

Introduction

The *Longue Durée* of Empire

Toward a Comparative Semantics of a Key Concept in Modern European History

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of a new interest in empires past and present and an inflation of the concept in modern political language and beyond, the article first looks at the use of the concept as an analytical marker in historical and current interpretations of empires. With a focus on Western European cases, the concrete semantics of *empire* as a key concept in modern European history is analyzed, combining a reconstruction of some diachronic trends with synchronic differentiations.

KEYWORDS

comparison, empire, historical semantics, *longue durée*, political and analytical vocabulary

The Comparative Study of Empires

European empires, with their multiethnic societies, have long been considered exemplary cases of historical failure. The historiographic concepts of *rise*, *decline*, and *fall* are symptomatic in this respect: against the nineteenth-century background of nationalization, industrialization, and class conflict, the complex structures of Europe's multiethnic empires were for a long time seen as inferior to the apparently homogeneous and powerful nation-state.¹ This model

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1. See Ann L. Stoler, Carole McGranahan, Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Prince-



seemed to correspond much better to the premises of modernization, which assume that traditional loyalties—religious, local, or dynastic—have to be gradually replaced by the dominating paradigms of nation and nation-state.² The disintegration and dissolution of all continental empires—the German Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire—during the course of World War I underlined the notion that traditional ties of religion, estate, or region had by then become mere relics of the past. They had finally been replaced by the social categories of industrial societies, as well as by the new concepts of national loyalty and ethnic homogeneity. This idea is based upon the paradigmatic formula of “rise, decline, and fall,” which applies Edward Gibbon’s historiographic model to the complexities of imperial structures in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.³

However, after a long dominance of nations and nation-states, empires seem to be back on the agenda. Several political trends have contributed to this development. The political upheavals of 1989/1990 and the end of the Cold War raised questions about established paradigms. The dissolution of the Soviet Union generated a number of new nation-states in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. Meanwhile, the model of the nation-state has lost much of its legitimacy against a background of institutional Europeanization as well as economic and cultural globalization. Furthermore, the outburst of extreme ethnic violence in some parts of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia underlines the problem of how states can accommodate ethnic plural-

ton University Press, 2010); Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten im 19. Jahrhundert* [Empires and nation-states in the nineteenth century] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, eds., *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

2. See Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, “Europäische Nationalismen im West-Ost-Vergleich: Von der Typologie zur Differenzbestimmung” [European nationalism—Eastern and Western Europe in comparison: From typology to differentiation], in *Nationalismen in Europa: West- und Osteuropa im Vergleich* [Nationalisms in Europe: Western and Eastern Europe in comparison], Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, eds. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001), 11–45.

3. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London: W. Strahan, and T. Cadell, 1776–1789); Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929); Shmuel Eisenstadt, ed., *The Decline of Empires* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967); Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire 1815–1918* (London: Longmann, 1989); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Richard Lorenz, ed., *Das Verdämmern der Macht: Vom Untergang großer Reiche* [The dusk of power: On the decline of great empires] (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2000); Emil Brix, Klaus Koch and Elisabeth Vyslonzil, eds., *The Decline of Empires* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001); Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

ity, and point to the example of traditional empires.⁴ Finally, the end of Cold War antagonism gave rise to the United States' new international strategy to maintain and, for a time, expand its international engagement in a world of asymmetrically located conflicts. The role of the United States as the last remaining empire has provoked controversial discussions on the chances and limits of empires in the past and present.⁵ These developments are the catalysts for a new interest in historical alternatives beyond the nation-state, not only among academic historians but also for a wider public, and may explain the focus on European empires of the early modern period and later. In contrast to the long-held premise of unavoidable disintegration and decay, the present focus is rather on the following questions: Why were empires able to last for so long? In which ways did they contribute to the stability of the international order between 1815 and 1914? And where did the limits of their potential for integration lie? A shift from the paradigm of "rise and fall" toward the question of "chances and crises" is obvious in many recent studies on the topic.⁶ For example, historians of Austria-Hungary have pointed to the failure of many nationalist movements to gain widespread support for secessionism before and even during the first years of World War I.⁷

In light of these developments, there currently seems to be an inflation of empires and all things imperial, although in some fields, such as economics,

4. Heinrich A. Winkler and Hartmut Kaelble, eds., *Nationalismus—Nationalitäten—Supranationalität* [Nationalism—nationalities—supranationality] (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1995); Barry Jones and Michael Keating, eds., *The European Union and the Region* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Aleksandar Pavković and Ivan Mišić, *New States and Old Conflicts: Nationalism and State Formation in the Former Yugoslavia* (Canberra: National Europe Center, 2002).

5. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Lane, 2003); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); For a critical review, see Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, "'New Imperialism' oder 'Liberal Empire'? Niall Fergusons Empire-Apologetik im Zeichen der 'Anglobalization'" ['New imperialism' or 'liberal empire'? Niall Ferguson's apologetics of empire under the banner of 'Anglobalization'], *Zeithistorische Forschungen: Studies in Contemporary History* 3 (2006): 121–128.

6. Herfried Münkler, *Imperien: Die Logik der Weltherrschaft vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* [Empires: The logic of world supremacy from Ancient Rome to the United States] (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2005); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* [The disenchantment of Asia: Europe and the Asian empires in the eighteenth century] (Munich: Beck, 1998); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus: Geschichte—Formen—Folgen* [Colonialism: History—shapes—consequences] (Munich: Beck, 2012).

7. Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Laurence Cole and Daniel Unowsky, eds., *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy* (New York: Berghahn, 2007).

anthropology, and missionary theology, the fascination with empires was more than obvious as early as the late nineteenth century. The current trend favorable to the study of empires stems from an increased interest in transnational phenomena and the history of global entanglements, such as human rights, that transcend the boundaries of nation-states and point to models of political order that help to put into historical perspective the relatively late birth of the nation and nation-states. What is called *empire* or characterized as *imperial* today tends to embrace almost all spheres of popular life and academic discourse. Corresponding to this quantitative inflation is the qualitative spread. The meanings of *empire* and *imperialism* in everyday language have become so unlimited that Stephen Howe could conclude that “imperialism has gone imperial, colonialism has colonized our language.”⁸ The concepts of *empire* and *imperialism* have spread not only within the disciplines of political science and history, but may also be found in economics, anthropology, literary studies, and theology. The various meanings these concepts have absorbed in different contexts have further complicated the matter, above all through their repeated connection with other highly contested concepts such as *colonialism*, *postcolonialism*, *globalization*, and, very recently, *neoliberalism*.⁹

One basic observation relevant to most of these usages of *empire* is that they denote a particular relation between a more powerful agency of rule and less powerful subsystems.¹⁰ This relation has become more and more problematic and negative, as, for instance, in the perspective of the colonized vis-à-vis imperial actors.¹¹ As with so many other concepts that contain in themselves a whole history of semantic change and, therefore, evade any isolated definition, the increasing inflation of connotations and usages has reduced the analytical value of *empire*.¹² There is thus a necessity to focus on the semantics of *empire*

8. Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10; Frederick Cooper, “Empire Multiplied: A Review Essay,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46/2 (2004): 247–272.

9. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); Anthony G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen and Gisela Neunhöffer, eds., *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique* (London: Routledge, 2006).

10. For problems of definition, see Jürgen Osterhammel, “Imperien” [Empires], in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* [Transnational history: Topics, trends and theories], Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 56–67; Münkler, *Imperien*, 11–22.

11. See the following section in this article, point (9), page xx.

12. Jörn Leonhard, *Liberalismus: Zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* [Liberalism: On the historical semantics of a European interpretive pattern] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001), 47, 66; Jörn Leonhard, “From European Liberalism to the Languages of Liberalisms: The Semantics of *Liberalism* in European Comparison,” *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History* 8 (2004): 17–51.

and on the usage of the concept, the argument, and the metaphor as developed by past contemporaries.

Given the limitations of a journal article, the following cannot be more than a symptomatic analysis. In order to identify important leitmotifs, narratives, and interpretative paradigms, which form part of the historical semantics of *empire*, the first part of this article looks at the use of *empire* as an analytical tool utilized by historians and other researchers—in itself a historical analysis of changes as they were represented by historiographic trends. Against this background, the second part concentrates on the concrete semantics of *empire*, with a focus on Western European cases. In order to achieve a comparative view, one would certainly have to include many more examples: continental European empires such as the Russian, Ottoman, or Spanish Empires, extra-European cases such as China, and the complexity of “writing back” the empire from the perspective of the colonized. However, such a broad range of cases fits into the scope of a larger comparative research project that transcends the limits of an article. Yet even on the basis of a limited focus, such an analysis seems all the more important since *empire* has become a key concept of historical and present political language. Furthermore, there is rarely a deeper reflection on the diachronic change and synchronic variety of meanings that stand behind different uses of *empire* and *imperial* pasts: “imperium” is not “empire” in English, which is not “empire” in French, which is not “Reich.”¹³

Beyond “Decline and Fall”

Narratives and Leitmotifs in Classic and Recent Empire Historiography

In order to better situate the approach of comparative historical semantics, it is useful to first systematize classical and more current syntheses, narratives, and interpretative patterns in the use of *empire* as a concept. The following examples denote discursive situations and are to be understood as ideal-types, helping to better understand the syntheses and narrative paradigms that have so far evolved from the historiographic encounters with empires and imperial histories. Which master narratives are more convincing than others, and why? What role do grand narratives play in collective identity formation? How are we to explain the attractiveness and the suggestive quality of *empire* in narratives?¹⁴ Five normative aspects seem of particular importance:

13. Maurice Duverger, ed., *Le Concept d'Empire* [The concept of empire] (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1980); Franz Bosbach and Hermann Hiery, eds., *Imperium, Empire, Reich: Ein Konzept politischer Herrschaft im deutsch-britischen Vergleich* [Imperium, empire, Reich: A concept of political rule in German-British comparison] (Munich: Saur, 1999).

14. Jörn Leonhard, “Wie legitimieren sich multiethnische Empires im langen 19. Jahrhundert?” [How do multiethnic empires legitimize themselves in the long nineteenth century?], in *Die Legitimation von Imperien: Strategien und Motive im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*

(1) One of the most influential narratives on empire history is certainly Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published between 1776 and 1789. Gibbon's work became a canonized study on imperial history because he developed such a suggestive pattern of positive origins, crisis, decline, and fall, referring to the problem of imperial overstretch as a fundamental problem in late Roman antiquity. At the same time, his interpretation was exemplary in that he applied the study of an ancient empire to his own contemporary discussion on the current state and future of the British Empire following the conflict over the North American colonies. Thus, his work served as a warning for contemporaries not to repeat the dangerous developments of their Roman predecessor.¹⁵ The leitmotif of a possible repetition, of thinking in historical analogies, but also of the tension between uniqueness and circular models of world history all formed a part of this imperial history. Its attractiveness stemmed also from the idea of a *translatio imperii*, by which all empires, old and new, were linked to each other.¹⁶

(2) The comparison between the British Empire and ancient empires, further underlined by the application of the model of civic virtue and the language of classical republicanism, formed part of a Whig interpretation of the British Empire. It began to develop in the eighteenth century and referred to an evolutionary, gradual, and organic concept of progress and English civilization expanding over time and space, contributing to the general improvement and moral rise of hitherto uncivilized peoples—an image that could be easily contrasted with Oriental despotism. The semantics of *empire* included a strong element of universalism and mission and thus a suggestive dichotomy of identity and alterity.¹⁷ Toward the later nineteenth century, this missionary

[The legitimation of empires: Strategies and motives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries], Herfried Münkler and Eva M. Hausteiner, eds. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012), 70–93.

15. John Robertson, "Gibbon's Roman Empire as a Universal Monarchy: The 'Decline and Fall' and the Imperial Idea in Early Modern Europe," in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, Rosamond McKitterick and Ronald Quinault, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 247–270.

16. Werner Goez, *Translatio imperii: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* [*Translatio imperii: A contribution to the history of historical thought and political theories in the Middle Ages and early modern times*] (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958); Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* [Meaning in history: The theological implications of the philosophy of history] (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973); Benedikt Stuchtey, "'Westward the course of empire takes its way': Imperialism and the Frontier in British and German Historical Writing around 1900," in *British and German Historiography 1750–1950: Traditions, Perceptions, and Transfers*, Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 289–334.

17. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge

vision behind *empire* was accompanied more and more by jingoistic undertones, referring to *empire* as the proof of the particular qualities of a nation, as in John Robert Seeley's influential work "The Expansion of England."¹⁸ But for many recent nation-states such as Belgium, Germany, or Italy, the reference to *empire* was a suggestive way to strengthen their legitimacy as political actors in the international arena and against a background of increasing tensions. Hence, imperializing nation-states used *empire* as a political tool to reaffirm their position.

(3) Throughout the nineteenth century, empires and imperial policies were identified by more than just ruling vast territories with ethnically and religiously diverse populations. For early critics of imperialism, expanding power in time and space represented another state in the development of bourgeois capitalism in metropolitan societies. From this a negative counternarrative developed around the concept of *empire*, no longer focusing on merely political aspects but on socioeconomic processes, and concentrating on the colonies' function to stabilize metropolitan economies and societies. These analyses resulted in attempts to explain the origins of empires and predict their future erosion based on models found in the works of John Hobson, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.¹⁹

(4) A fourth interpretation developed toward the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, as well as among Austrian Socialists: it concentrated on the idea of *empire* as a federation of diverse ethnic populations bound together as a commonwealth—a concept that soon denoted a model counter to the apparently successful model of the nineteenth-century nation-state. Within that perspective, empires seemed to provide a container for many ethnic groups without inevitably eroding because of aggressive nationalist and secessionist movements. But this positive connotation of *empire* in the sense of "federation" and "commonwealth" could in practice always be contrasted with imperial rule, for example, in South Africa, India, or Ireland in the case of the British Empire.²⁰

University Press, 2000); Benedikt Stuchtey, *Die europäische Expansion und ihre Feinde: Kolonialismuskritik vom 18. bis in das 20. Jahrhundert* [European expansion and its enemies: Criticism of colonialism from the eighteenth to the twentieth century] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010).

18. John R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883).

19. Peter J. Cain and Mark Harrison, eds., *Imperialism: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001); Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

20. Theodor Schieder, "Idee und Gestalt des übernationalen Staates seit dem 19. Jahrhundert" [Idea and shape of the supranational state since the nineteenth century], *Historische Zeitschrift* 184 (1957): 336–366.

(5) Contrary to the idea of *empire* as a federation was the critical view of *empire* as a means of repressing young, newly awakened, nations. The empire as an authoritarian framework for multiethnic populations and stateless nations, a peoples' prison, became a highly influential component of modernization theories that saw the homogenous nation-state as the ideal structure for political and socioeconomic progress. The Greeks in the 1820s, the Poles after 1830, the Italian Risorgimento and the Hungarian national movement against the Habsburg Monarchy during the revolutions of 1848/1849 were examples that underlined the idea of a repressive empire. Woodrow Wilson's response to the crisis of World War I, his ideal of national self-determination, had much to do with this negative image. It also had a lasting impact on historiographies in the twentieth century because it offered a suggestive black-and-white dichotomy of repressive empires and repressed nations desperately seeking to emancipate themselves from imperial rule. Theodor Schieder's classification of secessionist nationalisms in Eastern Europe referred to this model, further molding the semantics of *empire* as well.²¹

In contrast to these five normative approaches, more recent syntheses have pointed to particularly analytical criteria behind *empires* and have added to the complex semantics.

(6) A further interpretative inroad into the complexities of empires was based on the differentiation between maritime and continental empires, referring to the ideal-types of the maritime British Empire on the one hand, and the Habsburg Monarchy, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire on the other. Helmut Gollwitzer and others have focused on the structural differences resulting from these basic constellations.²²

(7) Another perspective points to the external dimension of empires as agents and actors in international relations. In this respect, a classic example was and is the focus on the various crises over the Ottoman Empire's position and its long-term erosion in Southeast Europe. The development of the Oriental question from the eighteenth century to the Balkan wars and the outbreak

21. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Theodor Schieder, "Typologie und Erscheinungsformen des Nationalstaats in Europa" [Typology and shapes of the nation-state in Europe] in *Nationalismus und Nationalstaat: Studien zum nationalen Problem im modernen Europa* [Nationalism and the nation-state: Studies on the national problem in modern Europe], ed. Otto Dann and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 65–86; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

22. Heinz Gollwitzer, *Geschichte des weltpolitischen Denkens, vol. I: Vom Zeitalter der Entdeckungen bis zum Beginn des Imperialismus, vol. II: Zeitalter des Imperialismus und der Weltkriege* [History of cosmopolitan thought, vol. I: From the age of discoveries to the beginning of imperialism, vol. II: The age of imperialism and the World Wars] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972–1982).

of World War I served as a pretext to ask if authoritarian empires had not been particularly responsible for the destabilization of the international system.²³

(8) In contrast to the external perspective, more recent interpretations have concentrated on internal processes, thus overcoming the classical difference between metropolitan centers and colonial peripheries. A particular version of this interpretative pattern looks at the “empire at home”—at the ways and means by which imperial experiences have permeated metropolitan societies.²⁴

(9) Postcolonial studies and new imperial history have applied the critical approach of deconstructing images of empires and the imperial self. Originally focusing on the problematic role of European colonizers, but implicitly arguing on the basis of European connotations and concepts, which were then made the very object of critical deconstruction, this culturalist approach further challenged the traditional understanding of Europe and the Occident—the apparent center and apparent periphery. Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Eric Hobsbawm’s “invented traditions” were applied to imperial icons such as the imperial British monarchy.²⁵ Even more important have been debates on Orientalism and Occidentalism following Edward Said’s works, constructing the other from the European perspective or constructing Europe from the outward perspective, as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s subaltern studies and Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. All of these works have underlined the importance of the semantics of *empire* as markers of often-conflicting identities after formal empires have passed into history. These works underline that the semantics of *empire* cannot be reduced to a European perspective and understanding, but that the “writing back” of *empire* from the perspective of non-European voices, the reconstruction of the unequal meanings of *empire* in different imperial and colonial contexts, is of equal importance.²⁶ Although this article cannot include this perspective, it is clear that any future research will have to take it into systematic consideration.

23. See Gregor Schöllgen, *Imperialismus und Gleichgewicht: Deutschland, England und die orientalische Frage 1871–1914* [Imperialism and balance: Germany, England and the Oriental question] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 3rd edition, 2000).

24. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

25. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

26. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage Books, 1978); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Alexander L. Macfie, ed., *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, eds., *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Rep-*

(10) Finally, we can observe a renaissance of imperial paradigms and narratives from the 1980s and 1990s. The post-imperial era after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990/1991 and the apparent dominance of the United States in world politics has opened a variety of insights into the mechanisms of eroding empires and nation building. The interpretation of the Habsburg Monarchy as an example of a relatively successful policy to accommodate peaceful coexistence of many ethnic groups prior to 1914 pointed in this direction.²⁷ After 1989–1991, an obvious demand developed for imperial reinterpretations of world order, as demonstrated by the successes of Herfried Münkler's book on *Imperium* and Niall Ferguson's interpretation of the historic British Empire as a partial blueprint for an American Empire in the twenty-first century. Empires provide a kind of political and historical orientation that other institutions or agents seem unable to offer.

Empire as a Suggestive Metaphor

How can we explain the prominent role played by empires in historical narratives and semantics until the present? What makes empires such a suggestive historical narrative and metaphor for historical duration and change? Five aspects seem of particular relevance.

(1) *Empire* as a historical concept always refers to a particular aura that leads to grand historical comparisons—biblical empires, Egypt and Persia, the Maya, Chinese, Roman, and Christian empires—that transcend Europe and make historical analogies possible. These analogies allow quasi-sacral connotations that go beyond the mere semantics of “state” or “rule”. Empires, from that perspective, allow a conception of order that derives its legitimacy from narratives of continuity and duration. The *translatio imperii* creates a legitimizing chain of empires with a past, a present, and a future, and it stresses the importance of learning from imperial history, which has been a prominent feature from Gibbon to Ferguson. It was no accident that invented empire traditions in the course of the nineteenth century included the adoption of the very concept of *empire*, such as in the Ottoman and the Russian Empires, in order to underline their symbolic equality with other empires, such as the Ger-

resentations and Signifying Practices (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (London: Routledge, 2004). For a critical view on Said's thesis, see John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

27. Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848–1918* [The equality of nationalities in the constitution and administration of Austria, 1848–1918] (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985).

man or British Empires.²⁸ However, blueprints and master plans derived from imperial examples of the past also tend to provoke controversial debates on normative images of empires.

(2) Empires come with particular missions based on religious, moral, and heroic connotations. As one can see from the semantics of *Reich* in German, the medieval connotations were deeply rooted in Christian theology, linking the continuation of historical empires to a Christian direction of history. These meanings, which went well beyond that of “state” or “estate” in that they offered a particular universal legitimacy, pointing to messianic, eschatological, and utopian dimensions, led to the fascination of past contemporaries with the many *translationes imperii*. Even after the formal end of the old German Reich in 1804, the semantics of difference continued to impregnate political language in Germany, as the invented continuities of 1871 (“Second Reich”) and 1933 (“Third Reich”) demonstrated. The strong sense of fulfilling a plan in history, of making history complete, had its roots in the religious semantics behind *Reich*. Another important reference developed in the course of the nineteenth century when the relationship between (Christian) missions in colonial empires and the definition of empire as an instrument of civilization became crucial.²⁹

(3) Empires are characterized by large processes in time and space, hence the importance of connected leitmotifs such as expansion, agglomeration, invasion, and moving frontiers in contrast to static borders, of centers and peripheries, of contact zones, transfers, and spatial interactions, of integration, erosion, and disintegration.

(4) Empires apparently offer orientation through the imagined dichotomization between the imperial self and the colonized other, although the practice is characterized more often by hybrid combinations and varieties in between the two. Nevertheless, empires include particular dramatis personae, colorful heroic agents, ornamental contexts, and “situations coloniales.”³⁰

(5) Following from the many spatial and temporal constellations, empires offer particular insights into mechanisms, actors, and particular styles of rule,

28. Michael Ursinus, “Byzanz, Osmanisches Reich, türkischer Nationalstaat: Zur Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkriegs” [Byzantium, Ottoman Empire, Turkish nation-state: On the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous on the eve of World War I], in Lorenz, *Verdämmern der Macht*, 159–161.

29. John Gascoigne, “Introduction: Religion and Empire, a Historiographical Perspective,” *Journal of Religious History* 32 (2008): 159–178.

30. Jean Copans, “La ‘Situation Coloniale’ de Georges Balandier: Notion conjoncturelle ou modèle sociologique et historique” [The “colonial situation” by Georges Balandier: Vogue term or sociological and historical model], *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 110 (2001): 31–52.

as demonstrated by the examples of *divide et impera*, the focus on the imperial elite, on men on the spot, on the phenomena of the elite going native. Empires contend with a capital of historical experiences regarding flexible means to deal with ethnic, political, legal, religious, and geographical diversity. This can be contrasted with the imperial imitation of the nation-state model at the end of the nineteenth century, when invented imperial nationalisms—such as Turkification, Russification, Magyarization—provoked new national movements within empires, thus limiting the traditional freedom of action.³¹

Historical Semantics of *Empire* in Comparative Perspective

Friedrich Nietzsche's famous dictum—everything that contains in itself a whole history would evade any definition—can be applied to the semantics of *empire* as well.³² The concept meant very different things to different historical actors in different societies at different times. In order to avoid the trap of semantic nominalism, that is, the unreflected transfer of a concept from one historical context to another and the use of the concept only in retrospect, thereby neglecting the diachronic change and synchronic diversity of meanings, the following *tour d'horizon* is a first attempt to reconstruct major turning points in the historical semantics of *empire*. It is a symptomatic analysis, focusing on Western European perspectives and also leaving out the important views of the colonized and their counterconcepts.

Universalism and Particularism: The Meaning of Imperium from the Ancient World to the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period

Imperium, from which the word “empire” is derived, signified legitimate authority or dominion in Roman antiquity. In the historical context of the Roman

31. Alexei Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism: Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008); Jürgen Osterhammel, “Europamodelle und imperiale Kontexte” [Concepts of Europe and imperial contexts], *Journal of Modern European History* 2, no. 2 (2004): 157–181; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* [The transformation of the world: A history of the nineteenth century] (Munich: Beck, 2009), 565–672; Christopher A. Bayly, *Die Geburt der modernen Welt: Eine Globalgeschichte 1780–1914* (Frankfurt: Campus-Verlag, 2006), 248–300, English ed.: *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

32. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zur Genealogie der Moral: Zweite Abhandlung: ‘Schuld’, ‘schlechtes Gewissen’, Verwandtes” [On the genealogy of morals: Second essay: ‘Guilt’, ‘bad conscience’ and the like], chap. 13 in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1993), 317.

republic, the *imperator* was first of all a successful military leader and general, and even when *imperator* came to be identified with monarch, *imperium* and *imperator* retained a strong element of military command and military office. This semantic coupling of *empire* with the spheres of war and the military was to become a lasting legacy. In the nineteenth century many of the newly invented traditions of the empire referred to the military in order to offer a monarchical symbol of unity, as documented by many examples ranging from both Napoleons to the Ottoman Sultans, the Russian Tsars, and the Meiji tennō in Japan. Military iconography and the symbolization of the ability to wage war were decisive for communicating the meaning of empire. In the context of ancient Rome *imperium* came to denote Rome's right to command obedience from all subjugated peoples. At the same time it referred to the dual self-images of a superior civilization, marked by the contrast to barbarian peoples and to the idea of a universal monarchy. This was also reflected in Greek philosophy, which from the second century BCE onward had drawn a parallel between the *Imperium Romanum* and the universe (*oikumene*). Thus, the semantics of *orbis terrarum* and *imperium* came together.³³

Imperium's meaning in the Middle Ages was first of all suffused by the rise of Christianity. This led to a new combination of a universal monotheistic religion and a universal imperial tradition. This particular sacralization of *imperium* had far-reaching consequences for the heirs of the *Imperium Romanum*. The meaning of *imperium* in Byzantium was marked by the ability of the Byzantine emperor to fully control the patriarch of Constantinople and the Eastern Church, whereas in the Western part of the former *imperium*, a long conflict developed between the Pope on the one hand and the imperial power on the other. Whereas the Western interpretation of *imperium* had to take into account the rise of territorial states and hereditary aristocratic actors in politics, leading to new concepts of law and contracts, such restrictions did not matter in the Byzantine interpretation of *imperium*.³⁴ Here the formal claim to symbolize the direct tradition of the *Imperium Romanum* continued until 1493. The traditional duality of West and East according to the idea of *divisio imperii* and *renovatio imperii* gave way in the eleventh century to a perceived superiority of the Western empire.

In the course of the Middle Ages, three levels of the semantics of *empire* in the Western tradition can be discerned. The complication of the semantics resulted from the fact that these levels could not be separated; rather, they overlapped and led to quasi-entangled meanings. First, the Carolingian concept

33. Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London: John Murray, 2000), 7–9.

34. Paul Veyne, "L'Empire romain," in Duverger, *Concept*, 121–129; Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

of empire referred to the restoration in 800 CE of the Holy Roman Empire by Charlemagne, king of the Franks and first emperor of this restored *Imperium Romanum*. The *translatio imperii a Graecis ad Francos* was later continued by the *translatio* to the Saxon king Otto in 962 CE.³⁵ The Carolingian imperial title, derived from the function of the defender of the Latin Christian church, marked Charlemagne as a *primus inter pares* among the other European monarchs, but Charlemagne did not follow universalist objectives. Rather, the political practice of this *imperium* was characterized by decentralization and devolution of power. Nevertheless, this example became a prime point of reference for Napoleon I after 1804 when he looked for historical sources of imperial legitimacy and analogy.

Second, the universal empire according to the interpretation of the Roman Pope was developed in response to attempts by the Hohenstaufen emperors in the twelfth and thirteenth century to convert the Carolingian *imperium* into a universal empire. The Pope's definition built upon the universality not of political domination but of religion and evangelization, if necessary by the means of holy wars in crusades.

Third, following and expanding the tradition of the Carolingian interpretation, empire could refer to the concrete territory of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (*Heiliges Römisches Reich deutscher Nation*). The early definitions of *Reich* in German political language integrated older traditions, such as Charlemagne, but the constitutional and political meaning of *Reich* unfolded in the fourteenth century when the conflict with the Pope and German emperors' Italian involvements had ceased and the Reich had developed its own characteristic constitutional framework. This framework created a loose confederation that allowed for maximum autonomy for imperial cities, ecclesiastical territories, and princes. This tradition had long-term consequences well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁶ Even in the entry of the French *Encyclopédie* of 1755, *empire*, in general meaning, referred to a vast territory, whereas the specific meaning was clearly applied to the case of Germany: "Empire. This is the name which one gives to states that are submitted to a sovereign who has the title of 'emperor,'" as in the cases of Russia and the Moghul Empire. However, "among us we apply the name of 'empire' primarily to the German political body which is a republic composed of all the princes

35. Jörg Fisch, "Imperialismus," in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* [Historical basic concepts: Encyclopedia of the politico-social language in Germany], vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 172–174.

36. Lieven, *Empire*, 13–17; R. Folz, *The Concept of Empire in Western Europe from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin, Werner Conze, Elisabeth Fehrenbach, Notker Hammerstein and Peter Moraw, "Reich," *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 423–508.

and states that form the three electoral colleges and which are submitted to a chief which is the emperor.”³⁷

For and Against Empire: Criticism and the Polemic Use of the Concept in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

As a legacy of the medieval period, the universalistic semantics of *empire*, as developed so powerfully, for instance, in Dante’s *monarchia universalis*, were still present in political theory in the fourteenth century. However, against the background of rising territorial kingdoms in Europe, there was no realistic prospect of an empire capable of exercising power over the individual kingdoms. Instead, contemporary political theory of the fourteenth century in France developed the idea of the king being emperor in his own realm—*rex est imperator in regno suo*—in an attempt to prevent any interference from external actors.³⁸ The period of the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe confirmed this development: contrary to the idea of Charles V to establish a new empire surpassing its Roman predecessor in the name of Christian-Catholic universalism, Protestants and their European princes and monarchs referred to the defense of sovereignty.

In England *empire* referred for a long time simply to dominion of land: “As the true proportion or balance of Dominion in land, such is the nature of Empire.”³⁹ However, in the seventeenth century the maritime dimension became an important element of the semantics. As early as 1685 Nathaniel Crouch differentiated between *kingdom*, *dominion*, and *empire*. Whereas Great Britain was identified with the “three famous Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland,” he applied *empire* to the “Acquisitions and Dominions of the English Monarchy in America.”⁴⁰ A more systematic discussion of the concept with

37. “C’est le nom qu’on donne aux états qui sont soumis à un souverain qui a le titre d’empereur,” as in the cases of Russia and the Moghul Empire. However, “parmi nous, on donne le nom d’empire par excellence au corps Germanique, qui est une république composée de tous les princes et états qui forment les trios collèges de l’Allemagne, et soumise à un chef qui est l’empereur” (translated by Jörn Leonhard). Edme-François Mallet and Paul Henri Thiry d’Holbach, “Empire,” in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres: Mis en ordre et publié par M. Diderot, et, quant à la partie mathématique, par M. d’Alembert*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1755), 582.

38. Steffen Schlinker, *Fürstentum und Rezeption: Reichsfürstenstand und gelehrte Literatur im späten Mittelalter* [Imperial princes and reception: The estate of the imperial princes of the Holy Roman Empire and academic literature in the late Middle Ages] (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 269–272; Jörg Fisch, “Imperialismus,” *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 3:173–175.

39. James Harrington, *Oceana*, in *Works*, James Harrington, ed. John Toland (Aalen: Scienta Verlag, 1963), 37; Hans Fenske, “Gewaltenteilung,” *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 2:928.

40. Nathaniel Crouch, *The English Empire in America: Or a Prospect of His Majesties Dominions in the West-Indies ... With an account of the Discovery, Scituation [sic], Product, and*

political connotations used in public discussion on the state of Britain in relation to her colonies developed in the eighteenth century. The focal point of the definition of *empire* shifted from the spatial dimension to that of a particular style of political rule. In 1752 Thomas Pownall referred to the language of classical republicanism:

This Modelling the People into various Orders, and Subordinations of Orders, so as to be capable of receiving and communicating any Motion, and acting under that Direction as a one Whole, is what the Romans called by the peculiar Word Imperium, to express which particular Groups of Ideal, we have no Word in English but by adopting the Word Empire. 'Tis by this System only that a People become a political Body; 'tis the Chain, the Bond of Union, by which very vague and independent Particles cohere: 'Tis, as Livy says, the Circean Wand, touched by which, Men and even Brutes grow tame and manageable; where this Cement is not, all Things run together into Confusion, and fall to Ruin where there is not this Foundation.⁴¹

Edward Gibbon's classic analysis of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire was meant to be a warning against overstretching the British Empire after the experience of 1776. But the contemporary discussion did not focus so much on the concept of *empire*, since most colonies were seen more as commercial entities and less as forming a coherent political entity. The meaning of the concept still lacked an essentially polemic structure. Thus, Alexander Hamilton, who had fought for the American colonies' independence against Britain, could still identify the United States as "an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world."⁴² Nonetheless, the experience of the North American colonies' independence from London brought a fundamental new notion to the understanding of *empire*, that is, the possible secession from empire, based on anti-imperialist arguments taken from classical republicanism and theories of resistance from the early modern period.

More important was the systematic critique and denunciation of *empire* in enlightened political theory. *Empire* came to be identified with extended territories and despotism. Historical and contemporary examples were used to back up this interpretation: the self-governed Roman Republic had been perverted into an *imperium* by expansion that had gone hand in hand with despotism, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire offered an excellent case

other Excellencies of these Countries. To which is prefixed a Relation of the first Discovery of the New World called America, by the Spaniards. And of the Remarkable Voyages of several Englishmen to divers places therein. Illustrated with Maps and Pictures (London, 1685), 1.

41. Thomas Pownall, *Principles of Polity, Being the Grounds and Reasons of Civil Empire: In Three Parts* (London, 1752), 93–94.

42. Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (1787), 33, quoted in Lieven, *Empire*, 17.

for arguing that vast territories could only be integrated through means of force and repression. Thus Montesquieu argued:

a great empire necessarily requires a despotic authority for him who governs, since it is essential that decisions are taken promptly to make up for the remoteness of the places to which they are conveyed, that fear puts a check on the distant governor and magistrate, and that the law springs from a single head, capable of never-ceasing adjustments in accordance with the chance events which always multiply in the state in proportion to its dimensions. Without this there would be a dismemberment of the Monarchy into its separate parts and the diverse peoples, released from a domination which they regard as foreign, would begin to live under their own laws.⁴³

A second strand of criticism developed in contemporary political economy. The anti-mercantilist theorists, especially Adam Smith, criticized the widening gap between theory and reality of *empire*: “The rulers of Great Britain have ... amused the people with the imagination that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic. This empire, however, has hitherto existed in imagination only. It has hitherto been, not an empire, but the project of an empire.”⁴⁴ They regarded *empire* as a symbol of a particular colonial economy, which Smith associated with slave labor and non-constitutional rule, in stark contrast to the ideal of free trade and international division of labor. This critical leitmotif was revived when, in the last third of the nineteenth century, protection seemed on the agenda again. Now it was identified with the idea of making colonial empires the cornerstone in a system of protected economies, allowing complete control over territory and resources for the well-being of metropolitan societies in Europe. John Hobson’s explanation of imperialism as the highest state of empire then referred to protection as the natural strategy of empires. For Joseph Schumpeter, *empire, imperialism*, and the idea of isolated economic entities simply denoted an atavism in history, linked to the existence of military aristocratic classes and warfare, contradicting the evolution of capitalism as a “progressive rationalisation of life and mind.” Finally, Marxism and Leninism focused equally on the social and economic side of empire. Whereas Marx believed in the historical necessity of colonial empires to awake the native peoples from their “undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life,” Lenin challenged the notion of any relation between pre-modern, essentially non-capitalist, empires and the imperialism of his own days. Monopolized finance capital and political government had to combine in order to

43. Baron de Montesquieu, *Deux Opuscules de Montesquieu: Réflexions sur la Monarchie Universelle en Europe* [Reflections on universal monarchy in Europe] (Paris: J. Rouam & cie, 1891), 19.

44. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 464.

find new markets for trade and investment. The permanent wars between the empire-powers would finally provoke revolutions.⁴⁵

Whereas these critiques of *empire* used economic arguments, advocates of *empire* in the nineteenth century referred to different criteria, usually derived from the political and ideological sphere. The origins of the two-fold levels of meaning—the socioeconomic level and the political and ideological level—lie here. In 1804, Napoleon's empire in France denoted an attempt to develop a specific ideological legitimacy of his new post-revolutionary regime. An amalgamation of bourgeois revolutionary achievements such as the *Code Civil*, the *idées libérales*, and a *constitution libérale*, extraordinary military successes and monarchical traditions pointed to the chain of imperial predecessors.⁴⁶ The identification of his empire with that of Charlemagne did not take the universalism of Christian religion as its core; rather, it was the European span of his imperial territory that was at its core. In that imperial perspective, the empire's expansion could also be identified with a particular mission and the export of the revolution's progressive legacy. Empire was associated not only with the grandeur of France but also with the historical force of young, stateless nations such as Poland or Italy, for which Napoleon claimed a special responsibility. At the same time, his nephew, Louis Bonaparte, imitated the meanings that his uncle had attached to empire and also expanded the semantics of the concept by a social connotation and a self-image of peaceful progress, despite the fact that the famous motto of 1852, *l'empire, c'est la paix*, stood increasingly in contrast to the French empire's involvement in wars from the mid-1850s onward.⁴⁷

45. John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1988), 67, 71, 106; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism (and) Social Classes* (New York, 1955), 65–92, quoted in Lieven, *Empire*, 9–21; Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948).

46. Jörn Leonhard, “Das Präsens der Revolution: Der Bonapartismus in der europäischen Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts” [The present of the revolution: Bonapartism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European history], in *Kommunikation und Konfliktatrag: Verfassungskultur als Faktor politischer und gesellschaftlicher Machtverhältnisse* [Communication and conflict: Constitutional culture as a factor of political and social hierarchy], Werner Daum, Kathrin S. Hartmann, Simon Palaoro, and Bärbel Suderbrink, eds. (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2010), 293–317.

47. Quoted in [Tavernier], *Deuxième mémoire adressé au gouvernement de S. M. l'Empereur Napoléon III sur l'expédition de Crimée et la conduite de la guerre de l'Orient, par un officier général* (Geneva: Lauffer, 1855), 66, and Johannes Willms, *Napoleon III.: Frankreichs letzter Kaiser* [Napoleon III.: The last French emperor] (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008), 163; see Jörn Leonhard, *Bellizismus und Nation: Kriegsdeutung und Nationsbestimmung in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten, 1750–1914* [Belligerence and the nation: War discourses and the determination of the nation in Europe and the United States, 1750–1914] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 517–533.

In Germany in the pre-1800s, the early modern meaning of *Reich*, with its complex and overlapping sovereignties, remained a strong point of reference even after the formal end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1804. In this respect Hegel's identification of the succession of four empires—the Persian, Greek, Roman, and German Empires—and the evolution of progress became very influential.⁴⁸ Yet at the same time, Hegel's concept of the state underlined the existence of a powerful and alternative concept that could nevertheless be coupled with *empire*. Both in 1871 and in 1933 the new political regimes referred prominently to the semantics of *empire*, using the names “the Second Empire” (*Zweites Kaiserreich*) of the German nation-state and the Third Reich. However, in 1871 *Reich* no longer denoted a loose federation with local autonomies, but referred to the ideal of a homogenous German nation under Prussian auspices and to an imperializing nation-state. Despite using the idea of imperial continuation and analogy, the Third Reich marked the complete opposite of the traditions of the old Reich, defining the German people's future in purely racist terms and going beyond all traditional boundaries by the imagination of a Greater German Empire (*Grossdeutsches Reich*) as a homogenous racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*).

With the end of Napoleon's regime in 1870, *empire* lost the meaning of a realistic political alternative and its semantics were reduced to the sphere of France's colonial possessions. In contrast to the French context, with the stabilization of the Third Republic's political culture, the semantics of *Reich* in Germany became essential for its further development, even after the formal end of the old Reich in 1804. The historian Heinrich August Winkler started his analysis of Germany's history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the famous sentence “Am Anfang war das Reich” (“At the beginning there was the Holy Roman Empire”) in order to underline that only by overcoming the false myths of *Reich* could Germany master her long path to the West.⁴⁹

In the British use of the concept of *empire* toward the late nineteenth century, the perception of international competition became crucial. For outspoken defenders of the British Empire, the concept was less associated with economic protectionism, and more with an attempt to integrate the former colonies, with their sizeable European settlements. These former colonies were to enjoy quasi autonomy as dominions and join into an imperial federation.

48. Gottfried W. Hegel, “Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse” [Elements of the philosophy of law], in *Sämtliche Werke*, Gottfried W. Hegel, vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Frohmann, 1928), §§ 349, 351, 347, 352–354; Gottfried W. Hegel, “Philosophie der Geschichte” [The philosophy of history], in Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, 11:92, 111.

49. Heinrich A. Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. I: *Deutsche Geschichte vom Ende des Alten Reiches bis zum Untergang der Weimarer Republik* [Germany: The long road West 1789–1933] (Munich: Beck, 2000), 5.

Here the difference between *empire* and *dominion* proved to be important. Canada, for instance, achieved far-reaching legislative autonomy in 1867 and was then called “Dominion of Canada,” but “dominion” as a concept to denote all self-governing colonies of the British Empire came into use only in the course of the early twentieth century and was formally defined by the Statute of Westminster in 1931. In Charles Dilke’s influential work of 1868, the primary focus on the former settler colonies went hand in hand with a definition of empire as a politically and culturally “Greater Britain,” amalgamating racist and social Darwinist connotations:

In America, the peoples of the world are being fused together, but they are run into an English mould: Alfred’s laws and Chaucer’s tongue are theirs ... Through America, England is speaking to the world. Sketches of Saxondom may be of interest even upon humbler grounds: the development of the England of Elizabeth is to be found, not in the Britain of Victoria, but in half the habitable globe. If two small islands are by courtesy styled “Great” America, Australia, India, must form a Greater Britain.”⁵⁰

The racist connotations were obvious, and they also found their way into the concept of former “white settler colonies” as the basis of the dominion status, denoting a racist understanding of *empire* that excluded non-white inhabitants from any imperial federation.⁵¹

At the same time, the concept of “Greater Britain” allowed a certain distancing from *empire*, which came under increasing pressure and criticism when identified with imperial violence and repressive rule. John Robert Seeley, a professor of history at Cambridge, acknowledged the importance of the concept “Colonial Empire” for Britain’s self-image, but he also pointed to a more critical semantics: “The expression ‘Colonial Empire’ is familiar to us, and yet there is something strange in the juxtaposition of words. The word empire seems too military and despotic to suit the relation of a mother-country to her colonies.”⁵² In contrast, the positive connotation of “Greater Britain” referred not only to English culture and nationality but also to a particular political culture that helped to distinguish the British Empire from all historical predecessors.

Greater Britain is a real enlargement of the English State; it carries across the seas not merely the English race, but the authority of the English Govern-

50. Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867*, 2 vols. (London: MacMillan, 1868), 1:vii.

51. Benno Gammerl, *Staatsbürger, Untertanen und Andere: Der Umgang mit ethnischer Heterogenität im Britischen Weltreich und im Habsburgerreich 1867–1918* [Citizens, subjects and others: The handling of ethnic heterogeneity in the British and Habsburg Empires 1867–1918] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 65–67.

52. Seeley, *Expansion of England*, 37.

ment. We call it for want of a better word an Empire. And it does resemble the great Empires of history in this respect, that it is an aggregate of provinces, each of which has a government which is sent out to it from the political head-quarters and which is a kind of delegation from the supreme government. But yet it is wholly unlike the great Empires, of the Old World, Persian or Macedonian or Roman or Turkish, because it is not in the main founded on conquest, and because in the main the inhabitants of the distant provinces are of the same nation as those of the dominant country. It resembles them in its vast extent, but it does not resemble them in that violent military character which has made most Empires short-lived and liable to speedy decay.⁵³

The empire as a federation had a decisively political meaning. Seeley wrote that the only way to respond to the rise of the United States and Russia was to act like an empire following the example of the United States and establish a federal union of countries that were very remote from each other:

Our colonies do not resemble the colonies which classical students meet with in Greek and Roman history, and our Empire is not an Empire at all in the ordinary sense of the word. It does not consist of a congeries of nations held together by force, but in the main of one nation, as much as if it were no Empire but an ordinary state.⁵⁴

However, it was not clear whether such a political entity would still be an empire. Moreover the idea of a particular civilizing mission, avoiding the mistakes of former empires, became prominent. Thus Lord Rosebery admitted that he did not know any word other than empire that “adequately expresses a number of states of vast size under a single sovereign,” but he insisted at the same time that “our Empire is not an Empire in the ordinary sense of the word ... the English Empire is on the whole free from that weakness which has brought down most empires, the weakness of being a mere mechanical forced union of alien nationalities.” He concluded his definition by referring to the idea of the empire as a “Greater Britain,” by stating that the British Empire was not really an empire, but “a vast English nation, only a nation so widely dispersed that before the age of steam and electricity its strong natural bonds of race and religion seemed practically dissolved by distance.” This definition focused exclusively on the white dominions. With regard to the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of the British Empire, contemporaries underlined its cultural meaning, its function for civilizing the colonies, where whites exclusively formed a tiny administrative minority. Alfred Milner admitted that “[e]mpire and imperialism are words which lend themselves to much abuse,” but he insisted that once one had stripped them of “tawdry accessories,” one would dis-

53. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

54. *Ibid.*, 46–47, 51; Lieven, *Empire*, 20.

cover their “real grandeur ... we believe that it is only by such union that they [the kindred peoples under the British flag] can attain their highest individual development.” Rosebery simply identified the empire as “the greatest secular agency for good known in the world.”⁵⁵

Against this background the Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1910 saw the English concepts of *empire* and *imperialism* in stark contrast to the authoritarian French understanding of *empire*. The British version stood for “free co-ordination, and the self-government of each co-ordinated part.” The common law tradition, as well as the political and social values of Britain, served to unify elements in this definition. At the same time, and indirectly, these elements reflected an empire in defense, in India, in Ireland, in South Africa after the experiences of the Boer War, and elsewhere:

The British Empire is, in a sense, an aspiration rather than a reality, a thought rather than a fact ... yet it has, like its prototype, one law, if not the law of Rome—one faith, if not in matters of religion, and at any rate in the field of political and social ideals.⁵⁶

Outlook: Ideological Usages and the Politics of History in the Twentieth Century

Radicalized versions of imperializing nation-states evolved in Italy, Germany, and Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, and in all of these contexts *imperio*, *Reich*, and *empire* served as fundamental points of reference for the definition of these regimes’ legitimacy and aims by references to notions of imperial pasts and imperial continuity. But even after the end of these regimes in 1945, the polemical use of empire in political language was far from exhausted and greatly accelerated against the background of the Cold War when the Soviet Union denounced the West as imperialist, whereas Western politicians referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.”⁵⁷

In the context of the Third World and decolonization, *empire* became a key word to question the European powers’ claim to maintaining colonial possessions. But the period of decolonization is interesting for yet another reason: the examples of both Britain and France show how important the political

55. Lord Archibald P. Rosebery, *Questions of Empire* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1900) and Lord Alfred Milner, *The Nation and the Empire: Being a Collection of Speeches and Addresses* (London: Constable and Company, 1913), both quoted in Lieven, *Empire*, 21.

56. “Empire,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 9:356.

57. David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the Evil Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

connotation of empire could be, even if it was not used in political language. Both Ireland and Algeria were by definition and constitutional setting not parts of the respective empires. Ireland, after 1801, had become an integral part of the United Kingdom, in the same way that Algeria had become a part of the French motherland in the course of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the use of *empire* as a watchword in connection with the situations of Ireland and Algeria had enormous political and mobilizing consequences, because it allowed developing analogies between the suppression of national independence movements there and in other parts of the colonial empires of Britain and France. If one denied Ireland a semantic context of *empire* and regarded it as an inseparable part of the motherland, it was no longer possible to apply the model of the white dominions and the practice of home rule to this case. Similarly, whether Algeria was defined as a part of the *empire colonial* of France or as *Algérie Française* mattered enormously.⁵⁸ In other words, the contemporary definition of what belonged to an empire and what did not had a deep impact on the process of decolonization by means of political languages.

The end of decolonization went hand in hand with a new focus on European integration, and with it came the first of many revivals of *empire* in contemporary political language. But can the European Union really be portrayed as a return to an enlightened version of empire?⁵⁹ Otto von Habsburg, son of the last Habsburg emperor, representative of the Pan-European Union and member of the European parliament, developed the idea of the “European Union, which we want to make a supranational lawful polity in the sense of the old Reich.” According to him, the European Union should be a confederation of mixed and overlapping sovereignties and a system allowing a maximum of local identity and autonomy. Since the word *Reich* would lead to confusion, and because of the word’s mainly negative historical connotations, Habsburg argued that

Reich meant for the French a centralized polity which is a centralized power state. This is much more similar to the Roman Empire, a territorially sovereign polity with defined borders, than to the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages that wanted to be and was something completely different. In distinction to the French, the English have an equivalent to the German word ‘Reich,’ namely commonwealth.⁶⁰

58. Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie coloniale (1830–1954)* [A history of colonial Algeria (1830–1954)] (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 2004).

59. Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

60. Otto von Habsburg, *Die Reichsidee: Geschichte und Zukunft einer übernationalen Ordnung* [The idea of Reich: History and future of a supranational order] (Vienna: Amalthea, 1986), 7, 28–74.

Here the many conflicting definitions of empire and the problems of translating *imperium*, *empire*, and *Reich* from one language to another without levelling the complex historical meanings becomes obvious. Because of these historical legacies—ranging from the totalitarian experiences to those of decolonization—*empire* has not really become an acceptable label for explaining the European Union's character.

The concept's presence in political language instead points to two different contexts: After 1990/1991, *empire*, often in retrospect, was applied to the Soviet Union to underline its multiethnic composition, and explain its failure in light of its inability to deal with this variety. In the Western perspective, the search for a positive meaning of empire became quite obvious after the watershed years of 1989–1991 as well. It was no accident that historians like Niall Ferguson looked at the example of the British Empire of the nineteenth century in order to develop a role model for the United States as the last remaining global power capable of securing political order and economic stability. This example demonstrates how important the political use of historical arguments, and the politics of history, actually are for the semantics of empire in modern political language. The waves of publications on the meaning of empire in a post-imperial world demonstrate that this debate is far from over.⁶¹

Conclusion: Some Observations on General Trends

Against the background of these very preliminary and symptomatic findings we may nevertheless identify at least some ideal-type aspects that seem elementary to understanding the historical semantics of *empire*.

First, the concept of *empire* includes in itself a *longue durée* and a particular structure of temporalization, not only the actual semantics of *empire* from antiquity to the present, but also the ideas of lines of succession, of historical continuity and analogies on the basis of *translatio* and *renovatio imperii*.

Second, the semantics of *empire* were often impregnated by a tension between universalism and particularism, between a missionary universalism of civilization and a political reality of eroding imperial rule. The tension existed also when the semantics of *empire* were confronted by rising territorial states from the time of the Middle Ages, when there were competing continental empires, when colonial empires developed in the course of the nineteenth century, and when compared with the model of the homogeneous and effective nation-state.

61. Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, "Zwischen Historisierung und Globalisierung: Titel, Themen und Trends der neueren Empire-Forschung" [Between historization and globalization: Titles, themes and trends of recent research on empires], *Neue Politische Literatur* 56 (2011): 389–404.

Third, there developed particular leitmotifs in the semantics of *empire*: from the sphere of military and war, of monarchical dynasties and religion as means of imperial integration, to the spatial images and dichotomies of center vs. periphery, extension vs. overstretching, and flexible imperial frontiers vs. fixed borders of nation-states. From the eighteenth century onward the identification of vast territories and particular forms of government, the danger of declining into despotic and repressive regimes, was a constant feature, as was the apparent ideal-type dichotomy between multiethnic empires and homogenizing nation-states.

Fourth, as in the history of other key concepts, the semantics of *empire* became differentiated through a critical and even polemical discussion of the concept, the development of counter-concepts and counter-models of rule—most importantly the nation-state—and the search for alternative concepts such as “federation” or “commonwealth”. In the course of these processes, starting from the late eighteenth century, political and ideological connotations became distinguished from economic ones.

Finally, discourses on *empire* were and still are always discourses about the legitimacy of particular models of rule, and the semantics of *empire* reflect the different political, socioeconomic, or cultural layers of legitimacy, and very often also the tension between these layers. The extraordinary renaissance of *empire* in present-day political language seems due to a particular combination of a suggestive imagination of order cum prosperity and an applied politics of history corresponding to an increased demand for suggestive historical metaphors. Both elements were already visible in Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as a contemporary response to the British experiences of imperial failure in 1776—from that perspective, we may still find ourselves in the shadow of *empire*.