

Teaching about Imperialism
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In traditional world maps, students notice a small explosion emanating from Western Europe beginning in 1492. Over the next four centuries this small explosion gradually drapes the rest of the earth in the national colors of European colonizers. Then, beginning in the early twentieth century, these national colors begin to retreat, until, by the end of the 1970s, all parts of the globe are restored to their original, national colors. End of story. Nothing to report here.

To many high school students, imperialism is very remote, and they feel that it has nothing to do with them. Yet empire is as close to all of them as the gas heating their homes, their breakfast cereal, their rides to school, their telephones, their television, and their future training and employment. Lough characterizes the United States today as an imperial power, since it had a military presence in 46 countries in 2002. Everything we produce, consume, and buy exists in an interconnected web of markets which, Lough argues, are characterized by relations of dominance and servitude. When students enter the world, they enter empire. In the classroom teachers can try to generate productive debate. These issues are so controversial and provocative that it is difficult to not generate debate. The study of imperialism can be approached in different ways. But historians are very good at asking two questions: **why here and not there**; and **why now and not then**.

Humans have been around for 2.5 million years; only in the last 0.4% of their existence have they lived in settled communities. For 99.6% of the time people have been on the planet, they did not put down roots. Why, after 99.6% of our time on Earth, did humans do this? A similar question can be raised about Empire. Some people ask what humans were doing wrong before they stumbled upon empire; but why did empire appear in Europe when it did, particularly in Europe, which Lough characterizes as a “cold, wet, resource-poor backwater”?

Traditional approaches to imperialism see it as a function of **states**. States appear fairly late. Most humans for most of human existence wandered as nomads. States build walls to prevent nomads from coming in. Societies run by dynastic familial units, Lough believes, should not be thought of as states, but rather as the possessions of warlords. Some of these warlords have been very successful.

Traditional approaches also think of imperialism as a matter of **money**. Indeed, there are greedy individuals and corporations. However, imperialism has more to do with coordinating productive human activity on a broad and finally global scale. The traditional approach argues that imperialism is a concentration of power. But in a way, imperialism is a dispersal or decentralization of power, which no one can control. When sovereigns deploy their wealth and their subjects to promote the imperial projects of their private economic elites, they have in fact handed the reins of power over to these private forces. We should therefore be skeptical over state claims to imperial power. Imperialism is a sign not of the strength, but of the weakness of states. Portugal, Spain, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, and the United States of America claim to colonize North America, part of Mexico, and part

of Central and South America, but states were in fact the big losers in such endeavors. The actors in this drama are not able to change the rules: they are constrained to obey an **economic rationality** which, should they not obey, will cause them to fail. They are constrained by a new set of rules but are disempowered by this decentering, by this proliferation.

In place of what Lough defines as a traditional approach to imperialism, he proposes the following. When Louis XIV announced “l'état, c'est moi,” we should see this ironically. The French nation, and Versailles, had never been situated so well. It was a benevolent monarchy. But as we look more closely at France, Spain, the Romanovs, and so on, we see dynasties increasingly dependent on **private international capital** for their survival. Those families that spurn capital become the losers, at least initially. Great Britain, by contrast, where the state completely submits to the logic of international capital, ends up on the top of the heap.

It is precisely because Louis XIV “is” the state that France undergoes a century of revolution. The problem is created by a group of aristocratic old-family elites trying to cling to power. Russia, which will not allow its bourgeoisie to rise and will not allow capital accumulation, will suffer for a century. Britain, which rationalized its markets and administration first, prospered. **Thus, it is in the places where these dynasties give up and say “capital is king” that the state booms.**

Imperialism of the modern sort therefore involves a globalized, decentered production. When dynasties give up their sovereignty and hand it to private corporations, these corporations are authorized to go out and organize human activity either domestically or in foreign territory. This activity expands beyond the artificial lines of the nation-state. Thus, modern imperialism entails the dispersal and depersonalization of power.

The **supersession of the state** fundamentally distinguishes modern empire from all those historical empires to which modern imperialism is compared, like the Han Empire or Roman Empire or Abassid Caliphate. Most older empires were extensions of warlords or of single families. It is important to distinguish between states based upon loyalty to families versus states that are based upon loyalty to depersonalized offices.

In the traditional view we think of states accumulating many natural resources, but it is not the state that accumulates these. Armies go where capital goes. Armies follow capital around the globe. Modern imperialism marks the end of individual dynastic power. It marks the private accumulation not of natural resources but of capital. In late 18th and early 19th centuries huge investor bubbles appear that are still with us. The aim of modern imperialism is to find those markets that will enable individuals to accumulate as much capital as possible. Sometimes the markets get overheated and there are not enough real goods there. But the aim is the private accumulation of capital. States become dependent upon empire. And this is a global coordination of labor.

In many world-historical empires if people did not work, they were killed. Many warlord-type societies did not beg people to work, but coerced them through physical punishment and execution. In older empires, labor served power, and the aim was material wealth. But this changes. The modern empires' aim is indirect coordination. Coercion, in the form of

physical punishment and execution, is no longer employed. Individuals are free to refrain from employment, but their family will starve if they do not work.

For the ancients, at a certain point all the storehouses were full. But when you measure modern capital, how much is enough? It is an immaterial measure of wealth. In many older historical empires, the emperor and dynasty control things, and the empire is subject to the will of the heads. Modern empires do not work this way. They are decentralized. Their rules are local.

This brings us back to the two questions *why here and not there*, and *why now and not then*.

“There” is hierarchalized, technologically advanced, richly textured, widely diffused culturally and linguistically, highly coordinated, centralized. One evidence of real empire “there” is that people can understand each other from coast to coast. It is materially luxurious, relatively unsustainable – this is why these empires rise up and collapse: they cannot be sustained.

“Here” is dispersed, flexible, ad hoc, and local. It is technologically and scientifically backward: read any sermon from C9 or C10 AD from France. These are very magical folk. Western Europe is also richly textured, but local. It is materially wanting. There is nothing present to attack. Generally communities that have not developed material resources are left alone.

Why was “here” particularly vulnerable to a new technology of value? Traditional value is determined by a complex coordination of interests, a very local geometry of guilds, warlords, priests, and peasants. To these we might add the supreme overriding interest of nature itself. The rising and setting of the sun, the passage of the seasons, the ebb and flow the tides, the migrations of animals, the movements of the heavens; all pass without the slightest interest in human will or events. Value-formation in traditional societies arises out of a variety of forces and interests that were necessarily negotiated socially and publicly and were always subject to change.

This begins to change in the thirteenth century for a variety of reasons. Largely it changes because the Muslims are spreading into the North towards the West and this spread of Islam reacquaints priests and churchmen with ideas and philosophers of whom they had previously read only tertiary accounts. It also provokes the Byzantine Empire to push back against Islam and ask for help from the West. This growth of Islam and interpenetration of Western Europe and Islam produced something valueless in the East, namely the clockwork. Clockwork was valuable in the East for astrological purposes, but was not used for measuring time. But in the West it was used by Muslims and Christians to announce prayer. With this new technology, we now have bells ringing all across Western Europe in time with one another. In China, India, or other well-developed communities, this would make no difference. In Western Europe because of its decentered, weak, fragmented nature, there is not much to unite these communities. But now they are united by the ringing of these bells at precise moments of the day, which clever entrepreneurs recognized could replace the rising and setting of the sun to announce the beginning and end of the work day. If a fairly good set of regulations governing commerce, law and trade existed in Western Europe, bells would not have had such an impact. But these laws didn’t exist, so bells were a uniting

factor. Instead of allowing the sun to wake us up, we will measure time—and, more importantly, value—abstractly in equal units.

This changes valuation altogether. Since power is dispersed and fragmented, this type of power can gain a foothold in C13 and C14. Value is measured not by this complex social arrangement but by the equal units of time rung out by cloistered (and then municipal) bells. Western Europe's first universally coherent cultural form was thus composed out of abstract value as measured in equal units of abstract time; its first coherent cultural form was capitalism.

Why now and not then. “Then” is a global lack of interest in Northwest Europe. Islam has not penetrated northern Europe which has nothing to offer. Now there is growing global interest in extra-Mediterranean Europe. Islam begins to stretch northward into Byzantium where it meets and seeks to encompass eastern Christendom. In response to Byzantine calls for help, western nobles are introduced to their first taste of real civilization: Byzantine and Muslim civilization. And they are caught completely off guard: splendid courts, literature, cities. Christians say “we want that. We thought we were a civilization. We were fairly backward.”

Lough argues that teaching about imperialism must center on the version of imperialism that is flourishing in present world, and that teaching high school students about imperialism in the distant past is not efficacious. He argues that imperialism should be about everyday habits. If it doesn't trouble us, it cannot produce conversation.