Review of "Empires"

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The control of foreign and domestic policies in one political society by another—Michael Doyle’s definition of empire—is a topic of great importance. Empires and imperialism (the process of establishing and retaining imperial control) have shaped political life since the beginning of recorded history. Nineteenth-century imperialism set the stage for current relations between advanced industrial countries and the less developed countries of the Third World. Correspondingly, theories of imperialism have had a strong impact on current analyses of development and underdevelopment.

Michael Doyle’s book is an important comparative historical study of empires. It is comparative history in the mode of “analytic induction”: a theoretical framework guides a case-by-case analysis in which explanatory propositions are developed, tested, extended, and modified. The initial framework is informed by a critical review of earlier work. Imperial expansion, Doyle argues, cannot be explained exclusively by the intentions and resources of the metropole, as is done in the imperialism theories of Hobson, Lenin, and Schumpeter; nor can it be explained fully by the condition of peripheral political societies; nor, finally, is it sufficient to treat empires simply as the outcome of imbalances in the international system of power. Doyle synthesizes these factors in his basic framework. It focuses on the character of the metropole and of the peripheries, on transnational extensions such as trade or religious missions, and on the system of international power relations. With this foundation laid, he begins with a comparative analysis of premodern and early modern empires and kindred systems: Athens and Sparta, Rome, and the Ottoman, Spanish, and English empires.

These comparative analyses yield a first set of hypotheses on the sociology of empire. Imperial metropoles, to give one example of his propositions, need not be extraordinarily populous, wealthy, or well armed; rather they are set off from peripheral polities by a strong central government, a sense of cohesion among the governing population, and a high degree of internal social differentiation. Polities of this kind are in a position to develop transnational extensions of their own economic, social, or cultural life into a relationship of domination over a peripheral society that lacks any one of these three characteristics. This abstract formulation does not do justice to the richness of his historical explanations, nor does it indicate the impressive use of confirming and deviant case analysis. This first part of the book does much more than flesh out and put to a first test the theoretical orientations developed in the critique of earlier theories. It is very valuable on its own. Doyle draws here on a long tradition of reflection; the way he uses and builds on the analyses of Thucydides, Tacitus, Ibn Chaldun, Machiavelli, or Gibbon is admirable.

Nineteenth-century imperialism is the book’s main subject. Separate chapters deal with the association between tribal peripheries and formal empire and with the association between patrimonial peripheries and informal empire, with the roots of the scramble for Africa in the European international system, and with the different internal forces leading to or terminating imperial expansion in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. The result is both a complex set of empirically grounded theoretical propositions about empires, and an intriguing and convincing reinterpretation of nineteenth-century imperialism.

The concluding chapter deals with imperial development and decolonization. Too many new issues are raised in this brief conclusion. Among the questions raised but not answered is the relation between former empire and subsequent dependence relations—surely an issue many readers expect to see addressed.

The theoretical core of the book, Doyle’s sociology of empire, leaves a number of issues undertheorized. The first is the central category of the evolutionary theory of Spencer and Parsons: differentiation. The vast scope of this concept covers a number of quite different uses in various historical contexts, which would have benefited from a more specific conceptualization. Little or nothing is said about the sources of different patterns of differentiation. Closely related is another lacuna: While the difference between modern and premodern societies informs not only the organization of the book but also
much theorizing on which Doyle builds, the nature of this difference is virtually not addressed, but taken for granted. This is problematic for an analysis that extends the essentials of its theoretical framework across that divide without modification.

Finally, while the character of the metropolitan state is given considerable attention in the first, essentially premodern, phase of the analysis, it receives much less attention than one would expect in the study of nineteenth-century imperialism. The differences between the early North American and the later worldwide British empire, as well as the differences between French and British colonial rule, are quite clearly related to differences in the structure of the state and its relation to society. This is evident even from Doyle’s own account; but it is not sufficiently made explicit theoretically.

These critical comments notwithstanding, Empires is a major addition to the list of important comparative historical works that have in the last two decades advanced macrosocial analysis more than any other development. It also shares another characteristic of major recent contributions that is less often noted: It borrows for its theoretical premises selectively from Marx, Lenin, Weber, and the realists of power, but also from Spencer, Parsons, and Huntington. Building on these traditions as well as their critiques, Doyle arrives at an impressive theoretical view of empire and imperialism that is grounded in wide-ranging yet careful historical analyses.


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What a delight! Those with time and an open mind will find here a work meeting the highest criteria of C. Wright Mills’ “sociological imagination,” while setting forth hypotheses that might cause Mills to turn in his grave. Billed by the Promethean publishers as a “distinguished sociologist and philosopher,” Feuer blends the coverage of history and biography to illuminate the “main trends of our time” with both finesse and thorough scholarship. He does so in a style and form that would have to win the admiration of Mills despite sharp divergences and efforts to demolish Mills’ and all the usual anti-imperialist critiques. Mills is nowhere mentioned, and one of the few minor flaws is lack of an index for other than names. An author with such breadth and depth of coverage should have offered a good subject index to the reader interested in the richly documented theses and the often equally brilliant addenda and asides in footnotes.

Major flaws will be found by critics who disagree sharply both with Feuer’s main theses and with his avowed effort to “help fashion an American political philosophy” that will enable the United States to play a leading role in rejuvenating and extending “progressive imperialism” without being trapped in guilt-feeling and “obeisance to self-lacerative ideology” (p. 2). Basing his proposal on a sharp distinction of such “progressive imperialism” from the “regressive imperialism” typified in our times by Nazi imperialism and worldwide Soviet imperialism, Feuer grants that these are “poles” on a continuum, and notes especially in his historical references, ancient and modern, the boons and limits of past “progressive” imperialisms, such as Athenian, Alexandrian, and Napoleonic—though his careful caveats often seem lost in the mists of semantics, especially in his treatment of the British, where something akin to Anglophilia may blur his vision.

Unlike those critics who will disagree entirely with Feuer’s theses, I find his arguments cogent and his examples and documentation brilliant and true. Feuer plays like a master organism across the keys of history and biography, encompassing literary figures as well as statesmen and leaders on the economic and broader social scenes. One may argue details of his coverage, especially in his assaults on the “anti-imperialist mind.” There he tries to show that the neuroses and other mental and psychological problems of anti-imperialists were at least as severe as those of imperialists, as unmasked by critics. Thus, his treatment of Sir Roger Casement in support of the 1916 Irish rebellion is one of the few mentions he gives to Britain’s longest imperialist misdeed. Yet, while quoting G. B. Shaw in other connections, Feuer fails to take account of Shaw’s suggested defense