

The Final Frontiers?

Charles Maier's Breakthrough *Among Empires*

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US empire is in vogue, if not on the streets of Paris than at least as a topic of academic discourse. Analysts should, however, beware. The last wave of historians of US “empire,” including such New Left revisionists as William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber, shrunk the “e” word from six letters to four, employing it more as epithet than as analytical concept. Without defining empire, early narratives were at best equally comprehensible sans “empire” and at worst vehicles for bias. More recently, historians Niall Ferguson and Andrew Bacevich have penned superb books on US global supremacy: *Colossus* and *American Empire*, respectively. But neither defines empire rigorously. Ferguson’s analogies with the British Empire are illuminating but do not embrace empire as a framework. The United States may look and act like an empire — it may even exceed British imperial power. But the United States also looks and acts like a nation-state. What is needed is explicit differentiation between empires and nation-states before application to the US case.

Harvard historian Charles Maier’s *Among Empires* is a breakthrough. Maier throws cold water on empire’s extollers and excoriators alike. As if to compensate for the omissions of his predecessors, and as if normal tradeoffs did not apply to him, Maier devotes half the book to a comparative discussion of empires past in extraordinary breadth and depth. The book is as valuable as the whole corpus of histories of US empire before it.

Perhaps most important, for starters, is his precise definition of empire: “a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominant state — the ‘mother country’ or the ‘metropole’ — create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit (the ‘colony’ or, in spatial terms, the ‘periphery’).” Already the attention to social structures distinguishes Maier’s approach. So too does his explicit differentiation of empires from nation-

states. “States can be socially and ethnically homogenous,” Maier writes, “but the empire is differentiated: religiously, nationally, occupationally, and territorially.” Empires stabilize inequality at home and export social hierarchies. Empires almost constantly fight. They separate the zone of conflict, the frontier, from the zone of peace, the core — at least in theory, the Gauls remind. One of Maier’s especially notable insights is that most nation-states begin as empires. They are empires that finish the homogenizing job, “finally successful in imposing linguistic uniformity and a sense of encompassing identity.” The point is worth elaboration. Empires and nation-states may be conceived as two ideal types that bound a range of combinations in between. If so, no wonder Maier is compelled to punt on whether the United States is an empire. The matter is less yes-or-no than to-what-extent.

Before turning to the US case, Maier offers comparative essays on two imperial characteristics: the frontier and violence. His conceptualization of the frontier makes a major advance in the theoretical literature. Common to all empires and an institution in its own right, the frontier “marks insiders and outsiders and always becomes a contested fault line along which acts of violence — call it disorder or resistance, depending on your point of view — accumulate.” Maier identifies four frontier types and the politics they produce: anti-adversarial (against organized rivals), anti-incursive (against barbarians), proto-territorial, and tributary. Unfortunately, Maier does not or cannot apply many of these ideas to the United States, which has a “post-territorial empire” as well as a territorial one.

Maier’s discussion of violence is likewise rich, though his body-count balance sheet may be unfair to empires. Maier does not pull rhetorical punches. “The lifeblood of empires is blood.” Imperial frontiers and ambition “create an intimate and recurring bond with the recourse to force.” Maier shuns the counterfactual question of how much violence empires prevent, declaring the answer unknowable. Perhaps, but reasoning is possible. If Maier is right that “empires, in effect, eliminate internal anti-adversarial frontiers,” then empire may be regarded as a centrifugal violence transfer, from the interior to the frontier. Part of the excessive violence empires leave behind may reflect what life would have been like without empire.

But it is in the realm of international political economy that Maier concentrates his discussion of the United States and makes his greatest contribution. US empire has assumed two forms: the empire of production, from World War II to the 1970s, and the empire of consumption, from the 1970s to the present. The empire of production was truly imperial, Maier writes, because European elites acquiesced in Washington’s military and socioeconomic leadership, propagating US economic structures and Fordist production methods to the Old World. The Marshall Plan emerges as a milestone. From Marshall Plan offices at home and visits to the United States, European labor learned the US consensus that wage hikes should not exceed productivity gains.

Maier’s chapter on the post-1970s empire of consumption is the most original and deserves substantial attention. Maier approaches the chapter by asking why

foreigners bought US Treasury bills even though higher rates of return were available elsewhere and the dollar had depreciated. His answer lies in a tacit exchange between core and periphery. The United States sent manufacturing jobs and social capital abroad, where foreigners in turn bought Treasury bills to finance the United States' mounting debt and prodigal consumption. Clearly this "bargain" was implicit, if that. Just how implicit deserves further scrutiny. Was debt purchase really necessary to the US export of jobs, or would that export have happened anyway? Here the imperial framework may lead us astray. Maier contends that where US jobs were exported, elites "returned a portion of the goods produced under them as a payment for their new opportunities to become wealthy." But for many elites, investing in the United States was their own decision. They weighed expected profitability and stability of several possible investments and chose the United States. If they felt compelled out of fear that the job export would otherwise cease, Maier does not establish this fear empirically. Hence the paradox of any would-be US empire. In international economics as in geopolitics as in global culture, the US imperium appears less coercive than its predecessors.

A highlight is Maier's sometimes explicit, mostly implicit dialogue with Harvard historian Niall Ferguson. Maier seems to prefer the US empire of domestic consumption to Ferguson's British empire of overseas investment, or at least Maier is skeptical of the latter's merits. Indeed the dispute, simplified, centers less on different facts and interpretations than on different concerns. Whereas Ferguson's *Empire* and *Colossus* betray overriding interest for the overall welfare of imperial subjects, Maier is more sensitive to social structures throughout the empire and to the potential debasement of domestic arrangements. "In terms of utilizing its own society's savings to secure a continuing income from abroad, Britain was the more 'virtuous' hegemon," Maier concedes. "But national thrift was imposed on the many by the few. The capacity to save rested on its ability to draw on centuries of deference and nineteenth-century ideologies of economic liberalism to keep mass incomes low and upper-class savings high." By contrast, the post-1970s United States, helped by borrowing from abroad, made sure to deliver real-wage growth even as the rich profited spectacularly.

Maier is also sensitive to social structures abroad, though he does not address any case in depth. His general claim is this: "The socioeconomic hierarchies within the colonial societies were like RNA: they served as templates to transfer the structures of power from the metropole to the periphery." The RNA theory remains to be demonstrated, in what would make an outstanding sequel. Maier does provide one example. The digital revolution begot a divide not only between nations but also within societies, between the digital haves and the analog have-nots. If the 1970s had marked the twilight of US ascendancy, however, the global digital revolution might still have happened. Then again, the United States did not decline. It spearheaded technological innovation and diffusion. The point is that discerning the precise role of US empire in this story is no small task. More broadly, the relationship between two kinds of global phenomena since the 1970s — the rise

of transnational actors and forces and the power of US empire — begs further scholarship. Is it possible to tease out the achievements of each? In what ways were they mutually reinforcing, even necessary complements? In what ways did they contradict? Maier's book is as valuable for the questions it provokes and the agenda it sets as for the arguments it makes.

For all its brilliance, Maier's focus on political economy is simultaneously the book's — perhaps history's — strength and weakness. There is a disconnect between the two halves, between the theoretical discussion of empire and the inquiry into US pre-eminence. When Maier considers empires in the abstract, he concludes that the frontier stands out as the vital institution of empire. He offers no corresponding chapter on the US frontier. This may be for good reason — the task is at least a book in itself, for the US frontier consists of several spatial and non-spatial frontiers, among them military, economic, technological, and ideological. Hopefully, Maier will next explore in what ways US empire is post-territorial and in what ways it clings to land. There is even potential, as Maier intimates, to conceive of Al Qaeda so as to redefine the War on Terror as a battle of two post-territorial empires.

When Maier considers empires in the abstract, he also assigns a more modest role to economics than in the chapters on US empire. As Maier's definition of empire implies, just how imperial the United States is depends mainly on the “webs of co-opted sociability” it has spun. The United States, he writes, was an imperial leader through the 1960s for three structural reasons: its coordination of the economy, its nurturing of a transnational political elite, and its diffusion of US culture. In practice Maier attempts to do justice only to the first. He can hardly be faulted for producing a stellar essay. Rather, he should be praised for bumping up against the edge of the historical discipline. Flows of goods, money, and people are easier to trace than sociological dynamics of control and subordination. They are, at least, tangible. They find expression in balance sheets. How can we tell whether transnational elites' adoption of US political and cultural values was a product of imperial coordination or voluntary adoption or both?

Maier overviews both the trajectory of US empire and its imperial nature at particular slices in time. Aware of the ambition, he is careful to call his book “not a systematic history” but rather an “extended essay” — which nonetheless combines national, international, transnational, and global history to analyze economic, social, and political relations from Rome to the present. Even a single time-slice appraisal would be plenty. Evaluating US empire is a grand project. It is many projects. And it is not only history's project. The dynamics of imperial control and the multiplicity of imperial sovereignties belie simplification. Their demystification may not come absent integration of sociology, anthropology, economics, and political theory. To Charles Maier's great credit, he probes the frontiers of history's empires and method alike.