Empires in World History, it seems, is everywhere, an important topic of historical scholarship since the late 1990s. Most famously, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri described the pernicious influence of a Gramsci-style, intrusive, hegemonic state-based power in their landmark book, Empire (2000). Their work served, perhaps unintentionally, as a call to arms for the antiglobalization movement that gained in strength in the early part of that decade. Alternately, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper hold that while “empires” are often seen now as haunting specters of tyranny and oppression, it has not always been so. Instead, they posit that empires have taken many different shapes and have been the most influential form of political rule over the last two millennia. The authors seek not only to describe the rise and fall of often immense territorial polities over the last 2,500 years, but also to correct the prevailing view that ties the development of the “modern” world to the arrival of the nation-state in Europe in the seventeenth century.

Burbank and Cooper propose that imperial constructions, influences, and intersections have been vastly undervalued by scholars studying the history of “political economy.” They set out to “widen perspectives on the political history of the world” by working against the teleology of European nation-state development and the rise of the West set forth powerfully in the histories of, for example, Geoffrey Parker (The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800 [1988]) and Charles Tilly (Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990 [1990]) (p. xi). While they agree that conflict has been central to the course of European history, Burbank and Cooper argue that much of world history has been shaped more decisively by transcendent, but still locally produced, devices of imperial control that included, most importantly, the management of difference. The emphasis on “connections and contacts” of empires as critical to their formation hearkens back to the sweeping work of William McNeill (The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community [1963], Plagues and Peoples [1976], and The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000 [1982]) on the rise of the West as contingent and hardly predetermined (p. 2). Ultimately, Burbank and Cooper’s study is a superb example of the analytical potential of world and transnational history, as it manages to trace the great sweep of world political development while emphasizing the role of intermediaries and borders in shaping empires based on “contingent accommodation” (p. 12). Burbank and Cooper have thus delivered a valuable and important single-volume political history of empire, useful for both undergraduates and early graduate students engaged in imperial or colonial history.

Empires in World History offers a broader chronological and geographic scope than any comparable work, particularly in light of the focus on the European overseas/colonial experience found in most comparative studies of empire. For instance, in After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire (2007), John Darwin depicts the...
post-Tamerlane imperial experience as marked by a powerful East that served as both example and foil for Europe still recovering from the fall of Rome. By the fifteenth century, Darwin reckons, that homogenized East “stagnated” and fell behind. Whereas Anthony Pagden tries to define the meaning of empire for Europeans (Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France ca. 1500-1800 [1998]), Darwin’s work focuses on empire as conquest, leaving out the changing meaning of the term over centuries.[1] Burbank and Cooper, in contrast, take on all of these challenges in their description of the meaning and form of empire for different peoples, from China to Europe and the United States. For its scope and approach to the meaning and importance of empire outside of Europe, the study stands alone.

In a work of just over five hundred pages, the authors analyze an enormous swath of time and space. It is impossible to offer a detailed summary of such a wide-ranging work in a review such as this. In general, though, the chapters describe, in order, Roman and Chinese empires; the rise of Christian and Islamic monotheism; the importance of the Mongol conquests and technologies of rule; Spanish and Ottoman conceptions of imperial governance; early European colonial technologies; the expansion of Russia and the Chinese Ming/Manchu dynasties; the rise of revolutionary sentiments and nationalism via empire in the early nineteenth century; Russian and American forms of “manifest destiny”; late nineteenth-century European colonial expansion; responses of the Russian, Hapsburg, and Ottoman empires to the emerging power of Northwestern Europe; the changes to imperial structures brought on by the world wars of the twentieth century; and the appearance of the nation-state system in the mid-twentieth century.

Rome and China occupy a central place in the history of empire, providing contrasting templates that would be taken up by empire builders over the millennia that followed. Thus, the first substantive chapter focuses on the imperial legacies of these great polities. Rome, on the one hand, instituted a pluralistic legal system that ultimately resulted in a “patrimonial” style of rule wherein the Roman Emperor ruled over subordinate monarchs as a supreme “King of Kings” (pp. 32-35). Roman rulers, though, did not delegate much imperial power to these subordinates, instead dispensing Roman officials as administrators in a larger enterprise that expected all people to eventually become Roman (p. 42). Chinese empires, on the other hand, approached rule in a different manner altogether. Built on long-standing techniques of military and legal administration, the Qin and successor dynasties ruled directly from the center. By rewarding educated elites with land grants and political power as provincial officials, Chinese emperors avoided many of the palace intrigues that ultimately devastated Rome by diluting potential opposing power blocs. Chinese empire, writ large, thus represented the most durable political form, lasting in various guises at least into the early twentieth century (although Burbank and Cooper argue that the ostensibly Communist contemporary Chinese government closely resembles its imperial forebears). Unlike Rome, which dissolved in part due to its inability to deal with the demands of frontier or border groups, Chinese imperial history depended in large part on interactions across borders. Such cultural, political, and social crossings routinely injected new life into an ancient bureaucratic structure.

Borders, and the ways in which empires deal with the polities surrounding them, serve as an important theme throughout the work. The Chinese legacy for imperial governance, the authors find, moved through the western and northern borders, most notably, through the Mongol invasions. The Mongols both transmitted and refined Chinese techniques, in the process creating “imperial technologies” that would prove important for virtually all future Eurasian empires. Burbank and Cooper describe the Mongol tolerance for religious difference as they focused almost entirely on the exaction of tribute and taxation. Despite their fierce reputation, the Mongols proved willing patrons of the arts as they also protected merchants. Like the Ottomans who followed, the nomadic invaders from the Eurasian steppe employed foreign agents who they rotated around the immense imperial bureaucracy, thereby avoiding direct power challenges from entrenched local potentates. The Mongols were both innovators and important conveyors of imperial techniques to those who would succeed them in the great Eurasian power game. Borders, then, stand as important sources of not only renewal, but also contact and transmission in the imperial model of Burbank and Cooper. This same type of border rejuvenation would emerge again in China, as the Manchu invaders of the north overthrew the Ming dynasty and reintroduced some of the old Mongol style of rule to the world’s oldest empire.

The imperial exchange initiated by the Mongols did not stop with cultural tolerance. Indeed, Burbank and Cooper find that networks of commerce and intellectual transmission spread in part due to military conquest, as “markets do not become ‘global’ on their own” (p. 64). The Mongol willingness to support merchant networks manifested itself to the greatest extent, the authors argue,
under Ottoman rule, when the principle of extraterritoriality permitted the existence of numerous legal regimes, including Islamic, Jewish, and Christian European among others, within the larger polity. Merchants thus exercised enormous freedom and influence within the empire. Such tolerance, however, was not without risk. Burbank and Cooper propose that this structure provided a point of entry for French and British traders intent on establishing an economic foothold in the East. Powerful commercial interests slowly exploited small fissures in nineteenth-century Ottoman economic and political structures, offering an opening to European political forces and causing Ottoman decline. Burbank and Cooper describe this process: “European interventions plus the Ottomans’ integrating reforms opened up a strident politics of sectionalism where once all had felt themselves under the Sultan’s protection” (p. 346). The Ottoman state, then, no longer offered a framework that honored difference, at least when compared with the free-wheeling rhetoric of trade provided by the British. Simultaneously, the British took control of former Ottoman and Chinese possessions by employing an “imperialism of free trade” and capitalistic exploitation of colonial populations, particularly in India (p. 310). When combined with powerful military technology, British free trade ideologies formed a nearly unstoppable force, becoming a new Mongol-style invasion that overcame older empires with an updated version of their own political-economic approaches.

These imperial frameworks, which tried to adjudicate difference so as to better rule conquered populations, ultimately defined what would become the modern nation-state system. Hardly invented and codified in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, as much traditional European history has held, nation-states in this model emerged only after empires could no longer manage their inhabitants. In describing the Latin American anticolonial rebellions of the early nineteenth century, the authors write, “Nationalism emerged as an ideology to defend unequal social orders, but only after imperial structures had failed to manage conflicts within the empire form of state” (p. 245). The linking of ethnicity or nationality and a territorial state emerged not as an organic belief from longstanding familial ties, but rather in conversation with millennia of imperial policies. It was only after the successive world wars that ethnic groups, driven in part by an emerging Euro-American system of international law that favored the equality of territorial states, began to claim specific geographic-linguistic homelands. Empires conducted the First World War, not nation-states, as colonial populations remained largely loyal to their European masters, the authors note. However, these populations soon caught on to the nation-state language emerging in European peace making, thereby strengthening their own claims to existence in what had long been an imperial world. Burbank and Cooper describe the period surrounding the world wars as "not a self-propelled movement from empire to nation-state.... Ideas and practices of layered sovereignty and of varying degrees of self-rule within overarching structures were still in play” (p. 413). In short, long-standing imperial techniques informed new approaches to state-based governance. The nation-state was but one possible conclusion of a much longer history of empire construction and collapse, and was certainly not predetermined if viewed from the wide angle of world history and outside the teleology of the rise of a hegemonic West.

Burbank and Cooper thus offer a superb synthetic, historical analysis of empire not as exception, but as the defining political-economic system of the last two thousand years. Such a synthesis, though, brings with it inherent weaknesses. In trying to consolidate such a long history in so few pages, the authors must make choices on content. In this particular text, the authors spend much time, as they admit from the outset, on politics on a grand scale in each empire. This approach lends the work an air of “great man” history, lacking in the experiences and viewpoints of those subject to imperial rule. The authors make one effort to permit these imperial subalterns to speak, in chapter 6. But even in this chapter they do little with non-European sources, opting instead for description of the sociopolitical forms of colonial domination enacted in the Americas and Africa, from trading enclaves to entrenched forms of plantation slavery. The structure, while compelling, thus remains at a high level of abstraction. Events viewed through a purely imperial optic seem to lose some of their humanity, as the power of local groups to shape their own political and social destinies disappears from view under the broad blanket of empire. At the same time, the reliance on European scholarship and records to describe imperial conditions over the centuries obscures the achievements of peoples not on the Eurasian continent, particularly in Africa. While it may be argued that these African empires had only limited contact with Eurasian technologies of rule, emerging scholarship seems to suggest stronger links between medieval and early modern African societies and their Mediterranean neighbors to the north.[2] Although outstanding as an imperial synthesis, scholars and students alike must view the histories of the areas
and peoples examined in this book in companion with other, more detailed social, economic, and cultural studies to arrive at a more complete conception of the local and personal motors of change.

Such a critique is, in truth, minor when compared with the achievements of the book as a whole, which was well-produced by Princeton University Press, including many useful maps and images, although some of the marginal quotations seem of limited utility at best. In the final analysis, this book is important not only as an introductory text, but also a vital reinterpretation of the means and methods of imperial rule, and political development in general, of the Eurasian continent over virtually the entire course of recorded history.

Notes

[1]. See also Patricia Seed, Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Patricia Seed, American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).


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