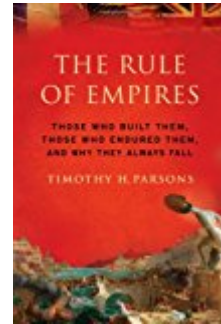


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Timothy Parsons. *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 496 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530431-2.



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Are empires ever a good thing? Can the Romans, Britons, and Spanish, and most recently the United States, be criticized and yet admired for their imperial conquests? Questions such as these are the focus of Timothy Parsons's *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall*. Parsons's lengthy tome asks whether empires are ever advantageous. He answers with an unequivocal "no." His thesis is that "Empire has never been more than naked self-interest masquerading as virtue," and he adds that his book will show "why empires are unbearable and eventually untenable" (p. 4). For Parsons, empire "entails the formal, direct, and authoritarian rule of one group over another. It is born out of the attempt to leverage military advantage for profit" (p. 9). Parsons challenges the arguments of scholars such as Niall Ferguson, Baron Cranworth, Deepak Lal, and others who postulate that empires have, in the past, liberalized the economic system of less developed areas, helped to create modern societies, and at times behaved in a benevolent and humanitarian manner.

Parsons, a social historian of twentieth-century Africa, undertakes a colossal task in tracing how certain empires were forged and how they crumbled in different parts of the world, from Rome (roughly 43 CE) to

Nazi Germany in the 1940s. Seven chronological chapters, covering roughly 450 pages, focus on the following conquests: Rome (Britain), the Umayyad Caliphate (Spain), Spain (Peru), Britain (India), Napoleonic France (Europe), Britain (Kenya), and Nazi Germany (France). His conclusion, titled "Imperial Epitaph," is essentially an eighth chapter, since the majority of this section focuses on the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. Parsons devotes chapters to several occupations in Europe as well as South America, Africa, and South Asia, which appropriately provides a global perspective.

Parsons threads several themes through his work. He is keen to show the creation and maintenance of empire from both sides, the colonizer and the colonized. One of his key arguments is that imperial conquests were not one-way streets. His first chapter argues that "modern debates about the nature and utility of empire began with Rome," for he insists that assimilation and cooperation were key elements in Roman expansion (p. 22). Conquerors, such as the Romans, needed local help to maintain their rule and this subsequently blurred the line between ruler and subject. This pattern continued in Spain under the Umayyads, who established rather vague criteria for citizenship. Indeed, with Muslim rule in Christian Spain, "conversions ... blurred the essential line be-

tween citizens and subject that was central to empire” (p. 69). Arabs assimilated into Spanish culture more so than the Romans had done in the various cultures they conquered; Parsons coins this development “Romanization in reverse” (p. 108). But, both Rome and the Umayyads would fail because the colonized would ultimately find their rule intolerable.

Parsons sees shifts in imperial relationships beginning in the 1500s with Spain in Peru under the *encomienda* system. While this policy extracted labor and promised “civilization” to the natives, it was “systematic domination dressed up in moral garb” (p. 124). Assimilation in imperial development was giving way to an ineradicable line between natives and the conquerors. Parsons correctly points out that Spain was ahead of its time in establishing clear delineations between colonizer and colonized; this became more profound in the nineteenth century when more European countries linked “imperial citizenship with blood” (p. 167). In essence, for Parsons, imperial government became steadily more greedy and self-interested. These goals then manifested themselves in different and more brutal treatment of the natives. Ultimately this empire failed because “it struggled to exert direct control over the hybrid local communities of Spanish settlers, Andeans, and African slaves that emerged from the wreckage of the Inkan Empire” (p. 6).

Conquerors’ new and rigid imperial identities inspired “civilizing” missions towards the natives without diminishing the imperialists’ powerful profit motives, as exemplified by Britain’s policies in India and Kenya. Indians and Kenyans, however, resisted these forms of control. According to Parsons, “Macaulay and the rest of the reformist lobby may have thought they could remake Indians in their own image, but they never realized how much the Indian majority was slowly but surely remaking them” (p. 218). Parsons highlights a key element of this imperial evolution at the end of his chapter on Kenya when he argues that British efforts to gain the assistance of locals led to future demands for political and social equality. Indeed, the 1960s showed the failure of Britain’s multiracialism, which had attempted to thwart Kenyan’s demands for citizenship and ultimately led to total independence. This was the case for many colonies of Africa and Asia between 1945 and 1965. The new cul-

ture of African and Indian nationalism after World War II shattered empires cultivated in the nineteenth century.

Parson’s arguments are supplemented by a twenty-page section of endnotes as well as a shorter index. One might have wished that the author had included a bibliography, but perhaps that might have been too much for this already large work. The chapters are lengthy, but are distinguished by a map at the start of each section. Unfortunately, there are no subsections or conclusions at the end of each chapter, which could have provided a clarifying order and summations to the comprehensive and detailed work therein.

A potential weakness of the book is the decision to devote an entire chapter to Nazi Germany’s conquest of France. Given the Nazis’ relatively brief rule of twelve years and specifically its occupation of France of roughly four years, one might debate whether there is a legitimate comparison to other empires that had a far longer duration, such as Rome. Indeed, the genocidal intents of the Nazis make theirs quite different than any of the empires listed in the book and its inclusion is questionable.

It is also fair to ask whether Parsons makes a persuasive case that history’s greatest empires were ultimately immoral failures. Parsons does provide compelling background and analysis for each of the empires he chose to include in his work. Yet, taking the stand that empires were always disadvantageous is perhaps too strong a position. The creation and maintenance of empires destroyed many indigenous populations. At the same time, however, it can be asserted that in certain cases, many of these civilizations benefited from technologies and services that likely would not have been available had imperialists never arrived. Does the bad outweigh the good? Perhaps. But the global history of empire, in all its complexity, defies both the jingoistic celebrations of the nineteenth-century imperialists and the blanket condemnation of our own postcolonial historians. In any case, Parsons deserves to be commended for tackling such a key question in imperial studies. He offers a thought-provoking interpretation of the dynamics of empire from ancient to modern manifestations. His questions touching the evolution of empires merit serious consideration by historians.

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