

Introduction

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 1852)

I

In an era of globalization, why should we care anymore about empires or colonies? Have not times moved on? Why should anyone be bothered with the history of fifty or more years ago when the world has changed so dramatically? Why carp on about the past when the Chinese and Indian economies are expanding exponentially and altering the economic and political landscape? Have not neoliberal economics totally transformed the global political scene? Surely progress and a desire for the new, not the presence of the past, are the constant state of things?

Or are things really so different? Has the history of the world had so little to do with the way that we live today? Are forced labor and slavery really just history? Do the many wars and civil wars of the twenty-first century, the civil strife and unrest, the ubiquitous presence of terrorism,

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exist only in the present, with no relation to the past? Do the problems of the West or of the global South have nothing to do with the very formation of the nations that are identified with those opposing terms? Have neoliberal economics merely perpetuated a new form of empire that has moved into a different phase?

There are many ways of understanding the world and the complexities of our present. One way is to examine how we are living out our lives in part as the product of our past. To fathom the many issues and conflicts that today seem to pose almost insurmountable problems – terrorism, fundamentalism, wars in Africa and the Middle East, insurgency in India, Sri Lanka, or Thailand – it helps to understand where those problems have come from and under what conditions they have emerged. Sometimes it can even help to guide our political judgments: with their knowledge of what had happened before, few historians would have advocated the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana famously put it: “those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it.”

Some things continue in other forms. Colonialism and imperialism involved the subjection of one people by another, and developed in their modern varieties in conjunction with other kinds of domination: of women, of slaves, of minorities, of the poor, of relatively powerless sovereign peoples, of the resources of the earth. So long as oppressive power of that kind continues, then analysis of the forms and practices of colonialism and imperialism remains relevant to the problems that we face today.

II

Order something on the Internet and you soon come to the moment of entering your address. At this point you will often be presented with a drop-down box that contains a predefined list of the names of all countries, starting with Afghanistan and ending with Zimbabwe. The list is almost two hundred and fifty countries long. Suddenly, your country is put on an equal footing with all others: you may live in one of the western countries which took part in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but here Afghanistan sits proudly at the top of the list, and you will have

to scroll down almost the whole way to the bottom to find the United Kingdom or the United States. We take it for granted that everyone lives in or comes from a particular country, and that the world is made up of diverse, separate nations that are all represented in the organization called the United Nations, which oversees the governance of the world.¹

Open Bartholomew's *The Century Atlas of the World*, published in London in 1902, and you will find a list of "Principal States with their Colonies and Protectorates." The number of such states here amounts to only thirty-seven. What happened, then, between 1902 and today? Not only are there fewer countries – neither Afghanistan nor Zimbabwe are to be found – but the names are also different. Here the names are not listed alphabetically, as on the Internet drop-down box, but by the size of the territory that they designate:

- 1 British Empire
- 2 Russian Empire
- 3 Chinese Empire (including Korea)
- 4 France
- 5 United States (including Hawaii, Cuba, Porto Rico [*sic*], the Philippines, Guam, and Tutuila, &c)
- 6 Brazil
- 7 Argentine Republic
- 8 Ottoman Empire
- 9 German Empire
- 10 Congo Free State
- 11 Portugal
- 12 Netherlands
- 13 Mexico
- 14 Peru
- 15 Persia
- 16 Bolivia
- 17 Columbia
- 18 Venezuela
- 19 Morocco
- 20 Sweden and Norway
- 21 Chili [*sic*]
- 22 Italy

- 23 Siam
- 24 Austria-Hungary
- 25 Abyssinia
- 26 Spain
- 27 Central America (5 states)
- 28 Japan
- 29 Ecuador
- 30 Denmark
- 31 Paraguay
- 32 Rumania
- 33 Bulgaria and E. Rumella (included in Ottoman Empire)
- 34 Greece
- 35 Servia [*sic*]
- 36 Switzerland
- 37 Belgium

It's an interesting list. Several countries that existed at that time, such as Liberia, are not even mentioned. Apart from the ranking by territorial size, what distinguishes it from a modern list is that some states are described as empires (if so, it now seems strange that France, Austria-Hungary, or Japan were not described as empires at that time). Portugal and Spain were no longer considered empires, though they had been empires and still had colonies; Denmark and Belgium if not empires certainly had colonies. Technically, the Congo Free State at that time was an independent fiefdom of the Belgian King: it would be assimilated into the Belgian Empire as a colony in 1908 after the scandalous conditions there were exposed. Morocco, whose coastal territories were already (and still are, under a different name) a Spanish "protectorate," would be divided up by France and Spain two years later in 1904.

Many of the countries on the list had been part of other empires over the previous one hundred and fifty years: Belgium itself, Italy, Greece, Serbia, Romania, the United States, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, Venezuela, Chile, Central America, Ecuador, Paraguay. Even Switzerland had been occupied by the French between 1798 and 1815. In fact very few of the countries had not been colonies of some kind in modern times: some that were themselves empires – Britain, China, France, Russia, Turkey – plus Abyssinia, Japan, Persia,

Siam. Abyssinia was then invaded and occupied by Italy in 1936; Persia (Iran) was occupied by the British and Russians in 1941; Japan was occupied by the United States in 1945. Thailand was the only country that managed to avoid colonization, even by the Japanese, though like China and Japan itself in the nineteenth century, it was obliged to grant extraterritorial “concessions” and is often described in the period as a “semi-colony.” Though repeated attempts have been made to conquer Afghanistan since the nineteenth century, it has never been successfully colonized, apart from brief periods in which the colonizers rarely if ever controlled the whole country; in earlier times, it did, however, form part of the Persian Achaemenid, Sassanid, and Safavid empires. China which was already conceding territories to the imperial powers in the nineteenth century (by World War I, ten of the world’s most powerful countries had concessions in China) was then invaded and partially colonized by the Japanese in the twentieth century. France was occupied by Germany; Russia underwent a convulsive revolution which prompted the international twelve-nation alliance invasion of 1917, followed by the German invasion of 1941, defeated at the cost of millions of lives. Turkey, which the Allied powers tried to dismember almost entirely in 1923, managed to hold them off enough to create its modern boundaries. During the period from 1750 to 2000 only Britain, Russia, Thailand, and Turkey have remained autonomous states throughout, albeit in changing geographical and political configurations. This autonomy has not preserved them from invasion, sequestration of their territory, internal revolution, or separatist campaigns. All these countries face movements demanding independence or political autonomy – from Scotland, Chechnya, the Malay Pattani, and Kurdistan.

We perhaps think of the world as it is as permanent, but it is chastening to reflect that in the last two hundred and fifty years, scarcely more than a breath in human history, its political stability has been minimal. Go back a few more hundred years, and the story hardly becomes more encouraging. State formations, whether as empires, nations, or unions, come and go, across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. From a longer perspective, the history of the world amounts to the formation and reformation of empires, appearing, expanding, and contracting like biological forms constantly

emerging, growing, usurping, transforming, overpowering, retreating, disintegrating.

Historically most empires gave way to further empires. The end of the European empires, by contrast, produced a new global political formation that distinguishes them from all empires that preceded them: the world of nation-states. It was in that environment that the postcolonial emerged as a specific way of addressing the inequities and injustices of both imperial rule and its global aftermath. As V. S. Naipaul put it in 1967: “The empires of our times were short-lived, but they have altered the world forever; their passing away is their least significant feature” (Naipaul 1967: 38).

Note

- 1 Yet at the United Nations only 192 countries are represented. Where do the additional fifty or so names in our address list come from? Some of them are uninhabited, such as Bouvet Island, in the Antarctic, a colony of Norway. Others have names such as “Palestinian Territories, Occupied,” “United States Minor Outlying Islands,” “Netherland Antilles,” or “British Virgin Islands.” None of these addresses or destinations is a sovereign country.