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# LESSONS OF EMPIRE

## IMPERIAL HISTORIES AND AMERICAN POWER

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Florida, will always matter. But the starkest sign of the current extremity of American power is the sharpness of the line it draws between who must and must not be counted, recognized, individualized, rendered human and rightful. No system has ever been more extreme in its distinctions between who does and does not count than the form of capitalist democracy currently practiced by the Republican-led Americans. In their dreams it can dress up in the togas of imperial lawgivers.

## 10. EMPIRE AND IMITATION

SHELDON POLLACK

The invitation to think about the new American empire and historical experience raises a number of important and hard questions especially for students of the non-modern non-West.<sup>1</sup> I will address just three in this essay, and only in a very schematic (and unavoidably reductive) manner. The first concerns historical knowledge itself, a problem that can only be registered and not resolved, except insofar as registering goes some way to resolving it. The second has to do with comparative history of the empire form, whether such a thing is even possible, and if so, what it might look like. Connected to this is the last and most difficult question: Can such a history, assuming it is possible, help us find our political way forward between the Scylla of the American empire and the Charybdis of the order of nation-states, its one apparent alternative? Can it point us toward some different, non-coercive mode of global power-culture, some cosmopolity perhaps, which might appear less hopelessly utopian if history could show that some people somewhere may once have lived in something like it?

Contemporary discussions of the lessons past empires may have for present ones make several assumptions that must come as a surprise to anyone who has followed the debates on historical knowledge over the past few decades. One is that we really can acquire true knowledge of history; another is that this knowledge is useful to us, that we will benefit by acting upon its truth. Since its recent near-death experience—having been reduced to mere storytelling by literary critics and to sheer ideology by philosophers, and this after long and cruel neglect by social science—history hasn't had it so good in a generation.<sup>2</sup>

The contradictions in the critique of historical knowledge were never very far beneath the surface. Hayden White could reduce history writing to tropes (metaphor, metonymy, and so on) and modes of employment (romance, tragedy, and the like),