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The idea of American empire has rather rapidly attained near ubiquity in a global media, and academic, discourse. We have also, within no more than 2-3 years, seen a remarkable shift in the ways in, and positions from, which it is used.

‘Empire’, ‘imperial’ and ‘imperialist’ are terms with complex and contested histories: one is even tempted to think of them as essentially contested concepts in the philosophers’ sense. In the political discourse of the 20th century’s second half, they were almost always used pejoratively. Almost nobody, and no state, was willing to adopt them as self-descriptions. Only the most hostile critics of United States foreign policy described it as either imperial or imperialist, or called America an empire. Today, however, the notion of an American empire is employed from a far wider range of viewpoints. It is of course still favoured by many negative critics of the phenomena concerned. But it is now used also by those who seemingly intend it in a neutral, analytical or descriptive way, and – in a more striking change – by strong supporters of a globally activist or interventionist policy. This has been accompanied by ever more vigorous debates over the relevance or otherwise to present-day US power of ‘lessons from history’, whether the earlier history of the USA and its international role themselves, or those of older imperial systems.

I want here to address aspects of those debates. I do so – inevitably given their breadth and the paper’s shortness – via a series of rather sweeping, even peremptory claims and (perhaps more helpfully) equally sweeping questions. This involves many passing allusions to a wide range of secondary literature. Full, or even indicative, referencing would therefore require a large number of very long footnotes. In the interests of brevity, manageability and readability, I have excluded these here – except at the end of this sentence – and merely refer the reader to other published or imminently forthcoming work on which this paper draws, and which includes something closer to a proper apparatus of references.1

1 The most directly relevant include ’David Fieldhouse and "Imperialism": Some Historiographical Revisions' in Peter Burroughs and A.J. Stockwell (eds.): Managing the Business of Empire (Frank Cass 1998); 'L'Afrique comme sublime objet de l'ideologie' in Francois-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar et. al. (eds.): Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amerique (Karthala, 2000); ‘The Slow Death and Strange Rebirths of Imperial History’ Jnl. of Imperial and Commonwealth History 29,2, 2001; Empire. A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2002); ‘Internal Decolonisation? British Politics since Thatcher as Postcolonial Trauma’ 20th Century British History 14,3, 2003;’C.L.R. James: Visions of History, Visions of Britain’ in Bill Schwarz (ed.), West Indian Intellectuals (Manchester University
I shall organise my comments on these developments, and their potential relevance for thinking about empire in the present, under no fewer than twelve summary headings. Each of them involves an issue which has manifested itself in quite sharp recent disputes among analysts of empire, but may also suggest new opportunities and directions for the subject.

In the study of empire, there have been comparatively few big ideas and, by comparison with many other spheres both of historical and of social scientific research, relatively little theory-building. One need only think of how much debate still revolves around the century-old theories of J.A. Hobson, or the fifty-year-old ones of Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher. The most widely influential ‘new wave’ of the past few decades, Saidian cultural analysis, has been spurned or scorned by at least as many students of empires as have embraced it. Very few historians have been at all attracted by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s eloquent and suggestive but also impressionistic or even internally inconsistent arguments, or think that these offer fruitful ‘leads’ for historical research. Yet this relative dearth of theoretical elaboration coexists with a remarkable effervescence of controversy and – especially, perhaps, since the 1980s – with influences coming from numerous academic disciplines, milieux and indeed theoretical traditions. Empire, its aftermaths and enduring significance have not only been the concerns of historians and political or International Relations analysts. In recent years, they have become major preoccupations among cultural and literary critics and theorists. In some other fields too - political theory, economics and 'development studies', anthropology, human geography and more - they have generated a rapidly growing and often highly contentious literature in the past few decades. These new approaches often come carrying a weighty conceptual and political baggage, including, crucially, the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism. If theory-building within imperial history as such has been sparse, the impact of various kinds of theory drawn from elsewhere on it has been ever more substantial and contentious.

The first sphere of debate I wish to highlight, therefore, involves epistemological disputes of the most basic kind. Most imperial historians have tended to be empiricists if not positivists. Distaste for grand theory is deeply ingrained. They have been especially uncomfortable, if not hostile, towards anything that smacks of poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction or relativism. They apprehended the late, much lamented Jacques Derrida as an incomprehensible but menacing bogeyman, the equally lamented Edward Said little less so (though Said’s views were of course in reality very far from those implied by such labels). And as invocation of Said’s name suggests, they have tended to associate use of colonial and postcolonial cultural theories with all those unwelcome tendencies and even with a total disregard for historical specificity and accuracy. It is all, of course, something of a caricature. But it is not total fantasy, for it bears some relation to the epistemological and indeed political standpoints of the most influential theorists of colonialism and postcoloniality.

The influences most sharply at issue are those around textualism and the linguistic turn in historical and social studies. Texts, including those modern historians and cultural critics produce, compete by claiming and proclaiming their truth. Looking at how texts compete, at what they compete over, and what is at stake in their competition, can tell us a lot, not least about contemporary ideologies and power relations. Many postcolonial critics, however, go on to suggest – in what one is tempted by now to call identikit-Foucauldian style – that all such claims are necessarily and equivalently also exercises in power, all articulating similarly equivalent truths. As we shall see, positions taken for or against such a theoretical stance have very often been associated with political, and even ethical, attitudes towards empire, its legacies and its apparent revival.

One constellation of views, a major and still relatively new paradigm for studying empire, is what has become known as colonial discourse analysis or sometimes, now, simply ‘postcolonialism’. Such theories have exhibited a tendency to see colonial power as an all-embracing, transhistorical force, controlling and transforming every aspect of colonised societies. The writings and attitudes of those involved with empire are seen as constituting a system, a network, a discourse in the sense made famous by Michel Foucault. (Though the notion of ‘colonialism as a system’ goes at least as far back as Sartre.) It inextricably combines the production of knowledge with the exercise of power. It deals in stereotypes and polar antitheses. It has both justificatory and repressive functions. And, perhaps above all, it is a singular ‘it’: colonial discourse and by extension the categories in which it deals (the colonizer, the colonized, the subject people, etc.) can meaningfully be discussed in unitary terms. Much current writing in this vein thus treats colonialism as homogeneous and all-powerful, and also often uses the term to denote patterns of domination, or even merely of transregional contact, which actually preceded, succeeded or indeed were substantially disengaged from periods of actual conquest, possession and rule. Calling all these sorts of things 'colonial' or ‘imperial’, at worst, systematically denies or underrates historical variety, complexity and heterogeneity.
In part, the difficulties and schisms here have a disciplinary origin: in dispute over whether (or sometimes, one fears, the presumption that) the tools and techniques of literary criticism are interchangeable with those of historical, social, and economic analysis. The few individual colonial texts and incidents discussed in some cultural analyses of empire are often used not even as 'symptoms' of wider social phenomena (a problematic enough procedure in itself, which has been the general besetting sin of what has been called 'new historicism' in literary studies), but as perfunctory pegs on which to hang sweeping assertions about a generalised colonial situation. Claims initially made about the forms and reception of specific literary texts are thus illegitimately generalised into claims about the historical and political situations from which such texts derive. The texts are characteristically assumed to express a shared colonial, or anticolonial, mentality. This is in many instances associated with what may be called a culturalist bias: indeed a cultural reductionism which is mirror-image of the economic reductionism typical of some parts of the Marxist tradition. Despite the debts to Marxism proclaimed by many exponents of colonial cultural studies, there is rarely any apparent interest in the economics of colonial or postcolonial relations - and where passing references are made to these, they are often by way of ill-understood claims derived from dependency theory. Conversely, of course, many analysts of imperial economic, military, social or political history lie open to the charge of neglecting the force of culture.

A second and closely linked problem thus lies in the relative lack, still, of interaction between political, economic and strategic studies of global power on the one hand, and work by literary and cultural studies scholars interested in the cultures and discourses of imperialism, on the other. These spheres of research have operated largely in an atmosphere of mutual indifference or even antagonism – and although here too a growing body of recent work seeks to close the gaps, they remain very wide. The post-1980s wave of cultural histories of colonialism and nationalism developed in large part out of literary studies, and has continued to bear the marks of its origin. It has also diverged sharply from much earlier work on related issues in its fundamental ‘take’ on the nature of imperial power.

One could over-simply say that one camp sees the crucial relationships for analysing colonial and indeed postcolonial histories as being those between knowledge and power, whereas the other views them as being those between interest and power. The focus on a knowledge-power nexus derives, of course, above all from Foucault and, more directly, from Said’s *Orientalism* and Bernard Cohn’s essays on colonialism’s ‘forms of knowledge’. This involves not merely a stress on the centrality, power and purposefulness of colonial discourses (or ideologies: those two concepts are, disconcertingly often, used as synonyms) but on colonialism’s capacity in a strong sense to create that which it claimed to find in colonised societies. Arguments doubting this, ones seeing colonial knowledge either as essentially neutral ‘information’ or as being created by colonised as well as
colonising subjects, ones denying that Orientalism in Said’s sense was a coherent system of thought, ones stressing the weakness of colonial power and the degree of agency retained by the colonised, all amount (in Nicholas Dirks’s terms) to an abject ‘disavowal of colonial power and prejudice’ or, yet more starkly, to ‘blam[ing] the victim again’.

My third theme is again closely related. Historians of empire – perhaps especially in the British case - are engaged in something like civil war, between what some call ‘new’ and ‘old’ approaches. The label ‘new imperial history’ has already been used in very varying ways, but most of those who have used the term seem to have a broadly shared understanding of what they mean by it. They mean approaches to imperial history centred on ideas of culture and, often, of discourse; ones influenced by feminism and gender studies, by critical race theory, and most pervasively by literary theories of colonial discourse and postcoloniality; ones which emphasise the impact of colonialism’s cultures on metropole as well as on the colonised, and tend also to see it as having very significant continuing effects after the end of formal colonial rule. They promise close attention to the relationships among knowledge, identity and power, including notably the political purposes and influences of historical writing itself. Much of this new work also proclaims itself to be interdisciplinary in focus, in stark contrast to most older imperial historiography, combining history, literary criticism, cultural studies, ethnography and drawing on ideas from philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis.

There are tendencies in some of this for things which should be hypotheses to become instead founding assumptions for ‘new imperial historians’. Thus some influential recent work proceeds simply by assuming that colonial expansion was both ubiquitously constitutive of metropolitan British culture, and equally crucially dependent on it - that culture was (and is) necessarily colonialist and colonialism cultural. Those few earlier historians and theorists who are judged to have shown some partial recognition of this are faintly praised. Those who fail that test are damned not only for insularity or economic determinism, but for simply not taking empire or race seriously enough, being indulgent or over-charitable towards the historical record of British power, indeed for being morally complicit in the continuing effects of that power’s multiple abuses.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, what intends, or proclaims, itself to be an integrative, barrier-dissolving body of work has sometimes instead seemed to produce new schisms and antagonisms. The idea of the new imperial history, perhaps especially when associated with colonial discourse analysis or postcolonial theory, has already occasioned a remarkable number of negative polemics: often extremely heated ones. From the ‘old historians’ side of the disputes, much work in the ‘new’ is – in line with the general epistemological-cum-political cleavage already noted – seen as, quite simply, not being properly historical at all.

A fourth great interpretive schism in historical debate might be encapsulated under the heading:
‘Histories of capitalism, or of colonialism?’ For some ‘second generation’ Subaltern Studies authors, in particular (Dipesh Chakrabarty or Gyan Prakash, for example) a crucial failing of Eurocentric historiography, even or especially in its Marxist forms, has been to write global history as the story of capitalism’s, and hence modernity’s, inexorable universalisation. This failing among Marxists is derided as reliance on a singular ‘modes of production narrative’, and certainly issues of empire play a surprisingly small part in the work of many major Marxist historians. For some among these critics, colonialism instead of capitalism becomes the great trans-historical organizing concept. An emerging body of writing on ‘alternative’ or ‘multiple’ modernities mounts a somewhat similar line of critique, albeit in a very different idiom and, perhaps, in more nuanced form.

To subsume colonialism and its crimes within a homogenising, teleological ‘modes-of-production narrative’, supposedly typical of orthodox Marxism, also – in critics’ eyes – leads one to obscure, as Prakash had put it: ‘How and why this logic of capital distinguishes between brown and white people in the latter’s favour’. This again, it is claimed, not only misrepresents but systematically downplays, even erases, the whole question of colonialism.

What is the point of this accusation? It lies above all, I think, in many contemporary critics’ conviction that those thus criticised see emphasis on colonialism as a, let alone the, great force in contemporary history as dangerous. There is – and this is a trope which Dirks, Prakash, Mrinalini Sinha and others have recently employed – a fear of engaging properly with colonial power and its continuing effects. This in its turn is for directly contemporary and political reasons. As Dirks has elsewhere put it: ‘Accounts of the problems of third world states…that ignore the role of the imperial past clearly serve to justify the imperial present, even when the point is not made explicit. The resurgence of interest in imperial history has been accompanied by a kinder and gentler view of the European role in Empire, on occasion scripted with specific lessons for the present.’

On that view, critique of positions associated with a school of imperial history is, at the most fundamental level, really all about engaging with imperialism’s legacies, and still more with imperialism’s revival, today. Historians’ arguments which are ostensibly about 19th-century Calcutta or Calabar are ‘really’ all about 21st-century Fallujah or Ramallah.

But all this is, surely, too present-minded, too inclined to reduce questions of scholarship entirely to ones of politics and prejudice. It is a little tempting, in reaction, to see some of these harsh antagonisms as more matters of style than of substance. They relate to what Geoff Eley and Keith Nield accurately referred to as a disturbingly widespread current stylistic trend: ‘its sometimes peremptory, exhortatory timbre, its apocalyptic and apodictic tone. Historians must do this, they cannot ignore that, they had better get their general act together.’ Sanjay Subrahmanyam - to whom I am indebted – has suggested that the interpretive schisms over imperial history should not be taken
so seriously as I’ve been inclined to do; they are mere family quarrels. Yet I feel this bends the stick too far the other way again: if the image is at all apt, then in my view the ‘family’ in question is large, quarrelsome, and perhaps quite dysfunctional; while some members seem not to talk to one another at all.

Study of US ‘empire’, more productively, almost forces us to reintegrate ideas about global capitalism and ones about colonialism or imperialism, to think of both together. Indeed a high proportion of the analysis and polemic on the subject which has poured forth in recent months – including, for instance, the numerous critical responses to Hardt and Negri – have been doing just that, albeit with inevitably very varying levels of sophistication. There are wide disagreements over, for instance, the relative weights to be accorded to economic multipolarity as against US military primacy. But there is at least debate, and apparently some broadly shared rules of engagement, rather than the seeming mutual deafness or disdain among some analysts of empires past.

A fifth kind of interpretive schism is that over the role of ideas, ideals, and ideology in imperial expansion and rule. One of the major common threads between US and British empire debates has been here, in dispute over the salience or otherwise of ideology. On one side lie those, perhaps again especially in literary and cultural theory, who very frequently assume that European colonialism was a wholly willed phenomenon. On the other are those who stress the extent to which colonial rule in general, and the British Empire in particular, was a patchwork quilt, an enormously varied set of forms of rule and domination, largely the product of improvisation and full of internal contradictions and strains, rather than a deliberately constructed global system. Ideologies of empire, on this latter view, were far more often ex post facto rationalisations for acts of expansion undertaken for a very wide range of reasons, opportunistically driven by crisis, or by the availability of new means of domination (technological and other), rather than by the ideology itself.

Most famously and influentially, Jack Gallagher and Ronald Robinson – in works which continue to shape a vast body of research - argued that Britain’s preferred mode of expansion was always informal, the direct annexation of overseas territory being a last resort, and one undertaken not in response to pressure from public opinion or economic interests, but by a policy-making élite: the famous ‘official mind’. This élite’s actions, notably the Scramble for Africa, were driven by crises on the periphery, and by desire to protect British control of India, the nucleus of empire. Neither the supposed needs of industrial or finance capital, nor any significant or elaborated imperialist ideology, played much of a role.

Somewhat similar lines of division seem to be emerging in relation to the roles of ideology and self-image in contemporary US actions. American world power, it is suggested (especially by ardent
advocates) rests on a belief in free trade and open markets, on defence of human rights and the extension of democracy. It is wielded by people who see their own nation as embodying a unique spirit of freedom, forged early in their history, and who aspire to spread that spirit of freedom everywhere. But the role of ideology is just as strongly stressed by many of American policy’s fiercest critics. Whilst some negative assessments, obviously enough, see such ideological claims as merely cloaks for the operation of interest, others take them very seriously – and note, moreover, that they may blind protagonists to the empire-building consequences of their actions. Often, a group more or less precisely identified as ‘the neo-conservatives’ or even (as, perhaps most interestingly, by Anne Norton) the disciples of Leo Strauss, are seen as the key ideologists of empire.

A sixth major issue and focus for debate lies in recent British and European work about the impact of empires on metropoles. The central focus has naturally been on the histories of discourse, ideology and mentality. But there has also been – as a notable part of a wider trend, what is sometimes rather grandly called the spatial turn in the human sciences – a strong interest in the making and remaking of space and place, the ‘imperialising’ of and physical traces of empire in, landscapes and (especially) cityscapes. There has been a small flood of recent books and articles on both physical and imaginative makings of ‘imperial cities’ and ‘colonial space’. What kinds of relationships between ‘home’ and ‘colony’ operated, for instance, across Britain’s modern history? Some answers have been sought in the relations of localism and globalism, in complex ‘mappings’ of real and imaginative landscapes: those of memory, of power, of exile, of loss and death.

How though, by what criteria of judgement, can we decide what features of British culture are ‘imperial’? It has proved difficult to formulate such criteria and set limits, despite the mass of recent historical work in the field, and despite the seemingly elaborately organized, sometimes officially sponsored nature of the putatively relevant British cultural production. Assessment of the historical place of empire in British life is still marked by stark polarity between silent assumptions about its utter marginality and vociferous ones about its centrality or ubiquity – and the current and forthcoming work in this field of which I am aware, like that by Bernard Porter, Bill Schwarz and Andrew Thompson, appears unlikely to close the gap. In some quarters (perhaps especially, and intriguingly, among some US-based students of British imperialism) there is a danger of overcompensating for previous neglect of the interpenetration of domestic and imperial, failing to recognise that in many spheres of British life and thought, there really were powerful kinds of insulation between them.

To a somewhat lesser but rapidly increasing extent, similar questions are being posed by historians of France, Germany, Belgium and other European former imperial powers – and indeed those of Russia. So far as I am aware recent American historiography has not yet engaged so closely with equivalent issues. Yet it is a fairly safe prediction that the notion of ‘Empire as a Way of Life’ across
much of modern American history, once so suggestively posed by William Appleman Williams, will soon become a renewed focus for investigation – as it already is for much work in cultural studies. There is, however, an evident and major analytical problem involved in thinking about the spatial, the cultural or indeed the discursive effects of ‘empire’ within America. Even if we are not fully persuaded by sweeping claims like those of Hardt and Negri, that global ‘Empire’ is now fully deterritorialised, network-like, that it no longer has an ‘outside’, it is hard to doubt that the nature of US power and influence is such that the interpretive difficulties and divisions are considerably greater here than in the British or other historical cases. In a context of largely informal empire – which does not announce or, on the whole, perceive itself as such – deciding ‘what counts as imperial’ in domestic life is considerably more difficult even than for the internal impact of past European empires.

The sceptics – among whom the present writer would, rather hesitantly, place himself – would tend to see potential parallels between British and US ‘empires’ in terms of a relative domestic indifference to their fates. The mass of Britain’s own population was not enthusiastic about, interested in or knowledgeable about empire, except when some particular crisis aroused strong but usually rather short-lived passions – and except for a relatively brief, relatively late ‘moment’ of more ambient popular imperialism which took shape only at the end of the Victorian era. To a significant extent, indeed, the empire’s ruling elites did not want mass public interest or engagement. Even in a more fully democratic polity than was imperial Britain, and with far swifter, more varied communications systems, a similar point may hold good for the contemporary United States. And even if self-conscious patriotism is, on any comparative perspective, unusually strong and broadly based there – and has been given a new if not necessarily enduring intensity since September 2001 - there too electorates are evidently far less intensely engaged with global or foreign policy questions than is often suggested. Domestic politics continues, and will continue, to revolve mostly around internal, and especially economic, issues. Empire, on this view, does not have to be widely popular to work. It may even be more effective if it is not. The enterprise of empire does not really depend on the idea of having an empire: not, at least, on that idea being held outside very restricted circles.

My seventh sphere of contention is that over appropriate levels and units of analysis. The British ‘new imperial history’ has included a sharp critique of nation-centred historical models, with sometimes a suggestion that notions of imperial cultures as global networks should be put in their place. British history could form the centre of a worldwide web of interconnecting stories; but in tracing those connections, the centre itself would be decentred. Some others – including some who would in this over-polarised debate be characterised as ‘old’ historians, like A.G. Hopkins – also urge that important trends in the contemporary world both give the history of Empire a renewed relevance, and enable new perspectives on it. If the great historiographical shift of the twentieth
century’s second half was from Imperial to national history, there are strong grounds for this now to be reversed.

Yet the resistances against such a move will be substantial: not only among those committed, whether on scholarly or political grounds, to narratives of a national past in Britain, Ireland and other European states, but from their counterparts in many former colonies too. Australian historian Ann Curthoys puts it only half-jokingly: ‘We’ve just started making national histories, and you want us to stop already?’ But perhaps the opposition will be most formidable of all in the American historical profession, or the country’s wider public culture. Given US historical traditions, the writing of trans-national, postnational or non-national histories, though surely necessitated in some sense by sustained analysis of America’s global role, will prove even harder than it has seemed for historians of Britain’s empire. Among the latter, though surely necessitated in some sense by sustained analysis of Britain’s global role, it is still more gestured towards than undertaken. Increasingly, scholars have revived or worked with such notions as ‘the imperial social formation’, ‘the British diaspora’, ‘Greater Britain’, even ‘The British World’ or ‘Anglobalization’, but all are more suggestive than exhaustive – and some may be already rather oversold. It appears to me that, although some of these concepts are overblown, and others evidently more appropriate to the study of a country of emigration than to one of immigration, we will need but at present lack their rough equivalents for analysis of the USA’s global role.

Ideas about ‘race’ are central to these. ‘Global Britishness’ was not only found among those of British descent. One found non-white groups in – and sometimes even outside – the empire styling themselves as British, perhaps most notably in the Anglophone Caribbean. Conversely, contest over and rejection of the label British by important groups within the United Kingdom has been a central development of recent decades, amounting in some eyes to a ‘break-up of Britain’ as the natural culminating stage of the end of empire. Here we might think about parallel engagements and disengagements with the idea of being American. One starting point among many might be something like Manthia Diawara’s memoir of imagined Americanisation in his youth in Francophone West Africa, and its relation to his experiences as an adult teaching in New York. At present, discourses of ‘race’ seem near ubiquitous in the cultural and literary studies of US ‘empire’ (indeed a common presumption is that that’s what it’s all about!), while they are virtually absent from much political, economic and strategic investigation. The key questions here thus revolve around how far or in what ways – if, indeed, at all – notions of themselves as ‘being imperial’ enter into, or even become in some strong sense constitutive of, American identities, their relationship to ideas about ‘race’ and ethnicity – and of course, though I am shamefacedly conscious of adding this in utterly tokenistic style, ideas about gender.

Eighth, the whole idea of anticolonial resistance is intensely contested. A crucial contention in much
modern scholarship on European empire – perhaps especially that rather loosely identified by critics as a conservative ‘Cambridge School’ of imperial historiography – is that colonialism depended crucially on collaboration. Collaborative bargains were not only inherent in the imperial relationship, but the nature of these bargains determined the character, and the longevity, of colonial rule. Again, ideas and ideology had little to do with it. Conversely, anticolonial nationalism was ordinarily a loose, indeed strikingly fragile alliance of local and sectional interests. The social bases of Indian nationalism, for instance, lay in a web of relationships which linked locality, province, and nation. Nationalist politics was crucially formed by local patron-client networks, by the ways in which resources were fought over or bargained for, and thus by the very structures of the Raj, as the biggest controller of such resources. All this implies great scepticism about the claims of Congress either to represent a unified national will or to be driven by high principles of national liberation. A near-inevitable consequence of the former claims is then that conflict between colonial rulers and nationalists was neither a fundamental clash of principled aspirations, nor the main dynamic of late-imperial social or political change, but a limited and superficial affair, often mere shadow boxing.

There is, then, a contest over the historical legitimacy or integrity of anticolonial nationalism. The view thus sketched is, in critics’ eyes, in itself colonialist, according the colonised no will of their own, no meaningful role other than collaboration, no politics other than that structured by the imperial system itself. In a somewhat different, more overtly present-minded and indeed more strident vein some current writers – the best-known, perhaps most extreme case in the Anglophone world would be Niall Ferguson – see those who resist imperial power, past and present, as typically doing so in the name of deeply unattractive, inward- or backward looking ideologies, and the postcolonial states they created a disaster for most poor countries. The continuation or renewal of some form of imperial governance might be better than independence for many.

That last claim in its turn rests, of course, on the viability, both as historical reconstruction and as present programme, of a model of ‘liberal empire’ such as that which Ferguson sketches. We cannot pursue that particular debate further here. The next - and ninth – historico-political argument I would like to highlight takes up a slightly different contention over models of imperial rule: formal versus informal.

The greatest difference between British and American ‘empires’, and indeed between the latter and all the other, earlier imperial systems with which it has been compared, is usually thought to be that US world power is seen to rest very little on physical conquest or direct colonial rule. Neither its objective nor its means is territorial acquisition: it exercises control or influence through local client regimes, and through less formalised, less obvious economic, diplomatic, cultural and other means of control. Up to a point, this contrast is evidently correctly drawn. The USA has indeed ordinarily operated through informal empire, not formal colonialism. Around 100 years ago, that pattern
seemed to be changing, but the change turned out to be temporary. And few observers think that recent events are likely to mark a long-term alteration in this regard either. US willingness to intervene directly with military force has, since the end of the Cold War and more especially since September 2001, increased sharply. But most analysts concur that this is not likely to result in a disposition to maintain long-run occupation or establish permanent protectorates in the regions concerned. Some, indeed, suspect that reluctance to accept the costs, risks and responsibilities which this would involve may prove to be a crucial weakness of American power.

Yet it is widely argued that Britain’s informal empire, too, was almost always and for almost all purposes more important than its formal colonial possessions. The contrast between a formal British or wider European colonialism and an informal American imperium should not be overstated. British imperial power at its height also operated informally at least as much as it did formally. My own view would thus be – as I have suggested at greater length elsewhere, and as Paul Kennedy among others also believes - that ideas about British informal empire developed mostly famously by Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher – and the closely related theories of collaboration and of ‘excentric imperialism’ which Robinson later pursued – may be especially fertile for thinking about US power today and its likely future.

The tenth theme may be posed as a deceptively simple-sounding question: how important was empire? The arguments about European colonialism’s economic balance-sheets are almost wearyingly familiar. On one side stand a range of claims which see colonial expansion as having been crucial to the economic development and industrialisation of Britain and other European imperial powers, with a particularly crucial role sometimes attributed to profits from the Atlantic slave trade and New World colonial slave labour. The other side of the coin is that African, Asian and other colonial economies had their prospects or patterns of economic development destroyed, blocked or distorted by their subjection to alien rule. A more positive view of colonialism’s consequences for development urges that it was through colonial rule that European technologies, cultures and institutions – the means through which Europe itself had been able to develop and industrialise – were spread through the rest of the world. The result was that, far from being systematically or deliberately ‘underdeveloped’, almost all former colonies developed more rapidly than they would have done if they had remained independent. Colonial regimes on the whole provided more effective and honest government than precolonial states had done: and, indeed, they created modern state structures where these had previously not existed.

Neither of these starkly opposed views, surely, takes sufficient account of the sheer diversity of colonial situations. In some, the colonial impact entirely transformed economic and other conditions; but in others had a far more limited impact, or simply continued or intensified already established trends. In British India, whilst early nationalist economic historians argued that indigenous industry
was deliberately destroyed by the British, other scholars suggest that the impact of colonial state policies or of British capitalists has been exaggerated: Indian entrepreneurs, industries and trading networks retained considerable wealth and power. Stressing only the damaging effects of colonialism underrates the power of indigenous activity and initiative. In parts of Africa, especially the most remote rural areas, the direct economic effects of colonial rule were limited, at least until near the end of the colonial era, when European rulers began to pursue far more interventionist policies than hitherto. For much of the less-developed world, it has also been argued, the era of colonial rule was either too far in the past (as with most of Latin America) or was simply too short-lived (as in much of tropical Africa) for it to be plausible to grant it overriding contemporary significance. Some analysts suggest, too, that colonialism as such was more effect than cause of the wider transformations with which it was associated: that it was the growing gulf between relative European wealth, state power and perhaps above all superior technology – an imbalance already evident well before the colonial empires reached their peak – which made modern colonialism possible, far more than vice versa.

Thus it is possible to maintain that colonialism, on a global scale, is essentially an epiphenomenal factor in modern history; and that, therefore, it has few significant continuing consequences either for former colony-owning powers or formerly colonised states. A parallel kind of claim can be made in relation to socio-political structures and processes: that the colonial and, indeed, the metropolitan-imperial state was typically so weak in powers of coercion, so dependent on the politics of collaboration, that the most enduringly significant kinds of conflict and change took place *within* the forms of colonial rule, rather than *through* or *against* it.

My eleventh theme can only be raised with the utmost brevity, although it is perhaps the most emotive and contentious of all. This is the role of violence, repression and atrocity in empire, and in its representations and memories. In Britain right now, some politicians urge that it is time to ‘stop apologizing’ for the imperial past and instead celebrate its positive achievements and the abiding virtues of Britishness: recent speeches by Chancellor Gordon Brown are the most striking cases in point. Countering this, critics press for renewed attention to past British colonial atrocities, drawing above all on two just-published and very important books on 1950s Kenya which reveal patterns of abuse and massacre far wider than previously acknowledged. Belgium is, with the opening of the ‘Memory of Congo’ exhibition at the Tervuren Africa Museum on 3 February 2005, confronting a brutal imperial past more fully than ever before. Yet still, the texts accompanying the exhibition remain defensive if not evasive on the dark side of Belgium’s colonial record – and the speech by minister Karel De Gucht at its opening was an almost defiant defence of that record. Australia is embroiled in its own ‘history wars’ following Keith Windschuttle’s provocative case that, contrary to the orthodoxies of the historical profession, stories of widespread massacre – let alone genocide –
of Aboriginals by white settlers are largely fabricated. In all those places and many more, repeatedly and inescapably, the historical arguments are linked with images of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

Twelfth, and finally, I’d like simply to ask: what is a scholarly, or indeed a politically engaged, focus on empire for? Previous generations of historians inhabited a time and a worldview in which the alternatives to empire seemed not only readily apparent and attractive, but to be on the road to global victory. Anticolonial nationalism, postcolonial ‘nation-building’, new global solidarities of the formerly oppressed combined to produce an optimistic, progressivist, even triumphalist metahistorical narrative of what Samir Amin has dubbed the Bandung Era.

That moment, clearly, is not ours, and those alternatives to empire are not ones that command widespread faith or even hope, at least in the forms that they did during the moment of decolonisation. David Scott has insistently and powerfully posed the question: as the narratives of postcolonial nationalism recede, what is the problem of empire for us? What were those of the anticolonial nationalist generation, and their historians, seeking to overcome, and how does it relate to anything that we now are seeking to overcome? Nationalist histories, Scott suggests (drawing of course on Hayden White), were typically emplotted as romance. Today, they must be rewritten as tragedy. Should the multiple histories of empire, and of opposition to empire, be recast as part of a new, tragic meta-narrative? I don’t know: I am only just starting to think about this, about how to respond to Scott’s challenge.

My readers may well feel, indeed, that ‘I don’t know’ has been an implied refrain throughout this paper – and that I have offered only very oblique answers to my title question: across all these disputes and developments, is the concept of empire being revived, reappraised, or rehabilitated? The revival is obvious, in the sense that the subject is attracting a breadth, vigour and global diversity of attention unmatched for decades, if ever. Equally obviously, that involves multiple kinds of reappraisal. And some of those, both scholarly and political, intend a sort of rehabilitation.

Beyond that, a longish list of themes and disputes over imperial history, and its potential implications for an ‘imperial’ present, have been sketched here. Although I have put many of my prejudices on display, I have on the whole not ‘adjudicated’ these disputes. The lack of closure is deliberate. Embracing analytical diversity, even eclecticism, is not just a matter of avoiding the polemical excesses so often noted above. It may also aptly reflect the multiplicity of forms of empire itself: not merely variation across time, but the coexistence of very different kinds of empire within the same system, at the same time.
Even where empires, especially imperial ideologies, display close family resemblances, this has sometimes reflected conscious imitation more than structural congruity. It is tempting, indeed, to urge a definitive abandonment of the singular term ‘empire’ – which tends, even when its users are stressing and tracing differences, to imply that these are variations on a single essence – and to follow those who insistently and compellingly pluralise ‘modernities’ by doing the same for empires and imperialisms. It is almost a commonplace that several radically different forms and representations of ‘British Empire’ cohabited at any one time. But the same might as well be said of the United States, which for extended periods was engaged simultaneously in westward and southward continental expansion (or ‘internal colonialism’), in direct, formal colonial annexations or military interventions, and in the far broader creation of ‘informal empire’ through client regimes, and through economic, diplomatic, cultural and other means.

Recognition of the very different kinds of things ‘empire’ could be, all at once, has a further potentially significant consequence. For some, including the most influential of all British radical critics of imperialism, J.A. Hobson, it prompted a sharp – though shifting – evaluative distinction between ‘aggressive’ and ‘constructive’ imperialism. Yet many contemporary colonial cultural histories have, of course, taken as their major theme the oppressive, alienating, humiliating, even soul-destroying character of ‘constructive’ or transformative imperialism’s impact on non-Western worlds. Some, especially in the very recent past, have suggested that it was especially intrusive or wounding in relation to Islamic societies subject to imperial power, and that this helps explain a great deal about current global confrontations. Such studies, and the politico-cultural stances which often undergird them, challenge the evaluative dichotomy drawn by earlier critics like Hobson. Some even appear to reverse it, seeing missionaries as, in the long run, a more damaging and culpable kind of imperial agent than machine-gunners. Their mirror-image, in a sense, may be encountered among those generally affirmative histories of empire which view its opponents past and present, from the Mahdi to Bin Laden, as all benighted cultural conservatives or obscurantists.

Recent trends in thinking about the British or other European empires – as I understand them – offer only, unsurprisingly, ambiguous ‘guidance’ for thinking about American global power. In crucial respects, indeed, different schools of thought offer radically diverging agendas. Yet approaches directing attention primarily to the formal structures of rule need not be incompatible with an interest in the ideologies, cultures and discourses of empire, nor with a concentration on British-American comparisons in terms of the concept of informal empire. Indeed one can surely (at the risk of sounding merely exhortatory, and of crying rather emptily ‘Why can’t we all just get along?’) urge the complementarity of apparently rival approaches. We can try to overcome the unprofitable barriers erected between cultural and politico-economic analyses of empire: barriers which, it was suggested above, appear if anything to grow ever higher in some scholarly circles concerned with British colonialism, and which are little if any less evident among American historians and cultural
analysts. We can also attempt to dismantle or evade the still more troublesome barriers – strikingly often following the same contours as the first - which too readily and aggressively associate particular historical methods, approaches or judgements with determinate politico-ethical stances towards empire.