

PART I

SOURCES, APPROACHES, DEFINITIONS

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Amid the welter of vague political abstraction to lay one's finger accurately on any "ism" so as to pin down and mark it out by definition seems impossible. Where meanings shift so quickly and so subtly, not only following changes of thought, but often manipulated artificially by political practitioners so as to obscure, expand, or distort, it is idle to demand the same rigor as is expected in the natural sciences. A certain broad consistency in its relations to other kindred terms is the nearest approach to definition which such a term as Imperialism admits. (Hobson 1965 [1905]: 3)

In attempting to come to terms with the structure and dynamics of imperial polities, the contributors in this volume are hardly pioneers. Interest in empires is as old as empires themselves; one could cite a vast literary and scholarly corpus on the genesis, operation, and decline of imperial polities, encompassing a staggering degree of variability in approaches, sources, and conclusions. Why this enduring interest? Part of it may have to do with the great impact empires have had on the world and on the lived reality of many artists and scholars who were participants in imperial polities, many of them dependent on state support or patronage. However, tracing the history of fascination with subjects imperial is complicated considerably by the shifting terrain of the concept itself.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPIRE

In scholarship coming from the European tradition, ideas of and about one empire – Rome – have contributed definitions and constituted foils for all

subsequent discussion of the concept of empire. It is thus worth considering that heritage and its intellectual legacy, as several chapters in this volume do (Alcock, MacCormack, Moreland, Woolf). In so doing, we acknowledge that western scholarship grew up around culturally and historically specific notions of imperialism and that these intellectual legacies have framed our enquiry in particular ways. However, to acknowledge the ways in which historical experiences of European and Mediterranean empires have set the terms for inquiry is not to suggest that our perspectives are entirely historically determined. Indeed, we adopt a more anthropological view, that underpins our focus on comparison and that suggests that our perspectives can be extended beyond this received historiography through the careful study of other imperialisms and through the evidential interplay of diverse source material – texts, art and architecture, artifacts, and landscape modification on local and regional scales.

The word “empire” itself derives from the Roman *imperium* with its root sense of order and command (Pagden 1995: 14). Tracing the semantic history of the notion of empire, Pagden isolates three basic European understandings that emerged over the last two millennia. The first meaning invokes a basic sense of authority or rule. As he explains:

In the first instance, the Latin term “empire,” *imperium*, described the sphere of executive authority possessed by the Roman magistrates, and like everything in the Roman state it had marked sacral overtones, which would survive well into the modern period. It was frequently employed, particularly in the various humanistic discourses of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which borrowed their etymologies from Cicero, in the somewhat indeterminate sense which would later be captured by the word “sovereignty.” The first sentence of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, for instance, begins: “All the states and dominions which have had and have empire over men.” (Pagden 1995: 12)

Thus, definitions of empire that invoke sovereignty as a basic feature (see contributions by Barfield, Subrahmanyam, Schreiber, this volume) bring us back again to this sense of the term, a curiously recursive semantic dilemma. Obviously, it is easy to invoke a kind of chicken-and-egg logic in this case, but my point here is simply to highlight the changing semantic baggage of the term empire and the difficulty of transforming a historically and culturally contingent term into a broader analytical category.

The second sense in which the term empire has been used historically is more circumscribed and less abstract, relating to the kind of “non-subordinate power exercised within what the Aristoteleans called a ‘perfect community’” (Pagden 1995: 12) – in a word, a state. This notion of empire clearly builds upon the first meaning while confining it to the political container we shall come to expect in the study of empires. Thus, even states without significant external territorial ambitions could and did refer to themselves as empires without making a clear distinction between “internal” political domination¹ and “external” conquest and dominion.

By the nineteenth century, however, the common definition of empire had

stabilized at the contemporary understanding of an expansive polity incorporating multiple states (or more broadly, incorporating significant internal diversity). Again, Pagden (1995: 13–14) explains:

Already by the first century CE, however, the term had also acquired something of its more familiar modern meaning. The Roman historian Sallust uses the phrase *Imperium romanum* . . . to describe the geographical extent and the authority of the Roman people. And when Tacitus spoke of the Roman world as an “immense body of empire” (*immensum imperii corpus*) he was describing precisely the kind of political, and cultural, unity created out of a diversity of different states widely separated in space, which Edmund Burke speaking in 1775 of the Spanish and British empires called “extensive and detached empire.” *Imperium*, in this sense, bound together different and formerly independent or “perfect” states.

These various understandings of the term “empire” managed to coexist, even if the third sense has come to dominate more recently. It is worth noting here that these first two senses, while having considerable historical resonance even now, are also of immediate and critical importance for the interpretation of documentary sources that employ such varied and shifting understandings – sources that informed the study of all New World empires until the nineteenth century, for example.

COMPARATIVE DYNAMICS OF EARLY EMPIRES

The project of this volume is explicitly comparative. While we acknowledge the specificity of each case as well as the contingencies of history, we also suggest that there is something to be gained by juxtaposing consideration of different empires, perhaps even different imperialisms, widely separated in space and time. The project of comparison immediately raises the question of what, exactly, is being compared, bringing us back to the problem of definition. Without doubt, discussions of definitions were among the most divisive topics of the conference that produced this volume. One easy way out of this morass is to employ what we may call the “pornography definition” of empires – I can’t say what they are, but I know one when I see one. In this section we deliberately include what may be seen as “marginal” cases of empires, the steppe polities described by Barfield and the Portuguese seaborne empire described by Subrahmanyam, as well as cases that engender less ambiguity about their ontological “status” as empires. What, then, is an empire and where/how shall we draw boundaries between empires and mere states, or empires and other forms of large-scale expansion and incorporation? In this section, Barfield, Schreiber, and Subrahmanyam all venture definitions of empire. Both Barfield and Schreiber adopt a kind of diagnostic approach, listing attributes of the archetype – or, in Barfield’s analysis, of the many subtypes. Subrahmanyam’s definition is significantly leaner, conforming most closely to the third historical definition described by Pagden, above.

Considering our task to be the definition of the category *empire* might,

however, unduly restrict us. Phrasing the problem in this way tempts us to a misplaced concreteness, to a belief that the analytical category "empire" is somehow a "thing" with properties – a living, breathing entity. In a sense, what is really critical is not the typological class that we might define, but the logic with which we dissect complex phenomena in the world to create such classifications. Why might sovereignty, for example, be important? Like "empire," sovereignty is not a natural category. It can be profitably seen not so much as a "property" of states, but as a kind of argument about one person or group's right to hold power over another. In his chapter in this volume, Yates explains that the, as he puts it, Chinese "imperial myth" developed in the Qin period identified empire not in terms of the sovereignty of a ruling people, as did the Romans (Woolf, this volume), but in terms of the person of the emperor and his lineage. South Asian empires, too, diverge from this Roman-derived expectation. On the other hand, concerns about legitimacy loom large in both the Chinese and South Asian cases, concerns that are shared by participants in and observers of empires such as the Roman one, who work out the issue in very different ways. What really drives our study of empires, then, is this working out of how, why, when, and where the processes of empire – the establishment of sovereignty here by way of example – are effected or fail.

The definitional issues raised above are concerned primarily with the notion of empire as a political form or type, a kind of super-state, juxtaposing empire, if only implicitly, against polities that are not empires. However, another way of viewing the problem, one that partakes of some of the wariness of misplaced concreteness raised in the previous paragraph, is to consider empires not in relation to an abstract array of political or evolutionary types, but in terms of their own cultural context. Here we come to another vexed definitional debate; what, then constitutes the empire "itself"? What are its elements? Where does the state begin and end; what are the boundaries between the state and the society in which it is embedded? It is one kind of argument to ask "were the Carolingians really an empire?" and quite another to attempt to define the contours of the Carolingian state apparatus, as Moreland does (this volume), to consider the practice of the state itself, and its impact on others who, in this exercise, must be considered in some sense to be not-the-state-itself. A Weberian definition of states as organizations claiming a monopoly on legitimate force within a given territory or of empires as special kinds of states does not, as Mitchell (1991: 82) notes, "tell us how the actual contours of this amorphous organization are to be drawn." Mitchell goes on to describe the problem of analytically isolating the state from its sociocultural matrix (society in his terms) as a key issue in defining the state concept and as a central debate in twentieth-century political science. Attempts to extinguish the state concept, by replacing it for example with the concept of a political *system*, always founder on this problem of boundary definition. The state, somehow, manages to maintain a salience in actual practice that defies attempts to define it away. Mitchell (1991: 78) proposes, then that:

the elusiveness of the state–society boundary needs to be taken seriously, not as a problem of conceptual precision but as a clue to the nature of the phenomenon. Rather than searching for a definition that will fix the boundary, we need to examine the detailed political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced. This distinction must be taken as the boundary not between two discrete entities, but as a line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained.

The processes that fix the precise location of this line, an internal distinction appearing as an external boundary, are what make the state seem to be a coherent, autonomous actor, and these processes warrant more detailed analytical attention. This is not to say that the state is thus somehow not “real” (Mitchell 1991: 81–2). Rather,

The point that the state’s boundary never marks a real exterior can suggest why it seems so often elusive and unstable. But this does not mean that line is illusory. On the contrary . . . producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power.

(Mitchell 1991: 90)

What Mitchell does not discuss but which nevertheless seems probable is that this “line drawn internally” will vary in both its character and its location between different polities. A comparative approach may be one of the best possibilities for addressing the processes that shape the apparent contours of any polity. Differences between the broad outlines of imperial polities, then, need not be the rocks upon which definitions founder, but instead may constitute the very sources of understanding the processes that set up such polities as seemingly independent objects or categories in themselves. As Brumfiel and others in this volume remind us, even the elite echelons of imperial society may be separated by basic differences of interest, culture, and capability – the imperial state is probably always a finely balanced (or unbalanced) set of compromises and concerns that work together to constitute what may be in sum seen as a polity. If we shift concern from definition *per se* to the kinds of processes that act and interact to form historical empires, a larger range of subject material becomes germane to our analysis. Some of this larger field of enquiry, into the kinds of ideological justifications and apparatuses set up by and about imperial polities, the responses to and ramifications of imperial expansion on a range of subject people, are addressed in this volume in the sections on “imperial ideologies” and “imperial subjects.”

Even if we cannot agree on what precisely empires are, still, paradoxically we can ask: What kinds of shapes do what we call empires assume? How do they behave? How, when, and why do they emerge, expand, fall apart and disappear? How do they view and represent themselves and others? How, why, and by whom are they remembered? How are those brought into imperial polities affected and how do they shape its trajectory? Which of these processes recur and

which seem to be unique? These are the kinds of questions that animate the chapters in this volume: questions of comparison in a dynamic rather than typological mode, questions that suggest to us that the comparative project is valuable indeed. Thus, it seems to be the case that we can disagree on actual definitions, even on the very need for close definition, and still be able to discuss imperial processes and histories to our mutual benefit.

TRACES OF THE PAST: WAYS OF CREATING HISTORY

In this section and indeed this entire volume, we are concerned with empires that, while remembered, are no longer extant. How may we come to know this past? It seems that to some extent our views – and indeed our definitions – reflect the sources of information available. The study of past empires employs many diverse kinds of sources: texts of a very large variety; archaeological remains (settlements, monuments, houses, artifacts – both quotidian and rarified, evidence of landscape modification); representations in art and architecture; even the evidence of human bodies. Obviously, the broad range of potential information and the proliferation of specialist knowledge require interdisciplinary cooperation. Very often, favored sources are closely linked with disciplinary training, but it is also, and more insidiously, true that different disciplinary traditions tend toward the acceptance of different kinds of explanations altogether. Most of the authors in this volume attempt to overcome these limits to some degree through engagement with multiple sources of information and a broad scholarly gaze, but it will always be worthwhile to closely interrogate not only the conclusions drawn from a body of evidence, but also the very selection of that corpus of information. How inferences about the past are made is, of course, a central preoccupation of history, archaeology, and historical anthropology, among other disciplines, and is far too broad a topic to consider here. In the context of the chapters in this section, however, I point to a few specific areas that reflect differences in disciplinary and topical focus.

In her chapter on the Wari empire, Schreiber concentrates on the spatial and temporal distribution of objects of a particular, she argues imperial, style. These objects, chiefly ceramics and architecture, are of interest not only for their potential functions in Wari society (serving, cooking, or storage vessels; warehouses, administrative offices, and barracks), but even more so as markers of Wari imperialism. The latter, as she readily agrees, is difficult to pin down precisely, although she does argue for a shift from more political to more economic forms of domination. Schreiber's analysis is, of necessity, intimately material, explicitly spatial, and based on chains of inference about association (terraces near a settlement, ceramics in a temple, an iconographic depiction in a distant locale). The very nature of the material record or perhaps just the training of archaeologists makes them (us) generally comfortable with and knowledgeable about the material world and its challenges, and accustomed to a constant scalar

disjunction between regional-scale information and minute, household-scale patterns of data.

Archaeological prejudices and possibilities also vary, however, by region. In areas with long traditions of research, archaeologists may have available minute detail on diet, agriculture, health patterns, production, household organization and variability, or they may have primarily monumental architecture and ceramic chronologies to work with. Different times and places also have divergent traditions of the ways in which text-based and archaeological data are compared and generated. In Schreiber's case, there are no texts of any sort and her analysis thus omits the genealogical accounts, for example, that frame Kuhrt's exegesis of Achaemenid history. In most of the other chapters in this volume, texts and material culture constitute two, if not *the two*, primary sources of information; but the balance in individual chapters varies significantly.

If archaeological data and archaeological traditions vary widely, then so too do both documentary records and historical approaches. The Inka, for example, are known only from texts of the conquering Spanish, as well as from archaeological and art historical information (D'Altroy, MacCormack, this volume). The Chinese empire, by contrast, has copious internal textual information (Yates, this volume), this information contrasting further with that available for many time periods in South Asia where historical texts, though abundant, are conventionalized in different kinds of ways (Morrison, Sinopoli, this volume). Even within a particular region, time, and research tradition, texts may vary in the degree to which they represent elite viewpoints and the perspectives of particular ethnic and cultural groups in an empire. Research traditions also play a role here. In the South Indian Vijayanagara empire, the focus on scholarship of the Tamil region and in the Tamil language has led to a situation in which an important, but distant province of the empire was better understood than the heartland of the empire itself. Clearly, the history of research and the historiography of our scholarship on empires play a powerful role in how we approach them.

Finally, we can point to a concern shared by historians, archaeologists, art historians, and all others who study empires, and this is the problem of scale. Empires, as Greg Woolf remarked at the conference, are both too big to study and too small to study. As we consider in the section "Empires in a wider world," it is necessary to look beyond political boundaries, even if this means in some cases that our area of study is the entire world. Archaeologists typically acquire very rich detail on a scale that is spatially very intimate yet temporally blurry. Extending archaeological understandings across very large spatial scales moves beyond any one scholar's own fieldwork; the masses of local data to be assimilated make supra-regional analysis on the basis of archaeological evidence difficult, though of course far from impossible.

Text-based analysis is also critically dependent on the spatial, temporal, and social scale of the texts themselves, as well as on work locating, transcribing, translating, and making texts available (publication, archives, libraries). Kuhrt mentions, for example, the critically important Elamite texts from Persepolis, the

majority of which still sit in a museum, awaiting analysis. Or again, in the case of the Vijayanagara empire, textual scholarship focused on inscriptions has relied disproportionately on temple inscriptions, not because of deficient scholarship, but because temples were where epigraphers and archaeologists looked for inscriptions and consequently what was primarily available to historians. When new strategies of fieldwork are followed, however, both the shape and the content of the historical record look quite different (Morrison and Lycett 1997). Here the scalar problems of dealing with tens of thousands of texts are similar to those in archaeology where, for example, literally millions of artifacts may be involved. It is easy to overdraw both the differences and the difficulties of working with diverse data sets. In most cases, the contributors to this volume bridge these differences in their own work and an eclectic approach may be the rule rather than the exception.

THE POLITICS OF ANALYSIS IN THE ANALYSIS OF POLITICS

As Hobson suggests (above), the very notion of what constitutes imperialism is subject to political agendas. As we discuss in the section on the “afterlife” of empires, the selection of *which* polities come to be remembered and invoked as exemplary, and *how* they are remembered, is also critically responsive to contemporary concerns. In some sense, then, empires never die – they are just reinvoked, reinvented, and recalled over and over again. The potential rewards of this process for rulers and politicians who may partake of past glories and legitimacies seem evident.

Analytical interest in empires, however, also operates in an interested context to some degree. Some scholarly analyses of empires are or seem to be overtly utilitarian, providing object lessons from the successes and failures of the past, veritable cookbooks for imperialism. Fredrick Danver’s (1894) two-volume study of the Portuguese overseas empire, for example, clearly drew out lessons for British rule in India from the “mistakes” of the Portuguese – including Catholicism and intermarriage with local people. Indeed, at particular points in time, British scholarship on the Portuguese in India was strikingly interested in issues such as when and how the Portuguese lost the right to rule, or whether they ever had it: issues suspiciously germane to contemporaneous self-justification for British rule over those very same territories. Other scholarship has worked quite explicitly to condemn the whole imperial enterprise, Wittfogel’s (1957) classic study of despotism as a protest against fascism being one example, Hobson’s (1965 [1905]) critique of imperialism another.

Of course, not all study of empires follows such an explicit political agenda. In putting together a conference and volume on empires we are certainly making a point about the historical and analytical importance of empires and the value of studying them – or, as I would prefer, about the importance of understanding the process and practices of imperialism, the hows and whys of empire-building,

expansion, legitimation, consolidation, and decay. At least part of this value lies in understanding the ways in which the ideologies, operations, and structures of imperial power work and affect people on the ground. Another part of this value is situated in developing a more nuanced theoretical understanding of imperial politics and processes; it is our goal in this volume to work, with all means possible, toward both these ends.