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EMPIRE
A Very Short Introduction

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Some clarity . . . and its limits

We have been following a sometimes tortuous path through a maze of arguments and definitions. We have come out, though, with what should be a set of usable, if rough-edged, concepts.

An **empire** is a large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest, and divided between a dominant centre and subordinate, sometimes far distant, peripheries.

Imperialism is used to mean the actions and attitudes which create or uphold such big political units – but also less obvious and direct kinds of control or domination by one people or country over others. It may make sense to use terms like cultural or economic imperialism to describe some of these less formal sorts of domination: but such labels will always be contentious. Some analysts also use terms like **dependency** – closely associated with economic underdevelopment – to describe these relationships. And they are clearly bound up with ideas about the newest of all these words: **globalization**. The ‘anti-globalization’ protestors who have confronted police forces in numerous world cities over the past few years evidently see globalization and imperialism as just two names for the same thing. Theories and rhetorics which express more positive views of the phenomenon, conversely, often tend to exaggerate the newness of the trends which they describe: the growth in transnational flows of goods, money, ideas, information, and people, with the allegedly resulting decline in the powers of the nation-state. All these have a much longer history, which scholars are only just beginning to trace. Much of this is, of course, the history of empires, which were the great transnational forces of earlier ages and the main engines of what some are now calling ‘archaic’ and ‘early-modern’ global society.

Colonialism is something more specific and strictly political: systems of rule by one group over another, where the first claims the

right (a ‘right’ again usually established by conquest) to exercise exclusive sovereignty over the second and to shape its destiny. Usually, this political domination is ‘long-distance’: the rulers of one bit of land exercise rule over another, separate one, whether the latter is a neighbour or on the far side of the world. But in a few cases – perhaps including apartheid-era South Africa, and parts of Latin America – the rulers and the ruled occupied the same physical space. Terms like **internal colonialism**, though again highly contentious, may be appropriate here.

Colonization refers to large-scale population movements, where the migrants maintain strong links with their or their ancestors’ former country, gaining significant privileges over other inhabitants of the territory by such links. When colonization takes place under the protection of clearly colonial political structures, it may most handily be called **settler colonialism**. This often involves the settlers entirely dispossessing earlier inhabitants, or instituting legal and other structures which systematically disadvantage them.

Finally, after the end of colonial rule, its effects still persist in innumerable different ways – though there is, of course, constant wrangling over how far various 21st-century miseries, especially in Africa, should be ‘blamed’ on the colonial legacy. A great range of terms has been used as collective designations for the parts of the globe once subject to colonialism: the Third World, the Less Developed (or, more optimistically, the Developing) Countries, the South, and more. The most popular today, and seemingly the most straightforward, is simply ‘the **postcolonial** world’. But the straightforwardness is rather deceptive, for as we’ve already noted and will explore further, ‘postcolonial’, with its various -isms and -ties, is also employed in a bewildering variety of other ways. Another, once popular tag for what came after colonial rule is **neo-colonialism**. The term has fallen out of favour, and was always widely abused in Cold War polemics, but might still be quite useful for postcolonial situations where an outside power – usually, but not

always, the former colonial ruler – still exercises very great, though half-hidden influence in ways that greatly resemble the older patterns of more open domination. France's role in some of her former African colonies comes readily to mind here.

For all these categories and concepts, there will be borderline cases, and contentious ones. For example, the indirect or informal political control exercised by the former Soviet Union over Poland, or by the United States over the Philippines, might (or might not, according to political preference) be described as imperialism. But it is not colonialism, since Poland and the Philippines retained formal political sovereignty. Nor is it colonization, since Russian or American migrants did not settle in Poland or the Philippines in significant numbers or exercise domination there. Much earlier, of course, large parts of Poland and the Philippines experienced both colonialism and colonization at the hands of Germany and Spain respectively. To take some still more controversial instances: the modern conflict in Northern Ireland is a colonial one in the eyes of Irish Republicans and of many international observers, emphatically not so in those of British governments and of Ulster Unionists. In the view of many Serbs, what happened in Kosovo in the 1990s was first a kind of creeping, but aggressive colonization by Albanians in historically Serbian land, then – when Serbs tried to defend themselves – full-scale imperialist war by the USA and its allies against Serbia. To Albanians, Kosovars, and most outside commentators, the case was entirely the reverse: the colonization, the regional imperialism, the aggression, and the guilt all lay with the Serbs, not their opponents. The Islamic militants who attacked New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 believed they were striking a blow against imperialism. To most Americans and Europeans, such a claim seemed utterly grotesque. But many people in poorer countries, even if they did not approve of these murderous acts, seemed to understand very well what the attackers said they were about. Quite obviously, defining 'empire' or 'colonialism' more precisely than these rival political forces do



PARIS EST PROPRE

GRACE A NOUS LES IMMIGRES QUI N'AIMONS PAS VOIR LES URINES ET LES CROTTEES DES CHIENS SANS NOUS, CETTE VILLE SERAIT PEUT-ETRE LA SCORIE DE CROTTEES

4. *Paris is Clean – thanks to postcolonial African and Asian migrants literally doing the dirty work. The same could have been said of almost every Western European and North American city.*

won't help much in resolving their conflicts – though equally, a bit more clarity would certainly do no harm.