



## Empires

Empires are supra-societal organizations that bind together smaller political units, which had previously been disjunct, into a single political system. The constituent units of an empire are ranked, and the location of each unit in the imperial hierarchy is fixed, with virtually no opportunities for upward mobility. Along with long-distance trade, empires have played a key role in producing the large structures that we recognize today as the global interconnectedness of the world. Most of the world's modern states are successors of empires or came about as a result of imperial transformations, breakups, or collapses.

Historically, the prime methods through which empires established themselves were military incursion, conquest, and the forcible subjection, enslavement, and extermination of populations. Additional empire-building techniques have included strategic marriage alliances of rulers, military coalitions against third parties, purchases of land (and, by extension, societies, along with all their economic, social and geo-strategic resources, associated with the land in question), or diplomatic bargaining. In some cases, such as the late 15th-century European incursions into the Americas, even disease vectors played an important part as ailments brought in by the invaders, such as smallpox, measles, chicken pox, or even the common cold, decimated the indigenous populations.

### Imperial Hierarchies

Empires, especially those encompassing large territories, tend to display a clearly recognizable, internal political feature: The higher a constituent unit is in the imperial hierarchy, the more powerful and the more clearly defined it is in political and administrative terms. Conversely, the lower a unit is in the hierarchy, the less consequential its political and administrative definition becomes. A corollary to this tendency to have a centralized power structure is that empires typically have relatively fluid and volatile borders. For instance, large and strikingly prominent empires, for example, the Mongolian or the Chinese empires at various important points in their histories, have had external borders that were either completely indeterminate or demarcated only in rather vague terms. This feature clearly sets empires aside from modern states, at least in theory.

Once in place, empires enact formal, often highly scripted, symbolic expressions of submission by representatives of the subordinate units and equally formal, emblematic acts of acceptance of this submission by the ruler of the empire. Empires tend to perpetuate political ideologies that depict imperial hierarchies as natural, and ultimately unchangeable. Such imperial ideologies may survive well beyond the collapse of the empire that had initially produced them.

A two-directional system of flows operates along the imperial administrative hierarchy. Top-down flows channel commands, decrees, verdicts, and rulings by the empire's ruler, military and other forms of direct coercion, as well as a modicum of redistribution of imperial resources, financing of military operations, and fiscal-regulatory measures. Bottom-up flows might involve transfers of economic value in the form of taxes, levies, tribute, terms of trade and gifts to the ruler, participation in military endeavors and other public service projects, information collection from officials, as well as internal intelligence gathering. Although there has been a great deal of variation in the intensity with which such vertical flows determine important political, economic, social, or cultural outcomes, maintenance of the integrity of at least some of these two-directional flows has been a requirement essential to the survival of all empires.

Empires maintain four essential mechanisms of control: (1) centripetal flows of value, (2) top-down, hierarchical

cognitive mapping of the empire's populations and natural resources, (3) devices and procedures of governmentality, and (4) interimperial geopolitics.

Empires are multitiered systems, perpetuating and normalizing cultural, linguistic, as well as bio-political differences among populations, creating and arranging such putative differences to be consistent with the logic of imperial hierarchy. Because of the match between the hierarchy among the units and the ranking of their populations, historically empires have been stubbornly resistant to the idea of extending basic civic, political, economic, and cultural rights to all their subject populations even if other (geo)political, economic, social, or cultural conditions would allow, or even encourage, such transformations (such as, for instance, the failure of the early 20th-century proposals to transform the Habsburg Empire into a modern state). Practices of inclusion and exclusion, as well as (often elaborate) typologies regarding the purported, comparative "worth" of segments of populations, constitute a lasting heritage of imperial systems of ruling.

Viewed as geopolitical entities, empires fall into two clearly distinguishable categories, and the distinction between the two has had far-reaching implications for the histories and overall consequences of imperial rule. All empires that had come to exist before the 16th century were *contiguous empires*; the ensuing capitalist world system saw the emergence of *overseas empires*.

### **Contiguous Empires**

Contiguous empires may be defined as hierarchical networks of political authority with spatial structures that resemble blots of ink spreading on paper: The constituent parts share significant land borders—or, as in the case of empires incorporating archipelagos, straits, and other areas in which physical geography provides for gaps and interruptions in contiguous land, strong, relatively short-distance maritime linkages—with each other, without any major hiatuses, gaps, or "blank spots." Given their contiguity, such empires tend to have structures that are by and large concentric, with the peak of the imperial pyramid located in the geographical center so that geographical distance from the seat of imperial power is a reasonably good measure of relative standing in the imperial hierarchy. Bottom-up flows proceed from the outside toward the geographical center, and centrifugal flows move in the reverse direction. Blurred, undefined external borders hence do not become obstacles to imperial rule. What matters most in the imperial logic takes place in the centers, away from the edges of the empire.

Because of the immediate physical connectedness of their parts, contiguous empires offer plenty of opportunities for flows of populations across imperial space, so long as they conform to the requirements of the imperial logic. Another consequence of the combination of contiguity and concentricity is that various geographically, ethnically, or linguistically defined groups among the empire's populations are able to specialize in performing tasks pertaining to the maintenance of the empire, such as court servant, tax collector, merchant, official, warrior, border guard, and so on.

### **Overseas Empires**

The creation of the modern capitalist world system involved the emergence of a new type of empire— although many important contiguous empires continued to exist. Overseas empires differ from their contiguous counterparts, first and foremost, in their spatial structure, which follows a unique network logic. Overseas empires are constituted, in essence, as a set of dyadic linkages of subordination between societies at spatially distant and historically distinct locales. As a result, the functioning of overseas empires takes place through a number of, often very long distance, vectors. At one end of each of those vectors is the society that initiates and forces the imperial relationship of subordination; at the other end, we see the single subordinate society subjected to the violence of colonial expansion. Centers of overseas empires maintain clusters of links to individual colonial holdings while the subordinate units, by comparison, exist in a state of network isolation. The few lateral links that overseas empires operate—such as transfers of slave or bonded labor, or military operations launched from one colony to another—are initiated and discontinued by, and under the strict control of, the imperial center.

It is clear that various key aspects of transportation technology—specifically, advances in maritime navigation, geographical knowledge, and shipbuilding—were crucial for the establishment of overseas empires. However, technology cannot be regarded as the determinate factor since global history shows instances of great, and earlier, advances in maritime technology—such as those that made the precapitalist Afro-Eurasian trade system possible—which did not result in the establishment of overseas empires. Instead, the innovation of overseas colonial empires—created by coalitions between the merchant and royal houses of the small, seaboard-faced west European societies—seems to have been spurred by the combined effect of the failures of the west European polities to build large and geopolitically influential enough contiguous empires, and their great physical distance, and effective exclusion, from the main circuits of the Afro-Eurasian trade network.

The intensity of the global drive for the construction of empires reached its high point in the late 19th-century “scramble for Africa,” culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, a multilateral summit of the representatives of European empires, convened with the sole purpose of assigning the few, as yet un-colonized parts of Africa to the summit's participants. With most of the inhabitable surface of the earth having been taken by imperial structures of one sort or another, subsequent efforts at the establishment and augmentation of empires by any party inevitably had to run into the territorial holdings of another imperial structure. The resulting geopolitical pressures to redivide the world and the aggressive global geopolitical strategies adopted by the most powerful west European empires were key reasons behind the outbreak of World War I. The same factors continued to play a significant part in the structural tensions leading up to World War II as the explicit geopolitical aims of the Axis powers were focused on imperial expansion on a global scale, combining contiguous and overseas strategies.

The construction of an extensive, global web of overseas empires was a singularly significant process for the construction of what we recognize today as west European bourgeois society. The innovation of the overseas empire allowed the soldier-merchants of the initially marginal, small, and relatively weak west European societies to penetrate the majestic Afro-Eurasian trade networks of the time. The discovery of various resources, especially silver, in the Americas gave Spanish and Portuguese merchants a means of exchange with which they could pay for much-coveted Chinese commodities. The triangular trade—transporting European commodities to Africa, slaves from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas, and the produce of slave labor, especially sugar, cotton, and other plantation products to Europe—gave west Europeans remarkable comparative advantages both economically and geopolitically. The network of overseas empires—most advanced in the case of the British Empire, but also noteworthy in the French and Dutch versions—allowed the European centers to construct global webs of economic, military, intelligence, and scholarly knowledge production that continued to serve as the basis for their global influence in the period after the loss of their empires.

## Postimperial Transformations

In the last two centuries the world has seen four periods with political transformations leading to the dismantling of empires. The first was the late 18th- to mid 19th-century wave of independence, especially in the Americas. The second upsurge saw the collapse of two centuries-old, contiguous empires—the Ottoman and Habsburg empires— and the transformation of a third, the czars' Russia, into a socialist state, in the aftermath of World War I. The third surge of successful rebellions resulted in the precipitous collapse of the remaining colonial empires centered in western Europe, a process that increased the number of independent states in the world by more than 100 during the three decades that followed World War II. The fourth wave involved the geopolitically negotiated dismantling of the hierarchical political system of the Soviet bloc. The latter was a supra-state arrangement that had shared important features with imperial systems, especially given the centralization of political decisions, while its ban on private ownership and some of its distributive patterns clearly set it aside from all other instances of empires. Its demise resulted not only in reinstating the formal sovereignty of the member-states of the Warsaw Pact, but also in the breakup of the USSR itself, implying the end of subjection to contiguous quasi-imperial domination for the societies of a number of its former republics, from the Baltic Sea to central Asia. Each of those four periods of imperial collapse increased the number of

independent states in the world, making interstate relations and global governance exponentially more complex.

The legacies of empires continue to operate in the postimperial period. For instance, the contrasts owing to the specific characteristics of overseas and contiguous empires make for strikingly different economic, political, cultural, and ideological imaginaries, challenges, opportunities, and outcomes in the context of newly independent states.

Even after four periods of imperial collapse, it is not entirely clear that we have seen the last of this political form. Two new developments merit mentioning here. First, the 20th century has spawned a new kind of supra-state political authority—the European Union—an institution that some observers, including some prominent European politicians, have repeatedly dubbed a new kind of empire. The European Union was initially a geopolitical strategy aiming to bring together—or, in official EU parlance, “share and pool”—the global sway of the erstwhile colonial powers of western Europe, stripped of most of their imperial holdings in the aftermath of World War II. In recent decades, an increasing number of states have joined the European Union from the central, eastern, and northern parts of Europe, incorporating societies with historical experiences of being part of contiguous empires.

While clearly a supra-state network and a public authority of its own, the European Union does not quite qualify as an empire in the strict sense because of the complexity of the ways in which its member-states can, and do, associate with each other, clearly preventing, at least so far, the emergence of a single, fixed, pan-west-European imperial hierarchy. Yet, it is hard to overlook the fact that the earliest EU members continue to be centers of a great majority of the world's still existing colonial empires and that the notion of European superiority, ubiquitous in public parlance in Europe, is both strikingly reminiscent of, and historically rooted in, the imperial discourses of “the West and the rest.”

Finally, it bears mentioning that there is a strand of scholarship that regards the contemporary, post-Cold War world in its entirety as a realm of empire, with the United States, a former settler colony with possibly the greatest amount of geopolitical power at its disposal, at its helm. Scholars in this tradition de-emphasize some specific aspects of the concept, for example, the fact that historical empires have consisted of territories that were formally tied to the imperial center—something that appears barely applicable to the contemporary world and the place of the United States in it (except of course for the violent history of the creation of the integrated territory of the United States itself). Yet, the ways in which the currently declining global economic hegemon uses its unrivaled military capacity in an increasingly global strategy of control gives a certain intuitive appeal to this use of the metaphor.

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## Further Readings

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**Entry Citation:**

Böröcz, József, and Mahua Sarkar. "Empires." *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*. Ed. Helmut K. Anheier, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Victor Faessel. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012. 476-80. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.



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