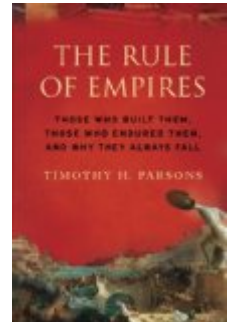


**Timothy Parsons.** *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 496 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-993115-6.



**Reviewed by** Steven Patterson

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**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

In this broad-ranging and compelling history, Timothy Parsons examines imperial rule in order to establish the patterns that have remained remarkably consistent over time and place. Empires have been the default setting for most of history, and Parsons ably, if not sympathetically, describes how they have been won, maintained, defended, and legitimized. Caesars, emirs, conquistadors, viceroys, nabobs, emperors, explorers, and soldiers all appear, in chapters on Roman Britain, Muslim Spain, Spanish Peru, Company India, Napoleonic Italy, British Kenya, Vichy France, and an epilogue (and epitaph) on the American occupation of Iraq.

Yet this is no romanticized account of daring deeds that won empires. Parsons maintains throughout that imperial rule and justice were incompatible, and he defines empire as a “permanent authoritarian rule that consigns a defeated enemy to perpetual subjecthood” (p. 447). He gives numerous examples, and the book is at its strongest when he quotes imperial victims, since “subject peoples must be the central focus of any

true assessment of an empire” (p. 17). The inherent problems in the policing, as well as the inevitable blurring, of the boundaries between conqueror and subject is a particular strength of the work. Empires reveal the limits of assimilation, despite their inclusive rhetoric, and that the maintenance of prestige represented the sacred center of imperial identity. The imperial social formation often tried to disguise the fact that empires always sought unequal relationships based on wealth extraction, whether in the form of raw materials, military recruits, domestic service, or other labor. When these were threatened, empires typically revealed their capacity for violence, since fear motivated and moved them to swift reprisal, and any perceived menace was met with exemplary levels of violence. In Company India in the 1780s, for example, Major J. Gilpin admitted that he burned several villages to strike a “degree of terror into others and deter them from rebellion” (p. 200).

Terror was never far beneath the imperial surface and tended to bubble up more than em-

pires (as well as imperial historians until recently) have been willing to admit. And yet, imperial powers had often been subject nations, and Parsons describes how powers like Spain and Britain made themselves imperial powers after long periods of subjugation. Victorious Muslims in medieval Spain were expected to win converts to Islam, yet doing so would have made it more difficult to collect taxes from *dhimmis*—thus the imperial trumped the religious, as it would do time and again for empires. Empires typically required such rigid boundaries, except when imperial men wanted to have conjugal relations with subject women, though of course Spanish men were forbidden from marrying Muslim women.

After the Reconquista, and returning to their “rightful” national narrative, the Spanish soon developed a similar system in Peru. The Spanish *requerimiento* warned resistors that “we shall powerfully enter into your country ... and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church ... we shall take you and your wives and your children” (p. 117). This pattern would of course repeat in Company India, Napoleonic France, British Kenya, and in Nazi-dominated France. Imperialists typically painted themselves as culturally and morally superior to the conquered, yet could rarely see themselves as exploiters of women. One’s status, no matter how humble or marginal back home, was instantly enhanced as an imperialist, and if nations became addicted to cheaply acquired wealth, power, and prestige, so did individuals. Cortes remarked that he came to the New World to get rich, “not to till the soil like a peasant” (p. 121). Empires allowed men to become “instant aristocrats” whose power was typically condoned and sanctified by their peers, if not always by their home government, as these types of men often undercut the benign and civilizing rhetoric of their European rulers.

Yet empires seemingly at their height could collapse. The Incans had recently extended their rule over large sections of South America, but

Pizarro was able to garner enough allies to overthrow them. Similarly, the British in India would profit from the Mughal domination of northern India. Thus, another feature of imperial rule lay in their fragility, since another power could benefit from the centralizing work performed by a weaker empire.

Parsons deftly exploits such imperial paradoxes, yet empires were first and foremost concerned with the relatively mundane task of wealth extraction. Napoleon’s modernization of Italy meant the poor lost their medieval rights to hunt and fish on wasteland and to glean after harvests (p. 271). Included in this wealth extraction were Italian soldiers, and Napoleon conscripted eighty-five thousand Italian men for his invasion of Russia, yet only some thirteen thousand returned home. When Italians broke out in revolt, French forces “castrated, flayed, impaled, crucified and burned captured rebels” and also slaughtered women discovered taking lunch to their men, who had been designated as bandits (p. 281).

As a historian of Africa, Parsons’s chapter on the British in Kenya is a powerful indictment of a society that preached of the redemptive power of imperialism but imposed martial law that displaced Africans from their lands, then used their nomadic status to classify them as barbarous and uncivilized. The British settlers even rejected a Carnegie grant to build a free library in Nairobi because it “would have been open to Africans, albeit through a separate door” (p. 326). It was no accident that such actions meant the British could claim the best land in Kenya for themselves, and only recently have the British agreed to pay compensation for those in Kenya tortured by the imperial regime.

Similarly, the last chapter reveals that the Nazi occupation of France conformed to the usual imperial model in which the conquering power was bent on extracting maximum wealth from France at minimal cost. The Germans treated the French as an imperial possession, yet the French

fought after World War II to try and retain Vietnam and Algeria, quickly forgetting the humiliation of what it meant to be ruled by an outsider, or perhaps because of this humiliation, were bent on restoring national glory.

For all the many strengths of the work, Parsons occasionally overreaches, as in his claim that liberals in nineteenth-century Britain “exposed how irrelevant and unproductive empire had become for nation-states” (p. 287). Liberals made this argument, but at the time convinced few in Britain. Parsons likewise argues that the informal empire of the early 1800s gave way to the more formal imperialism of the latter nineteenth century, and he claims that the “imperial project had a bad reputation in the mid nineteenth-century western world after the devastation of the Napoleonic wars” (p. 296). If Parsons’s focus is on the victims of imperial rule, it probably did not matter to Afghans or the Chinese during the mid-century Afghan and Opium Wars (which are not discussed in any detail) whether Britain was practicing formal or informal power, only that they were easily provoked to use force to achieve their goals. Parsons also occasionally loses the voice of the imperial victim, especially in the chapters on Napoleonic Italy and on Roman Britain (which is understandable due to limitations on sources).

Overall, the chapter on Roman Britain is the weakest. Parsons asserts that classical authors “invariably portrayed all barbarians ... as nomadic, cannibalistic, and sexually immoral” (p. 40). Parsons does admit that Romans used Britannia to discuss Roman society indirectly, yet one need only read Tacitus’s description of the *Germania* to see his admiration for their more “simple” and “morally pure” society. Likewise, Parsons asserts that Constantine made Christianity “the imperial state religion,” which did not happen until the reign of Theodosius (p. 57). The depiction of Rome is somewhat simplistic in this chapter, and in an effort to depict Romans as bent on conquest and little else, Parsons ignores the fact that there were

benefits to being in the Roman system, as the Britons soon found out when the Romans left.

Echoes of imperial Rome were left all over Britain, and Parsons could have perhaps developed more on such legacies, especially where subject peoples have kept some political institutions from their former conquerors. India established a parliamentary system closely modeled on that of the English, and the British could (and did) take credit for the abolition of *sati* and other reforms. Of course such legacies were not always straightforward, and the British saw degeneracy most everywhere they cared to look in India. Nevertheless, however flawed imperial powers have been, they at times made significant contributions that formerly subject peoples have carefully preserved.

Such reforms do not condone imperial rule, and perhaps Parsons’s greatest contribution to imperial historiography is to reveal how empires relied on force. Empires were pyramid schemes that sought to coopt “native” elites, who could buy into the imperial franchise if they wanted to retain their wealth or hold on to power, or they could remain outside such structures and critique it, often using the intellectual traditions of the European Enlightenment to do so. Imperialists, on the other hand, abandoned the lessons of the Enlightenment as needed, finding them, like Captain Barbosa from *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, more guidelines than actual rules. Force also had to be made moral, and most empires sought to transform violence into a virtue if it kept chaos, or even perceived chaos, at bay; even Napoleon claimed his wars were defensive, echoing Rome in doing so.

Imperial power was, and is, paranoid power, as an imperial race cannot appear weak. Parsons’s gritty and gripping account of how empires were maintained provides a lucid overview, well worth digging through, and if not always a pleasurable read, it is an illuminating one. *Rule of Empires* will be very useful for comparative studies

of empire, as well as for survey lectures--the quotations are apt, the writing fluid, and the arguments generally well made.

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