

The Idea of Empire Reconsidered

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I. The Question of Empire Revisited

In 2001 Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld initiated a study on 'Ancient Empires' and how they maintained dominance. It signalled a change in the climate of opinion in the US : "Since September 11 if not earlier the idea of American empire is back" as Charles S. Maier remarked in his recently published book *Among Empires* (2006) that can be considered a sequel to Nial Ferguson's 2004 publication *Colossus. The Price of America's Empire*. Thus , two highly renowned Harvard professors joined a transatlantic discourse on empire that has emerged recently in consequence of American ascendancy to a hegemonic position in post cold-war world politics a position that presidents Bush (I) and Clinton were inclined to describe in terms of 'global leadership'. Critics as well as supporters of the Bush II administration's foreign policy were moved to state a shift toward an imperial understanding of global leadership. Listen to Robert D. Kaplan : "Despite our anti-imperial traditions, and despite the fact that imperialism is delegitimized in public discourse , an imperial reality already dominates our foreign policy." The critics of this alleged imperial reality denounce in turn such a development toward imperialist foreign policy and like Chalmer Johnson point out that the new career of empire means the "end of the republic". According to Maier " (s)ome commentators aspire to empire; others argue that is inevitable and urge Americans to face up to its 'burdens'; still others condemn the development outright." And he points to a fundamental mutation of public consciousness: "Until a few years ago, most historians and commentators who wrote about empire angrily rejected any application of the concept of empire to the United States as somehow un-American. Empires meant conquest and annexation ; supposedly Americans did not do that." The American Founders were less worried in this respect. Steeped in the world of classical Rome they entertained the idea of a 'New Rome' and an 'American Empire' without a qualm in that they viewed themselves as heirs to the British Empire being very much in decline according to their

conviction. Up to the middle of the 19th century Americans talked about their empire. "The concept of an American empire disappeared with the War between the States", writes van Alstyne, and since then it is "(i)n the United States ♦ almost a heresy to describe the nation as an empire." Today public discourse in the United States has once again put this heresy on its agenda. This spurs the international debate on the imperial aspirations of the USA that has been going on since the break down of the bipolar world of global politics that made the USA the only surviving super power and global political actor. American supremacy changes indeed the global political scenario but whether we watch the ascendancy of a new Rome and of a global pax Americana or just the transient phase of American hegemony is an open question ♦ notwithstanding the miscarriage of imperial policies in the immediate present. And an answer to this question requires an answer to another question: What is an empire? In this respect the domestic American as well as the international discourse is marked by theoretical and conceptual confusion. First of all ♦ 'empire' is an anti-term articulating more or less misgivings about certain political developments, actions or events that were ascribed to imperial tendencies of America's or other nation's policies. These misgivings may be justified but they do not add up to a concept of empire. The same holds true for the mainstream critique that feeds on revived doctrines of 20th imperialism-discourse. It focuses on the modern phenomenon of imperialism being the result of the evolution of industrial societies and the attendant oligopolistic competition of states in the Western hemisphere. Imperialism explained in this way was deemed to be a modern phenomenon *sui generis* caused by political and economic expansionism (overseas and continental) of the great powers in the 19th century. Analysts of imperialism centred on the nation state when they investigated imperial forms of politics including its totalitarian variety and were careful to dissociate modern imperialism from the supposedly pre-modern imperial enterprises ♦ Schumpeter being the sole exception to this rule. In consequence they had never assigned modern imperialism a place in the sequence of world empires and to characterize it accordingly. For this reason there has not been forthcoming a historically grounded and theoretically informed conceptualization of *empire* that would provide the analytical instruments for an understanding of contemporary ♦ 'imperiality'. Social scientists and historians practice a kind of division of scientific labour that left the historical study of world empires to the historians and their narrative of the rise and fall of empires ranging from the ancient oriental empires to the eclipse of empires in modernity that is alternatively identified with the downfall

of Napoleon 1815 (thus excluding the colonial empires in the era of imperialism) or with the dissolution of the Hapsburg monarchy and the Ottoman empire in 1918 or finally with the decline of the UDSSR and the United States in the 1980ies as was stated by Richard Kennedy.

The prediction of Kennedy was in the case of the USA a bit too rash in view of the present debate. In the last analysis historians have agreed that the days of empires have gone.

Historiography presents a plethora of information about imperial societies whereby the *imperium Romanum* functions as the interpretive paradigm for an understanding of the rise and decline of imperial power and glory. Imperial historiography drawing on the Roman case came at least up with a rather precise albeit very general concept of empire: " We consider as essential for an empire the presence of far-reaching political power , that settles lastingly for many peoples the questions of rulership and of duty in an extended space . This complex of order necessitates an effective spiritual bond and a unifying recognizable end of action. Beyond the regulation of material matters the members must derive their security from the whole and receive the meaning of their sacrifices . Thus the empire presents itself as the unity of power and spirit in a global setting." The historian's working definition of empire notes key elements of an imperial order that invite further exploration of the subject matter. It has to transcend historical description of the phenomenon moving from historical narrative toward the typification of the imperial configuration of order in terms of a paradigm of political order to be set off against other political units like the territorial or the hegemonic state and to distinguish between transient and abortive imperial formations and a full blown empire. The historian's definition cited above refers implicitly to the latter that conventionally goes under the name *world-empire*, or German *Weltreich* . The term seems to have been coined by modern historiography in reference to the Latin *imperium mundi* respectively *monarchia mundi* that originated probably with Dante and Engelbert von Admont in the 14th century. Unfortunately, the available literature offers very little information in this regard. In late 19th century German historiography the term *Weltreich* is well established. However, as Eric Voegelin asserts in 1961, "the theoretical implications of the term *world-empire* , although it is generally used in historiography and politics , are quite insufficiently explored, so that the difficulties caused by the boundlessness of materials are aggravated by the inadequacy of conceptual instruments." In his following remarks Voegelin was to draw the main lines of the problem which in part will be discussed in the next paragraph.

II. The Meaning of World-Empire Restated

I return briefly to the ongoing discourse on the imperial aspirations of the USA. It has revived scholarly interest in the study of world-empire and put the systematic theoretical reflection on this subject on the social and political science agenda where Voegelin had put it many years ago. Social science is asked to remedy the deplorable fact of 'empire-obliviousness' in the profession as it was called by the German political scientist Herfried Münkler. The present discourse differs from the traditional 19th and 20th discourses on imperialism as well as from historical story-telling in that it rediscovers the 'world empire' as a model of political order sui generis based upon a 'logic of world-supremacy' as Herfried Münkler suggests in his seminal work on *Imperien – Die Logik der Weltherrschaft- vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* (2005). To Münkler the world-empire represents the empire *par excellence* and .therefore, it provides the theoretical and empirical point of reference for the study of the imperial phenomenon in all its varieties.

Maier, Münkler and Neil Ferguson – to name some of the most distinguished contributors to this discourse – think in terms of the return of empire in the post-imperial age. They argue against the classical historiographic assumption that the era of empires has come to its end with the ascendancy of the modern nation state. These authors start their respective investigations from the vantage point of the imperial potential of the United State in view of the history of world empires and reconstruct the imperial model of order by means of a combination of diachronous and synchronous analysis . They focus on the phenomenon of power – the empire considered a specific configuration of power signifying a more or less coercive regime extending over a whole range of territorial units. Imperial power feeds on military, economic, political and ideological resources – those are the recurring elements that according to the lead literature constitute imperial orders. The synchronous approach , however, misses the crucial point that there is a meaningful historical pattern of empire formation, and, further on, that self-interpretative symbolisms explicating the lead idea of empire are essential to empire building , and involves more than just being a power resource as is generally held . Undeniably , building

and sustaining an empire is foremost dependent on the different modalities of power- politics . But societies in imperial form like any other politically organized society represent a symbolic order. Conventional empire-research knows about this fact but does not recognize the primacy of the symbolically explicated spiritual substance in society-formation. However, only an understanding of the nexus of power and symbolization permits a differential analysis of the imperial phenomenon. Why is this so? Minkler insists that the 'world empire' is the empire *par excellence* insofar it involves the claim to world-superiority in terms of an imperial mission based upon an universal vision of order. The 'world' in question is thus a symbolically determined arena of action that pragmatically coincides with the geographically defined space. All empires, Voegelin wrote in his 1961 lecture . "intend to incorporate the universal order of human existence in the particular order of a finite society" and the types of empire (cosmological, ecumenic , orthodox and finally totalitarian) form a meaningful historical sequence each presupposing the preceding one , so that the sequence an irreversible whole of experiments with the problem of order." Voegelin in agreement with historical conventional opinion traces the beginning of empire- building to the so-called ancient oriental empires . But the world empire in the true sense of the word, that is the ecumenic empire, is to be distinguished for the earlier type of imperial society in that it emerges within the context of the axial transformation of human self-understanding that results in a novel configuration of power and spirit, political order and spiritual order. This configuration is called the 'ecumenic age' by Voegelin and explored in the volume that is respectively entitled .

The era of the new type of ecumenic that is multi-civilizational empire begins with the Iranian expansion in the Near East. Already Eduard Meier spoke of the empire of the Achaemenids

as the first state in history to lay claim to universality and world-domination. The era of ecumenic empires extends from the rise of the Persian to the fall of the Roman empire in the West and it is paralleled by the rise of the Chinese empire and the rise and downfall of the Hindu empires in the east. The ascendancy of this type of the order of the political was to structure the civilizational process of history up to the present time on a global scale.

The ecumenic empire as the prototypical world empire .

The intertwining of the spiritual outbursts and emergent world empire is not accidental. From the series of socio-cultural transformations in the so-called axial era from 800 B.C. to 600 A.D (according to Voegelin and Eisenstadt) evolve grand historical symbolic configurations in the Near East, in Mediterranean Europe, in China and India that "transform the shape of human societies and history in what seems to be an irreversible manner" and "ushered in a new type of social and civilizational dynamics in the history of mankind.". Defined in brief this radical spiritual change involved "the conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders." From this basic tension evolved the image of a differentiated reality that separated the divine from human being , nature from society and history. With the chasm between the transcendental order embodying the idea of an higher moral or metaphysical order and the mundane order of pragmatic life-worlds originated a far-reaching re-ordering of societal existence in order to attune the institutional and social set-up to the imperatives of the transcendental vision. "The outbreak of imperial expansion was thus accompanied by an opening of spiritual horizons that raised humanity to a new level of consciousness." The era of world-empire is co-eval with the breaking forth of the novel symbolic forms of human self-interpretation : philosophy, Zoroasterism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism etc.

This spiritual and cultural expansion of the horizon opened up the human world in term of the world inhabited by humans (the ecumene) to human action in an historically unprecedented way . The dynamics of power politics became bound up with the spiritual dynamics of the transcendental vision. At first there are power clusters , they fill power-vacua and in turn coalesce into incipient domination over cultures, ethnicities and territories . But political power in organized form is in search of meaning . This quest brings into play the dialectics of mundane and transcendent order. The vision of a transcendent order commits human existence to an universal truth that in turn transforms the newly discovered mundane field of human interaction into a realm that represents this truth in the modalities of community life.

The one transcendent truth of humanity corresponds to the one world under imperial order. "A power organization informed by the pathos of representative , and therefore of mankind ♦ that would be the core , as it emerges from historical phenomena , of a definition of world-empire" concludes Voegelin. From the tentative and experimental association between imperial power

and the spiritual forces unleashed by the axial breakthrough sprung the varieties of world-empire and their claim to universal superiority. Thus, the ancient world empires initiate a sequence of imperial projects that extends into modernity. The next phase calls Voegelin the era of "orthodox" empires. The association between the respective symbolic orders and power organisation is so far consolidated by self-referential orthodoxies that the most empires survive as self-contained political units even the mutual challenge of universal claims and the ensuing power conflicts. The spectrum of imperial order ranges from the Christian empires (East and West), the Islamic empires and the neo-confucian Chinese empires.

Before we turn to the modern era, we have to note a fundamental contradiction built into the ecumenic solution of political order. The universal idea of mankind under a transcendental order does not square with universal claim of imperial ecumenicity. The meaning of ecumenic spirituality entails on principle a community of humans living by the experience of a common transcendent source of order that points to an end of human existence beyond the mundane order of things thus denying the mundane world its universal or ecumenic meaning. Hellenic philosophy and in a more radical mode Judaic and Christian apocalyptic thinking but in a lesser degree Buddhist speculation denigrate the idea of world-empire in favour of directing

towards a telos of life beyond all empire. This was the dilemma of the imperial-religious complex that was only partially dissolved by the institutionalized form of religious communities that were in the world but not of the world. The long-standing marriage of axial symbolisms and ecumenic imperialism was always fraught by the temptation to subordinate the universal vision to the imperatives of power politics and this predicament came again to the fore in the modern experiments in empire-building.

In western modernity the idea of world-empire resurfaced twofold in the era of the nation-state that for a time dominated the world of the political. First, imperial forms unfolded in the process of European expansion into non-European spaces. The colonial empires of Spain, France and Britain legitimated the imperial aspirations in terms of a commitment to their civilizing mission based on the universally valid principles of Western intellectual and moral culture. Benjamin d'Israeli explained the meaning of this mission as follows: "(I)t is not our fleets and armies, however necessary they may be, for the maintenance of our imperial strength, that I only or

mainly depend in this enterprise on which this country is about to enter. It is on what I most highly value the consciousness that in the Eastern nations there is confidence in this country, and that when they know we can enforce our policy, at the same time they know that our Empire is an Empire of liberty, of truth, and of justice." But the fate of the colonial empires proved that in the long run the political logic of the Western nation state contradicts the logic of world-superiority. The logic of the nation state rests on the idea of self-determination and self-government and the universal validity of this principle legitimated the civilizational mission . The dilemma is obvious: An imperial policy destined to convey to the subjects of imperial coercion the universal idea of the right of self-determination necessitates the insistence of the ruled to get rid of the masters even at the price of replacing the colonial order by disorder of their own making.

The second and historically more disturbing case of modern empire-building is the rise of the totalitarian empire. It combines the expansionistic mood of Western modernity with the original faith in the apocalyptic transformation of the world of the axial era. To make a complicated story brief : The apocalyptic hope of an transcendent empire beyond all empires resurfaces in form of a new ecumenicity ♦ it envisions the merger of the mundane and the transcendental order in time and aims at creating an ultimate empire by means of power and coercion that eradicates the tension between the world and a transcendental beyond once for all.

The empires grounded in innerworldly apocalypses seemed to be the last cry of empire-building and their breakdown might indeed reveal that the age of empire is coming to its end as Voegelin surmised at the conclusion of his reflection on the meaning of world-empire. "The dream of representing universal order through the world empire" Voegelin asserts, is finished "when the meaning of universal order as the order of history under god has come into view". The statement is puzzling as Geoffroy Barraclough mused in his critical assessment of Voegelin's inquiry. Indeed, it is the philosopher who is capable to see through the dream But as Voegelin knew himself very well: "(n)o wisdom of a Plato could prevent the suicide of Athens" . That is to say that the philosopher's insight might never reach the public it attempts to address. Therefore, in view of the historical evidence there are reasons why the imperial model of order is a recurring model of political organization that may resurface in the 21th century , the United States being a case in point. Analysts like Maier decided to avoid claiming that the United States is or is not an

empire, while Minkler accepts the notion of an American empire and argues in favour of a Europe that should develop elements of an imperial policy of its own. If, however, the USA develops into an imperial order it will fail for the very reasons the European colonial empires declined in rather short a time. The logic of the order of the American republic contradicts the logic of world supremacy. The *idee directrice* of constitutional democracy may claim universal validity and American power may be tempted to press the non-Western world to accept this idea in terms of the Wilsonian dictum to make the world safe for democracy. But again the principle of self-government resists any imperial imperative. The failure of imperial policy is programmed. Philosophically spoken:

The best human beings can aspire to is ordering their societal existence by means of the creation of a form of the political that incorporates a balance of the mundane and transcendental dimensions of human experience.