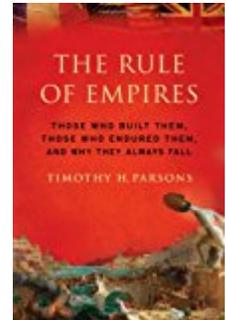


Timothy Parsons. *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 496 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-530431-2.



Reviewed by Philippa Levine

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2011)

How refreshing to read a history of imperialism aimed at a broad audience that refuses to blur or soften the brutal effects and origins of empire. In *The Rule of Empire*, Timothy Parsons deploys an effective mix of the sledgehammer and the scalpel in his examination of seven empires. His range is ambitious and impressive, from Roman Britain and eighth-century Spain to Europe in the 1940s, but his message is consistent: that empire as a phenomenon is always and everywhere about subjugation and exploitation. It would be a tough proposition to come away from *The Rule of Empire* thinking that imperialism was ever a good or beneficial practice. That might not be news to professional historians (though there are certainly practitioners who readily come to the defense of this or that empire), but in the public political context the case against empire has been rather more muted. Parsons offers a refreshing, engaging and cogently argued counterweight to the more usual neo-conservative reckoning of empire's alleged benefits. As Parsons notes if one looks at empire from the perspective of those subjected to it, their profit-and-loss balance sheet approach to the topic falls away. Seen from the van-

tage point of the colonised, Parsons sees empire as, quite simply, "intolerable" (p. 18). This, then, is a broadly polemical history, and one that carefully and thoughtfully marshals its evidence towards an inescapably damning conclusion.

Parsons' emphasis on the experience of those whose homelands were colonised allows him to offer a blend of political and social history in which we appreciate not just the effects of political and military decisions on the lives of ordinary people, but the varied forms and degrees of both collusion and resistance they engendered. Parsons never falls back on simple binary devices but instead illustrates the wide range of responses to empire among subject populations.

Inevitably in as wide-ranging a study as this, one could quibble about which empires were included, or perhaps more pertinently, which were excluded. Why not the Ottomans? Why not Japan, the first of the modern non-European empires, after all? Is Europe, somehow, still at the heart of Parsons' project for all he works to articulate the experience and opinions of non-Europeans subject of empire? Likewise, one might question how

far the comparison of, for example, the Roman Empire and Vichy France, upholds under close scrutiny. In his own defense, Parsons recognizes that the Umayyads, like the Romans, in his own words, "never set out to build an empire, nor did they admit to being a secular imperial power" (p. 67). In this they differed markedly from Napoleon and Hitler, whose self-conscious empire-making Parsons also analyses. That acknowledgement of historical difference raises important questions. I would not disagree with Parsons' implicit position here that just because you don't call what you're doing empire-building doesn't mean it isn't. Numerous examples uphold the myth-making predilections of states and politicians. Yet it might not be unfair to ask whether the nature of power in the eighth-century Mediterranean region is fully comparable with that of, for example, British Africa in the 1950s, with which another of Parsons' chapters deals. Parsons is far too good a historian not to be aware of the stakes of the claim here, and I am sympathetic to his desire to demonstrate the full range of imperial possibilities (and, I'd add, I am also in awe of the intellectual range he shows here). Still, I'm not fully convinced that ancient, early modern and modern empires can be paralleled quite as easily. They do all rest on exploitation and extraction, of that there can be little doubt, but the emergence of nationalism in particular, perhaps, sets the modern empires apart in significant ways.

But these are, in the scheme of things, minor concerns when applied to a book intended for a wide readership, and one in almost every other way so very well executed. If the unattractive parade of power-hungry men to whom Parsons introduces us serves to make readers consider more critical of the apologists for empire who still dominate public debate, he will have done us all a great service.

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Citation: Philippa Levine. Review of Parsons, Timothy. *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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