create homoge-
neous nations led to the slaughter of hundreds of
thousands of people who had lived side by side.
In the Middle East, Sunnis, Shi’ites, Kurds, Pales-
tinians, Jews, and many others have fought over
state authority and state boundaries for more than
eighty years since the end of the Ottoman empire.
Even as people struggled for and welcomed the
breakups of empires over the course of the twenti-
eth century, conflicts over what a nation is and who
belongs within it flared around the world.

In the 1960s, France, Great Britain, and other
former colonial powers—whose empires had once
embraced nearly a third of the world’s population—
became more national after shedding most of their
overseas parts, only to cede some of their prerog-
atives to the European Economic Community and
later to the European Union. The breakup of the
Soviet Union and its communist empire led to other
shifts in sovereignty. Some new states declared

themselves multinational—the Russian Federation—while others—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan—strove to produce homogeneous nations out of their diverse peoples. In central Europe, leaders of several post-Soviet states—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and others—turned in another direction and joined the European Union, giving up some of their reconstituted authority for the perceived advantages of belonging to a larger political unit.

These conflicts and ambiguities about sovereignty around the globe suggest that historical trajectories are more complicated than a movement toward nation-states. Empires—self-consciously maintaining the diversity of people they conquered and incorporated—have played a long and critical part in human history. For much of the last two millennia, empires and their rivalries, in regions or around the world, created contexts in which people formed connections—as ethnic or religious communities, in networks of migrants, settlers, slaves, and commercial agents. Despite efforts in words and wars to put national unity at the center of political imagination, imperial politics, imperial practices, and imperial cultures have shaped the world we live in.

This book does not follow the conventional narrative that leads inexorably from empire to nation-state. We focus instead on how different empires emerged, competed, and forged governing strategies, political ideas, and human affiliations over a long sweep of time—from ancient Rome and China to the present. We look at repertoires of imperial power—at the different strategies empires chose as they incorporated diverse peoples into the polity while sustaining or making distinctions among them.

Empires, of course, hardly represented a spontaneous embrace of diversity. Violence and day-to-day coercion were fundamental to how empires were built and how they operated. But as successful empires turned their conquests into profit, they had to manage their unlike populations, in the process producing a variety of ways to both exploit and rule. Empires mobilized and controlled their human resources differently, including or excluding, rewarding or exploiting, sharing out power or concentrating it. Empires enabled—and tried to control—connections and contacts. In some circumstances, people saw something to be gained from incorporation into a large and powerful state. More generally, empire was the political reality

with which they lived. People labored in enterprises sustaining imperial economies, participated in networks nurtured by imperial contacts, and sought power, fulfillment, or simply survival in settings configured by imperial rule and by imperial rivalries. In some situations, people found ways to escape, undermine, or destroy imperial control; in others, they sought to build their own empires or to take the place of their imperial rulers. Empires compelled political controversies, innovations, conflicts, and aspirations well into the twentieth century. Even today, empire as a form, if not as a name, is still invoked as a political possibility.

Empire was a remarkably durable form of state. The Ottoman empire endured six hundred years; for over two thousand years a succession of Chinese dynasties claimed the mantle of imperial predecessors. The Roman empire exercised power for six hundred years in the western Mediterranean area, and its eastern offshoot, the Byzantine empire, lasted another millennium. Rome was evoked as a model of splendor and order into the twentieth century and beyond. Russia has for centuries sustained imperial ways of ruling over distinctive populations. By comparison, the nation-state appears as a blip on the historical horizon, a state form that

emerged recently from under imperial skies and whose hold on the world's political imagination may well prove partial or transitory.

The endurance of empire challenges the notion that the nation-state is natural, necessary, and inevitable, and points us instead toward exploring the wide range of ways in which people over time, and for better or worse, have thought about politics and organized their states. Investigating the history of empires does not imply praising or condemning them. Instead, understanding possibilities as they appeared to people in their own times reveals the imperatives and actions that changed the past, created our present, and perhaps will shape the future.

Imperial Repertoires

This book does not look at all empires in all times and places. It focuses on a set of empires whose histories were distinctive, influential, and, in many cases, entwined. Empires were not all alike; they created, adopted, and transmitted various repertoires of rule. Our chapters describe the ranges of ruling strategies that were imaginable and feasible in specific historical situations, the conflicts that

emerged in different power structures, and the contentious relationships among empires that emerged at particular moments and over time drove world history.

An imperial repertoire was neither a bag of tricks dipped into at random nor a preset formula for rule. Faced with challenges day by day, empires improvised; they also had their habits. What leaders could imagine and what they could carry off were shaped by past practices and constrained by context—both by other empires with their overlapping goals and by people in places empire-builders coveted. People on contested territories could resist, deflect, or twist in their own favor the encroachment of a more powerful polity. Recognizing imperial repertoires as flexible, constrained by geography and history but open to innovation, enables us to avoid the false dichotomies of continuity or change, contingency or determinism, and to look instead for actions and conditions that pushed elements into and out of empires' strategies.

Our argument is not that every significant state was an empire, but that for most of human history empires and their interactions shaped the context in which people gauged their political possibilities, pursued their ambitions, and envisioned their soci-

eties. States large and small, rebels and loyalists and people who cared little for politics—all had to take empires, their ways of rule, and their competitions into account. Whether this imperial framework has come to an end is a question we address in the final chapter.

We begin with Rome and China in the third century BCE, not because they were the first empires—their great predecessors include Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Alexander the Great's enormous conquests, and more ancient dynasties in China—but because these two empires became longlasting reference points for later empire-builders. Rome and China both attained a huge physical size, integrated commerce and production into economies of world scale (the world that each of them created), devised institutions that sustained state power for centuries, developed compelling cultural frameworks to explain and promote their success, and assured, for long periods, acquiescence to imperial power. Their principal strategies—China's reliance on a class of loyal, trained officials, Rome's empowerment, at least in theory, of its citizens—had lasting and profound effects on how people imagine their states and their place in them.

We next consider empires that tried to move into Rome's place—resilient Byzantium, the dynamic but fissionable Islamic caliphates, and the short-lived Carolingians. These rivals built their empires on religious foundations; their histories display the possibilities and limits of militant monotheism as an arm of state power. The drive to convert or kill the unfaithful and to spread the true faith mobilized warriors for both Christianity and Islam, but also provoked splits inside empires over whose religious mantle was the true one and whose claim to power was god-given.

In the thirteenth century, under Chinggis Khan and his successors, Mongols put together the largest land empire of all time, based on a radically different principle—a pragmatic approach to religious and cultural difference. Mongol khans had the technological advantages of nomadic societies—above all, a mobile, largely self-sufficient, and hardy military—but it was thanks to their capacious notions of an imperial society that they rapidly made use of the skills and resources of the diverse peoples they conquered. Mongols' repertoire of rule combined intimidating violence with the protection of different religions and cultures and the politics of personal loyalty.

The Mongols are critical to our study for two reasons. First, their ways of rule influenced politics across a huge continent—in China, as well as in the later Russian, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. Second, at a time when no state on the western edge of Eurasia (today's Europe) could command loyalty and resources on a large scale, Mongols protected trade routes from the Black Sea to the Pacific and enabled cross-continental transmission of knowledge, goods, and statecraft. Other empires—in the region of today's Iran, in southern India or Africa, and elsewhere—are not described in any detail here, although they, too, promoted connections and change, long before Europeans appeared on the great-power scene.

It was the wealth and commercial vitality of Asia that eventually drew people from what is now thought of as Europe into what was for them a new sphere of trade, transport, and possibility. The empires of Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain do not enter our account in the familiar guise of “the expansion of Europe.” In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Europe was unimaginable as a political entity, and in any case, geographical regions are not political actors. We focus instead on the reconfiguration of relations

among empires at this time, a dynamic process whose consequences became evident only much later.

“European” maritime extensions were the product of three conditions: the high-value goods produced and exchanged in the Chinese imperial sphere; the obstacle posed by the Ottoman empire’s dominance of the eastern Mediterranean and land routes east; and the inability of rulers in western Eurasia to rebuild Roman-style unity on a terrain contested by rival monarchs and dynasts, lords with powerful followings, and cities defending their rights. It was this global configuration of power and resources that brought European navigators to Asia and, later, thanks to Columbus’s accidental discovery, to the Americas.

These new connections eventually reconfigured the global economy and world politics. But they were a long way from producing a unipolar, European-dominated world. Portuguese and Dutch maritime power depended on using force to constrain competitors’ commercial activity while ensuring that producers and local authorities in southeast Asia, where the riches in spices and textiles came from, had a stake in new long-distance trade. The fortified commercial enclave became a key element

of Europeans' repertoire of power. After Columbus's "discovery," his royal sponsors were able to make a "Spanish" empire by consolidating power on two continents and supplying the silver—produced with the coerced labor of indigenous Americans—that lubricated commerce in western Europe, across southeast Asia, and within the wealthy, commercially dynamic Chinese empire.

In the Americas, settlers from Europe, slaves brought from Africa, and their imperial masters produced new forms of imperial politics. Keeping subordinated people—indigenous or otherwise—from striking out on their own or casting their lot with rival empires was no simple task. Rulers of empires had to induce distant elites to cooperate, and they had to provide people—at home, overseas, and in between—with a sense of place within an unequal but incorporative polity. Such efforts did not always produce assimilation, conformity, or even resigned acceptance; tensions and violent conflict among imperial rulers, overseas settlers, indigenous communities, and forced migrants appear throughout our study.

Empire, in Europe or elsewhere, was more than a matter of economic exploitation. As early as the sixteenth century, a few European missionaries

and jurists were making distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate forms of imperial power, condemning Europeans' assaults on indigenous societies and questioning an empire's right to take land and labor from conquered peoples.

It was only in the nineteenth century that some European states, fortified by their imperial conquests, gained a clear technological and material edge over their neighbors and in other regions of the world. This “western” moment of imperial domination was never complete or stable. Opposition to slavery and to the excesses and brutality of rulers and settlers brought before an engaged public the question of whether colonies were places where humans could be exploited at will or parts of an inclusive, albeit inequitable, polity. Moreover, the empires of China, Russia, the Ottomans, and Habsburgs were not imperial has-beens, as the conventional story reads. They took initiatives to counter economic and cultural challenges, and played crucial roles in the conflicts and connections that animated world politics. Our chapters take up the trajectories of these empires, with their traditions, tensions, and competitions with each other.

We examine as well the strikingly different ways in which imperial expansion across land—not just

seas—produced distinct configurations of politics and society. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United States and Russia extended their rule across continents. Russia's repertoire of rule—inherited from a mix of imperial predecessors and rivals—relied on bringing ever more people under the emperor's care—and of course exploitation—while maintaining distinctions among incorporated groups. American revolutionaries invoked a different imperial politics, turning ideas of popular sovereignty against their British masters, then constructing an "Empire of Liberty" in Thomas Jefferson's words. The United States, expanding as Americans conquered indigenous peoples or acquired parts of others' empires, created a template for turning new territories into states, excluded Indians and slaves from the polity, and managed to stay together after a bitter civil war fought over the issue of governing different territories differently. In the late nineteenth century the young empire extended its power overseas—without developing a generally accepted idea of the United States as a ruler of colonies.

Britain, France, Germany, and other European countries were less reticent about colonial rule, and they applied it with vigor to new acquisi-

tions in Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth century. These powers, however, found by the early twentieth century that actually governing African and Asian colonies was more difficult than military conquest. The very claim to be bringing “civilization” and economic “progress” to supposedly backward areas opened up colonial powers to questioning from inside, from rival empires, and from indigenous elites over what, if any, forms of colonialism were politically and morally defensible.

Empires, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as in the sixteenth, existed in relation to each other. Different organizations of power—colonies, protectorates, dominions, territories forced into a dominant culture, semi-autonomous national regions—were combined in different ways within empires. Empires drew on human and material resources beyond the reach of any national polity, seeking control over both contiguous and distant lands and peoples.

In the twentieth century it was rivalry among empires—made all the more acute by Japan’s entry into the empire game and China’s temporary lapse out—that dragged imperial powers and their subjects around the world into two world wars. The devastating consequences of this interempire con-

flict, as well as the volatile notions of sovereignty nourished within and among empires, set the stage for the dissolution of colonial empires from the 1940s through the 1960s. But the dismantling of this kind of empire left in place the question of how powers like the United States, the USSR, and China would adapt their repertoires of power to changing conditions.

What drove these major transformations in world politics? It used to be argued that empires gave way to nation-states as ideas about rights, nations, and popular sovereignty emerged in the west. But there are several problems with this proposition. First, empires lasted well beyond the eighteenth century, when notions of popular sovereignty and natural rights captured political imagination in some parts of the world. Furthermore, if we assume that the origins of these concepts were “national,” we miss a crucial dynamic of political change. In British North America, the French Caribbean, Spanish South America, and elsewhere, struggles for political voice, rights, and citizenship took place *within* empires before they became revolutions *against* them. The results of these contests were not consistently national. Relationships between democracy,

nation, and empire were still debated in the middle of the twentieth century.

Other studies of world history attribute major shifts to the “rise of the state” in the “early modern period,” two terms tied to the notion of a single path toward a normal and universal kind of sovereignty—the “western” kind. Scholars have advanced different dates for the birth of this “modern” state system—1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia, the eighteenth century with its innovations in western political theory, the American and French revolutions. But expanding our outlook over space and back in time and focusing on empires allows us to see that states have institutionalized power for over two millennia in different parts of the world. A story of European state development and other people’s “responses” would misrepresent the long-term dynamics of state power in both Europe and the rest of the world.

To the extent that states became more powerful in England and France in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these transformations were a consequence of empire, rather than the other way around. As powers trying to control large spaces, empires channeled widely produced resources into state institutions that concentrated revenue and

military force. War among empires in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries set the stage for revolutionary movements that challenged Europe's empire-states.

In other words, this study of empire breaks with the special claims of nation, modernity, and Europe to explain the course of history. The book is an interpretive essay, based on analyses of selected imperial settings. It suggests how imperial power—and contests over and within it—have for thousands of years configured societies and states, inspired ambition and imagination, and opened up and closed down political possibilities.

Empire as a Type of State

What, then, is an empire, and how do we distinguish empire from other political entities?

Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people. The nation-state, in contrast, is based on the idea of a single people in a single territory constituting itself as a unique political community. The nation-state proclaims

the commonality of its people—even if the reality is more complicated—while the empire-state declares the non-equivalence of multiple populations. Both kinds of states are incorporative—they insist that people be ruled by their institutions—but the nation-state tends to homogenize those inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong, while the empire reaches outward and draws, usually coercively, peoples whose difference is made explicit under its rule. The concept of empire presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently.

The point of making such distinctions is not to put things into neatly defined boxes, but the opposite: to look at ranges of political possibilities and tensions and conflicts among them. People frequently tried to turn the polity in which they lived into something else—to claim autonomy from an overbearing emperor in the name of a people or to extend one people's power over others to make an empire. Where “nations” did become meaningful units of power, they still had to share space with empires and to meet challenges posed by them. Would a state that depended on the human and material resources of one people and one territory be able to survive in relation to powers whose

boundaries were more expansive? Even today, people in Pacific islands (New Caledonia, in relation to France) or Caribbean ones (Puerto Rico, in relation to the United States) and elsewhere weigh the advantages or disadvantages of disassociating themselves from larger units. As long as diversity and political ambition exist, empire-building is always a temptation, and because empires perpetuate difference along with incorporation there is always the possibility of their coming apart. For these reasons, empire is a useful concept with which to think about world history.

At times, makers of new states consciously built empires of their own, as did revolutionaries against Britain in eighteenth-century North America. At other times, newly independent states pursued a national route, as in decolonized Africa in the late twentieth century, and soon discovered their vulnerability vis-à-vis larger-scale polities. Empires themselves sometimes tried to create nations—preferably on another empire's territory, as British, French, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian leaders did on Ottoman lands in the nineteenth century. There was and is no single path from empire to nation—or the other way around. Both ways of organizing state power present challenges and opportunities

to the politically ambitious, and both empires and nation-states could be transformed into something more like the other.

What other political forms can be distinguished from empire? Small-scale groups more or less culturally homogeneous, often organized around divisions of tasks by gender, age, status, or kinship, are frequently considered the antithesis of empire. Some scholars shun the term “tribe” as condescending, but others use it to describe a social group that can be flexible, interactive, and politically creative. In this sense, a tribe may develop as people extend power over others and give themselves a name and sometimes a mission. On the Eurasian steppe, tribes united into huge confederations, and these at times made empires. The Mongol empires of the thirteenth century arose from the politics of tribal formation and confederation.

The fact that tribes, peoples, and nations have made empires points to a fundamental political dynamic, one that helps explain why empires cannot be confined to a particular place or era but emerged and reemerged over thousands of years and on all continents. In conditions of wide access to resources and simple technology, small advantages—larger family size, better access to irrigation

or trade routes, good luck, ambitious and skillful rulers—can lead to domination of one group over another, setting in motion the creation of tribal dynasties and kingships. The only way for a would-be king or tribal leader to become more powerful is to expand—taking animals, money, slaves, land, or other forms of wealth from outside his realm rather than from insiders whose support he needs. Once this externalization of sources of wealth begins, outsiders may see advantages in submitting to a powerful and effective conqueror. Emboldened kings or tribal leaders can then use their new subordinates to collect resources in a regular—not a raiding—way and to facilitate the incorporation of new peoples, territories, and trade routes without imposing uniformity in culture or administration. Tribes and kingdoms provided materials and incentives for making empires.

To tribes and kingdoms—polities distinct from empires but with the potential of becoming them—we can add city-states. The ancient Greek citystate gave some later societies models and vocabulary for politics—the city as “polis,” a unit of political inclusion and participation—as well as the idea of civic virtue, in which membership implies certain rights and duties. But like the tribe, the city-state was not

a uniform, static, or isolated entity. Greek democracy was for free men only, excluding women and slaves. City-states had hinterlands, took part in trade along land and sea routes, and fought against other polities and with each other. City-states that prospered as nodal points in commercial networks or controlled connections as did the Venetians and the Genoese, could become tempting targets for empires, might try to coexist with empires or even turn themselves, as Rome did, into empires.

The political logic of enrichment through expansion has produced empires around the globe as a major form of power. Pharaohs of Egypt, Assyrians, Guptas of south Asia, the Han Chinese, Turkic and other peoples of central Asia, Persians, Malians and Songhai of western Africa, Zulu of southern Africa, Mayans in central America, Incas in South America, Byzantines, and Carolingians in southeast and northern Europe, and the Muslim caliphates all used the flexible strategy of subordinating others to make empires—large, expansionist polities that are both incorporative and differentiated.

Today the most frequently invoked alternative to an empire is the nationstate. The ideology of the nation-state presumes that a “people” asserted and won its right to self-rule. This idea, however, may

be the product of a different history—of a state that through institutional and cultural initiatives convinced its members to think of themselves as a single people. Whether its roots are considered “ethnic,” “civic,” or some combination of the two, the nation-state builds on and produces commonality as well as a strong, often vigorously policed, distinction between those included in and those excluded from the nation.

If nations have been prominent in political imagination in many areas since the eighteenth century, the nation-state was not the only alternative to empire, then or in more recent times. Federation was another possibility—a layered form of sovereignty in which some powers rest in separate political units while others are located at the center, as in Switzerland. Confederation takes this idea one step further by recognizing the distinct personality of each federated unit. As we shall see in [chapter 13](#), as recently as the 1950s influential leaders in French West Africa argued that a confederation in which France and its former colonies would be equal participants was preferable to the breakup of empire into independent nation-states. Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, and later South Africa, became self-governing over the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries but remained associated with the “British Commonwealth.” In the twenty-first century, confederation in different forms still attracts political attention in Europe, Africa, Eurasia, and elsewhere, suggesting the advantages of distributing governmental functions and aspects of sovereignty over different levels of political organization.

Tribes, kingdoms, city-states, federations, and confederations, like nationstates, have no defendable claim to be “natural” units of political affinity or action; they came and went, sometimes transformed themselves into empires, sometimes were absorbed into empires, disappearing and emerging as empires fought with each other. No single type of state bears a fixed relationship to democracy as a governing principle. From the Roman Republic of the third century BCE to twentieth-century France, we encounter empires without emperors, governed in different ways, called by different names. Dictators, monarchs, presidents, parliaments, and central committees have ruled empires. Tyranny was—and is—a possibility in nationally homogeneous polities, as well as in empires.

What is significant about empires in history was their ability to set the context in which political

transformations took place. The enticements of subordination and enrichment kept empires in motion, in tension or conflict with each other and with other kinds of states. Memories of empires past, rejection and fear of empires, and aspirations to make new complex polities inspired and constrained leaders and followers, the ambitious, the indifferent, and the compelled.

Themes

If empire—as a form of state—was persistent over time, empire—as a way of rule—was not uniform. This study focuses on the different ways empires turned conquest into governing and on how empires balanced incorporation of people into the polity with sustaining distinctions among them. As we trace trajectories of empires in this book, we consider the following five themes.

Difference within Empires

Our chapters focus on how empires employed the politics of difference. We use this term more broadly and more neutrally than today's multi-

culturalists who call for recognition of distinct communities and their presumed values. A claim based on cultural authenticity is only one way to make difference an element of politics. The politics of difference, in some empires, could mean recognizing the multiplicity of peoples and their varied customs as an ordinary fact of life; in others it meant drawing a strict boundary between undifferentiated insiders and “barbarian” outsiders.

Recent studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial empires have emphasized that empire-builders—explorers, missionaries, and scientists, as well as political and military leaders—strove to make “we/they,” “self/other” distinctions between colonizing and colonized populations. From this perspective, maintaining or creating difference, including racialized difference, was not natural; it took work. Colonial states, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, exerted great effort to segregate space, provide people from the metropole with a home away from home, prevent colonial agents from “going native,” and regulate sexual relations between different populations.

If we break out of nineteenth- and twentieth-century reference points and out of European colonial frameworks, social difference takes on other mean-

ings—for both subjects and states. Distinction does not everywhere imply a binary split into colonized and colonizer, black and white. An empire could be an assemblage of peoples, practicing their religions and administering justice in their own ways, all subordinated to an imperial sovereign. For many empires, loyalty, not likeness, was the goal; recognition of difference—particularly of local leaders who could manage “their” people—could enhance maintenance of order, collection of taxes or tribute, and military recruitment. Empires could profit from skills and connections developed by distinct communities. Difference could be a fact and an opportunity, not an obsession.

The extremes of this spectrum between homogenization and the recognition of difference were never fully and durably enacted, but they allow us to think about the consequences of each strategy and of mixes of the two. By way of introduction, we look briefly at two examples.

Over its long existence, the Roman empire tended toward homogenization, based on a distinctive culture that developed as Rome expanded. Rome drew on the prestige of Greek achievements and on practices from conquered regions around the Mediterranean to produce identifiably Roman

styles in urban design, arts, and literature. The institutions of Roman empire—citizenship, legal rights, political participation—proved attractive to elites across the huge empire. The notion of a single, superior imperial civilization open in principle to those who could learn its ways was intrinsic to the Roman way of rule. Incorporation through likeness left barbarians, slaves, and others out.

Rome's initial practice of taking other people's gods into the imperial pantheon was later compromised by the spread of monotheistic Christianity, especially when it became a state religion in the fourth century CE. This more restrictive and homogenizing Roman model endured long after the empire fell. Rome imagined as a Christian civilization whose light could shine around the world became a reference point for later empires—Byzantine, Carolingian, Spanish, Portuguese, and others. Islamic empires that tried to take Rome's place also struggled to make a unified religious community, founded on the worship of one god.

The Mongols' imperial strategies offer a strong contrast to this homogenizing strategy. From early times, the steppe empires of inner Asia were not built around a fixed capital or a central cultural or religious conception but founded on a superior per-

son, the Great Khan. The leaders of the far-reaching Mongol empires of the thirteenth century learned their statecraft from both Eurasian and Chinese sources. Mongol empires sheltered Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Daoism, and Islam; Mongol rulers employed Muslim administrators across Eurasia and fostered arts and sciences produced by Arab, Persian, and Chinese civilizations. Empire in the Mongol style, where diversity was treated as both normal and useful, inflected repertoires of power across Eurasia and on its edges.

All empires were to some degree reliant on both incorporation and differentiation. Empires could mix, match, and transform their ways of rule. Roman-style centralization and homogeneity—missions to civilize and exploit the backward—were tempting to some Russian and Ottoman modernizers in the nineteenth century, when western European empires seemed to be outpacing eastern ones. But transformations—wished for or unconsciously adopted—were more likely to be partial and could go in both directions. In Russia, reformers found that attempts to impose uniformity ran up against the vested and competing interests of local intermediaries with a stake in the imperial edifice. And nineteenth-century British

officials—who could hardly admit to using Mongol techniques—sometimes acted like the other kind of empire, concentrating firepower, terrorizing populations, and then moving on, leaving in place a thin administration that compromised with local leaders, extracted revenue, and was cautious—and miserly—about spreading British education and culture.

Imperial Intermediaries

Rulers of empire sent out agents—governors, generals, tax collectors—to take charge of territories they incorporated. Could they send enough of these people—at sufficiently low cost—to govern every village or district in a widely dispersed realm? Rarely. Most often, imperial rulers needed the skills, knowledge, and authority of people from a conquered society—elites who could gain from cooperation or people who had earlier been marginal and could see advantages in serving the victorious power. Another kind of intermediary was a person from the homeland. What Romans referred to as “colonies” and the English in the seventeenth century called “plantations” took people from an

empire's core to new lands. Transplanted groups, dependent on linkages to home, were expected to act in the imperial interest.

Co-opting indigenous elites and sending settlers were strategies that relied on intermediaries' own social connections to ensure their cooperation. Another tactic was just the opposite: putting slaves or other people detached from their communities of origin—and dependent for their welfare and survival solely on their imperial masters—in positions of authority. This strategy was used effectively by the Ottomans, whose highest administrators and commanders had been extracted from their families as boys and brought up in the sultan's household. In this case, dependence and difference were entwined: it was usually Christian boys who were converted into the sultan's officials.

Imperial agents, wherever they were from, required incentives as well as discipline. Empires unintentionally created subversive possibilities for intermediaries, who could circumvent imperial purposes by establishing alternative networks or allegiances, attaching themselves to other empires, or rebelling, as did some European settlers in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because empires preserved distinction, they

augmented centrifugal possibilities: discontented intermediaries could find institutional or cultural supports for their actions. What successful empires produced, usually, was neither consistent loyalty nor constant resistance: they produced contingent accommodation.

By focusing on intermediaries, we emphasize a kind of political relationship that is often downplayed or ignored today—vertical connections between rulers, their agents, and their subjects. We tend to think of nations in horizontal terms—all citizens are equivalent. Or we describe societies as stratified—nobles, elites, commoners, masses, subalterns, workers, peasants, colonizers, colonized. The study of empires goes beyond the categories of equal individuals or layered groups and draws attention to people pushing and tugging on relationships with those above and below them, changing but only sometimes breaking the lines of authority and power.

*Imperial Intersections: Imitation,
Conflict, Transformation*

Empires did not act alone. Relationships *among*

empires were critical to their politics and to their subjects' possibilities. At times, elites in Rome and China thought of themselves as having no rivals; they had difficulties on their borders, but these were provoked, in their view, by uncivilized inferiors, not equivalent powers. But some of these outsiders—for example, Goths in west Eurasia and Xiongnu nomads in the east—enhanced their own capacities by raiding, bargaining, or serving their powerful settled neighbors. Imperial edges—on land or sea—offered opportunities to rivals. Intersections between nomadic and settled peoples were formative for empires, as each drew on the other's technological and administrative skills. Distance from an imperial center could allow fledgling empires to take off. In Arabia, crossed by trade routes but far from imperial controls, Muslim leaders in the seventh century had a chance to consolidate their followers and expand, mostly across territory that had once been Roman.

The intersection of empires provoked competition, imitation, and innovation—and both war and peace. Fragmentation of empires had lasting consequences for the future. For centuries after Rome's hold gave way, ambitious rulers aspired to put together an empire on a Roman scale; aspirants

included Charlemagne, Charles V, Suleiman the Magnificent, Napoleon, and Hitler. In Europe, no would-be emperor ever won the contest to replace Rome. The most powerful constraint on making a new unipolar power was other empires: the British and Russian empires were crucial to defeating, over a century apart, the imperial plans of Napoleon and Hitler.

Rivalry among a small number of empires, each with resources beyond any one nation, drove the history of the twentieth century—initiating the two world wars that widened and transformed, yet again, the competition among great powers. Japan's imperial conquests in southeast Asia opened a wedge in Europe's colonial empires, allowing former imperial intermediaries to make bids or wars for their own states, but imperial competition reemerged in cold, hot, and economic wars that continue to this day. From Rome and China to the present, the intersections of empires and their efforts to exercise power over distance, over different peoples, and over other states have had transforming consequences for politics, knowledge, and lives.

Imperial Imaginaries

Imperial leaders, at any time or place, could imagine only so many ways to run a state. For many rulers or would-be rulers, imperial context and experience were formative. In some empires, religious ideas provided a moral foundation for power but also provoked contestation. Both the Byzantines and the Islamic caliphates faced challenges from groups whose principles derived from shared religious values. Catholicism served as both legitimation and irritant to Spanish empire; Bartolomé de las Casas's denunciation of Spanish violence against Indians in the Americas in the sixteenth century called on Christians to live up to their purported principles. "Civilizing missions" declared by European empires in the nineteenth century existed in tension with racial theories. The missionary and the mine owner did not necessarily see empire in the same terms.

The question of political imagination is thus central to our study. Attention to the imperial context helps us understand the kinds of social relations and institutions that were conceivable or plausible

in specific situations. For instance, when a revolution opened up the language of “the citizen” and “the nation” in France in 1789, this produced both a debate in Paris and a revolution in the Caribbean over whether these concepts applied on islands where slavery and racial oppression had reigned. Imperial experience could inspire political creativity, as when people who grew up in the Russian empire designed the world’s first communist state as a federation of national republics. The variety and dynamic of political ideas in the past—when empires both opened up political imagination and constrained it—caution us not to take today’s political structures so much for granted that we blind ourselves to a fuller array of alternatives.

Repertoires of Power

Emperors stood atop pyramids of authority, sometimes trying to build upon rather than crush their subordinates’ claims to a territory or a group of people. Within a single empire, some parts might be ruled directly from the center, while in others local elites retained partial sovereignty. Emperors and other imperial governors and their subordi-

nates could try to adjust these arrangements. The fact that empires could redefine their allocations of power and privilege made them ambiguous kinds of states, capable of adapting to new circumstances. Political flexibility could give empires long lives.

We emphasize repertoires of imperial power, not typologies. Empire was a variable political form, and we accent the multiple ways in which incorporation and difference were conjugated. Empires' durability depended to a large extent on their ability to combine and shift strategies, from consolidating territory to planting enclaves, from loose supervision of intermediaries to tight, top-down control, from frank assertion of imperial authority to denial of acting like an empire. Unitary kingdoms, city-states, tribes, and nation-states were less able to respond as flexibly to a changing world.

The pragmatic, interactive, accommodating capacity of empires makes us skeptical of arguments that assume a fundamental redefinition of sovereignty, usually dated to the seventeenth century, when Europeans are said to have created a new system of potentially national and separate states. Whatever political theorists wrote (and elites and emperors wanted to believe), political

power at that time and after, and well beyond Europe's confines, continued to be distributed in complex and changing ways. The world did not then—and still does not—consist of billiard-ball states, with impermeable sovereignty, bouncing off each other.

The history of empires allows us instead to envision sovereignty as shared out, layered, overlapping. Catherine the Great of Russia was at once and officially an empress, an autocrat, a tsaritsa, a lord, a grand princess, a commander, and a “possessor” of her various lands and peoples. Napoleon left kings or princes in place in some areas he conquered while ruling others more directly with his famous prefects. Private corporations with charters from European powers exercised functions of state from the late sixteenth (the Dutch East India Company, the British Levant and East India companies) to the end of the nineteenth century (the British East Africa Company). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Britain, France, and other powers proclaimed “protectorates” over some areas—Morocco, Tunisia, parts of coastal east Africa, and parts of Vietnam—under the fiction that the local ruler, while remaining sovereign, had

voluntarily ceded some of his powers to the protecting empire.

The kind of sovereignty regime and the particular structures of power could make a difference to how states emerged out of colonial empires. That Morocco and Tunisia exited the French empire with less violence than did Algeria had much to do with the formers' status as protectorates and the latter's as an integral part of the French Republic. The possibility and sometimes the reality of layered sovereignty were long-lasting within European empires. And in other areas of imperial transformation—such as the Russian Federation formed in 1991—nested and manipulable sovereignty continues to the present.

The Dynamics of Empire

Although distinguishing empires with chronological labels—"modern," "premodern," or "ancient"—is tautological and unrevealing, empires did change over time and in space. Empires' capacities and strategies altered as competition drove innovations in ideas and technology and as conflicts challenged or enhanced imperial might.

A few key shifts in these repertoires underpin the arguments of this book. The alliance between monotheism and empire—in fourth-century Rome and seventh-century Arabia—was a transformation of enormous importance, setting forth a restrictive idea of legitimacy—one empire, one emperor, one god. Both Christianity and Islam were shaped by their imperial origins. Christianity emerged inside a powerful empire and in tension with it, setting limits on the kinds of power early Christian leaders could claim. In some later circumstances, clerics reinforced imperial unity; in others popes contested the power of kings. Islam developed on the edge of previous empires. Its leaders had the space to develop a religious community and then to build a specifically Islamic form of power. In both cases, claims to speak for one god were repeatedly contested, producing schisms within empires as well as jihads and crusades between them. Competitions for universal empire founded on religious community continued in the formerly Roman sphere for over a millennium—and in transmuted forms have emerged again in the enlarged world of the twenty-first century.

Across the Eurasian landmass, political transformation was driven by nomads' capacity for making

empires or making deals with them. Nomads upped the military ante in early times when they introduced the armed and mounted warrior as the weapon of choice. The most dramatic and influential of nomads' political interventions came from the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Through their conquests, the Mongols transmitted administrative practices, including religious pluralism, as well as military organization and communications technology. Mongol statecraft was amalgamated into China's imperial tradition; Russian princes earned their way to power as clients of Mongol khans.

The Ottoman empire appears at the center of our story, as an empire that managed to blend Turkic, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, and Persian traditions into durable, flexible, and transforming power. The Ottomans defeated the long-lived Byzantine empire in 1453, consolidated control at the vital junction of trade routes connecting Europe, the Indian Ocean, and the Eurasian landmass, and incorporated land and people from the outskirts of Vienna to eastern Anatolia and over much of the Arabian peninsula and north Africa. This brought the Ottoman empire close to the scale of the Roman empire and into such a dominant position that

rulers in western Europe were impelled to sponsor voyages around Africa to reach Asia with its riches. From these conflicts and challenges among empires, new maritime connections emerged.

If the “discovery” of the Americas was an imperial accident, it had a transformative impact. The New World and the Old and the oceans themselves became spaces on which the long-term competition of empires continued. The overseas thrust of European empire was disruptive in different ways to the world of empires. China and the Ottomans long remained too strong for European powers to do more than nibble at their edges. For centuries after Europeans reached their shores, societies in Asia retained their cultural integrity; rulers made advantageous deals with newcomers; commercial elites prospered and innovated. But internal strife eventually opened up exploitable cracks to outsiders.

The subjection of New World empires—the Aztecs and Incas notably—happened faster, and was more thoroughgoing. In the Americas, colonization led first to demographic decline and then vast relocations of peoples, as European settlement and the forced migration of enslaved Africans to parts of the Americas produced new kinds of societies.

As empires continued their destructive intrusions in the Americas and their rivalries with each other, the extent and effects of transcontinental connections were growing. The mining of silver by indigenous Americans under Spanish rule in what is now Peru and Mexico, and then the production of sugar by enslaved Africans under several empires in the Caribbean, began to transform the world economy. Food crops—maize, potatoes, tomatoes, rice—traveled across oceans. Empires tried to keep such activities under their control—with only partial and temporary success.

The most decisive economic breakthrough occurred around 1800 in Great Britain. Important as domestic reforms were to the agricultural and industrial revolutions in Britain, imperial resources—especially low-price sugar—and imperial enterprises—financial institutions, shipbuilding, armies and navies—were also essential factors. Trade had long been only partially a matter of markets; it depended on imperial might, on protecting vital lands and trade routes from other empires, pirates, and freebooters.

By 1800, Britain's economic advantages were such that it could survive the loss of part (not the most valuable) of its empire—in North America—

deepen its involvement in India, retain its colonies in the West Indies, fight off Napoleon's ambitions for European dominance, and pursue its interests elsewhere under the name of "free trade," using or threatening to use naval power to preserve British interests. Britain came to the fore during a period—short by imperial standards—when European empires appeared to dominate the world. Its repertoire of empire was shifting—but so was that of other powers. As some European rivals began to catch up with Britain's industrial economy, the interempire competition for resources led to a preemptive rush for colonial acquisitions and initiated a new phase of violence and war.

But the extension of empires over the world also transformed the space in which political ideas propagated and new ones developed. Since the sixteenth-century critiques of Spanish abuses of Indians, empires had been sites of debates over political legitimacy and sovereign power. In the late eighteenth century, the relationship of person, nation, and empire came under scrutiny. The antislavery movement in Britain targeted what had been the most lucrative dimension of empire and asserted that enslaved Africans should be treated as imperial subjects, not as exploitable objects.

The French revolution opened up the question of whether rights in a nation applied in colonies—perhaps going as far as to require that slaves be freed and made French citizens. French officials, for pragmatic as well as principled reasons, came out on both sides of the question in the 1790s. The status of “subjects” in the empire was periodically debated until 1946, when a new constitution declared all subjects to have the “qualities” of the French citizen—a change that exacerbated rather than relieved uncertainty over whether “France” was a society of equals or of non-equivalents.

That such debates continued unresolved for so long should make us reflect on conventional representations of processes that produced a “modern” world. It is not accurate to argue that western European empires suddenly stopped acting like empires, began to think like nation-states, set out to collect colonies to supply the nation with glory and lucre, then faced the disjuncture between their espousal of national self-determination and their denial of it to others. Much as the idea of a nation governing itself became part of European political thinking, an “epoch” of empire did not give way to a new nationalized sovereignty regime or to generalized

acceptance of the nation-state in the nineteenth century.

The language of nationally based community founded on shared history, language, or customs was used by some to argue for making new empires—the German one, for example—but implementing these ideas was not easy where populations were mixed and where already existing empires commanded major resources. The Ottomans, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, with their multi-ethnic, multiconfessional empires, struggled to find ways to make national community work for themselves, while competing with each other and other empires. The national question combined explosively with imperial rivalry to provoke a series of bloody conflicts—war in the Crimea in the 1850s, repeated wars in the Balkans, the Boxer Rebellion in China, and even more murderous conflagrations in the twentieth century, when Germany and Japan launched their drives for their own kinds of empires.

The volatile politics of imperial rivalry on a global scale raised the question of whether the “colonial” empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a new kind of polity, distinct from the empires of the past. Some Europeans argued that their em-

pires were a superior sort; others, like Lenin, saw them as a product—also unique—of capitalism. Some scholars today argue that the possibility of popular sovereignty at home—and Enlightenment ideas more generally—led European political thinkers and rulers to draw a sharper line than ever before between people who were inside the polity and outsiders who were considered unqualified to participate in governing themselves. But, as we noted above, Europeans still had to find intermediaries to do much of the work of running an empire, and they had to provide publics at home with an acceptable view of the state they lived in. The new technologies of war and communications did not necessarily penetrate to the level of village or commune. Claims to be bringing uplift and progress to Africa and Asia led to criticism both at home and abroad: why were colonial empires doing so little to fulfill their mission and why did land-grabbing, forced labor, and a great deal of violence persist?

Whatever was new or old about European colonialism in the nineteenth century, it was, from a historical perspective, short-lived: compare roughly seventy years of colonial rule over Africa to the Ottoman empire's six-hundred-year life span. Far from consolidating a world order based on the

distinction between European nation and non-European dependence, the assertive imperialism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to questions about the legitimacy and viability of colonialism and to more conflicts among new and old empires.

During World War II the long contest among rivals to control Europe's destiny played itself out on a global scale and provoked another shift in the world of empires. Japan's conquests of European colonies in southeast Asia proved especially devastating—to the eventual winners of this war among empires as well as to the losers. Germany, defeated as an empire, flourished as a nation-state. So too did Japan. France, Britain, and other colonial powers tried to revive their empires with new economic and political arrangements, only to find themselves faced at mid-century with both revolts and unbearable costs. The price of including African and Asian people in empires that were expected to provide services to their citizens proved too high. After shedding most of their colonies, European states took steps toward confederation with each other, opening up complex renegotiations of sovereignty that continue today.

The postwar reconfiguration brought to the fore two powers with histories of imperial expansion: the USSR and the United States. The Soviet Union combined the strategy of recognizing diverse “nationalities” with a one-party state to spread a communist web over its many national groups and to ignite challenges to capitalist empire elsewhere. The United States strove with Protestant abandon to extend its idea of democracy in a manner reminiscent of Rome and practiced free-trade imperialism, combining market power with military might. Americans expected the world to speak their language, want their political system, and love their culture, and, just when they seemed to be triumphant, ran into trouble, especially in areas Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans had once governed. Meanwhile, China, its boundaries close to those attained by the Qing emperors, its strong system of officialdom intact, mobilizes its huge population, controls its elites with a tight rein, contends with restless populations of Tibetans and Muslims, sends—without proselytizing—its entrepreneurs, specialists, and laborers abroad, and commands vital resources around the world. China, Russia, and the United States do not consider themselves

to be empires, but imperial pathways made them what they are.

A focus on empires, their repertoires of rule, and their intersecting trajectories thus revises conventional chronologies and categories and helps us see how, when, and where world history took new directions. Ambitious leaders, middling agents, and the weak had to position themselves in relation to powers that commanded supranational resources. The networks developed by empires dragged people across oceans into slavery, drew settlers and itinerants into new relationships, fostered diasporas, provided intellectual sources of international law, and provoked challenges to power.

We are left with questions about our own time. Has the normality of empire come to an end? Is the only alternative the nation-state with its capacity for violence in the cause of homogeneous community? Or are there other alternatives that can recognize diverse types of political association without insisting on uniformity or hierarchy? An attentive reading of the history of empires brings us face-to-face with extremes of violence and hubris, but also reminds us that sovereignty can be shared, layered, and transformed. The past is not a single path leading to a predetermined future.