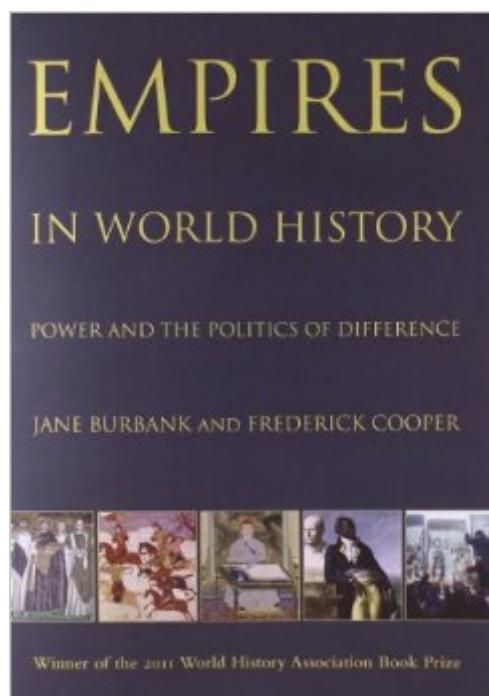


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Empires In World History: Power And The Politics Of Difference



Synopsis

Empires--vast states of territories and peoples united by force and ambition--have dominated the political landscape for more than two millennia. Empires in World History departs from conventional European and nation-centered perspectives to take a remarkable look at how empires relied on diversity to shape the global order. Beginning with ancient Rome and China and continuing across Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper examine empires' conquests, rivalries, and strategies of domination--with an emphasis on how empires accommodated, created, and manipulated differences among populations. Burbank and Cooper examine Rome and China from the third century BCE, empires that sustained state power for centuries. They delve into the militant monotheism of Byzantium, the Islamic Caliphates, and the short-lived Carolingians, as well as the pragmatically tolerant rule of the Mongols and Ottomans, who combined religious protection with the politics of loyalty. Burbank and Cooper discuss the influence of empire on capitalism and popular sovereignty, the limitations and instability of Europe's colonial projects, Russia's repertoire of exploitation and differentiation, as well as the "empire of liberty"--devised by American revolutionaries and later extended across a continent and beyond. With its investigation into the relationship between diversity and imperial states, Empires in World History offers a fresh approach to understanding the impact of empires on the past and present.

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Customer Reviews

Professors Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper deviate from the traditional narrative about the birth and development of the nation-state. Both authors contend that a world of bounded and unitary

states interacting with other equivalent states dates from 1948 C.E. rather than 1648 C.E. and the Treaty of Westphalia. For this reason, professors Burbank and Cooper explore instead the rise and fall of specific empires, their imaginary, their interaction with each other, and their respective repertoires of power. Professors Burbank and Cooper demonstrate convincingly that throughout history, most people have lived in empires that did not aim to represent a single nation. Unlike nation-states that tend to homogenize those inside their polity, empires treat different nations within their polity differently. Conflicts among empires, resistance of conquered people, and rebellions of settlers were some key factors in any cost-benefit analysis of empire-building and sustenance. To their credit, professors Burbank and Cooper clearly explain the vertical nature of power relations within empires, as leaders try to recruit reliable intermediaries to manage distant territories and achieve contingent accommodation to their rule. Empires used a wide variety of repertoires of rule such as reliance on a class of loyal, trained officials, empowerment of (select) citizens, marriage politics, and tribal allegiances to secure these essential intermediaries. Both authors also explore in much detail how empires vied with each other to become or remain the top "dog" over time. Imperial strategies such as restriction of competitive empires' connections, imperialism of free trade, and alliance of different empires against one or more other empires were in use at the intersection of empires.

This book is aimed at rebutting 2 ideas; that the nation-state is the "natural" form of political organization and that the emergence of nation-states is the logical "end" of history. The authors provide a selected survey of large polities from the Roman Empire to the present to demonstrate that various forms imperial organization were the norm for much of human history, and that the emergence of nation-states was a highly contingent and incomplete process. The authors provide generally good surveys of a variety of empires. The quality of writing is generally clear with solid narrative and analysis. Each section is backed by a good bibliography for future reading. The authors may have tried to pack too much into this book. It is very difficult to do justice to many of the topics covered in the space allowed and some sections have a superficial quality. Some discussions, for example, the brief analyses of the outbreak of WWI or the authors' attempted comparison of the "class" versus "patrimonial" features of the early Hapsburg versus Ottoman empires are brief to the point of being misleading. Some sections are marred by inaccurate statements. I doubt, for example, that British and French troops employed machine guns in the second Opium War, its not correct that the Allies assisted the French with "reconquering" North Africa in WWII (Tunisia yes, Algeria and Morocco no), and Salazar's Portugal and Franco's Spain

were not fascist states. The authors sometime overlook some interesting and ironic features related to post-WWII decolonialization.

Published in 2010, this award winning book is co-written by Jane Burbank, professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University (Ph.D. Harvard 1981) and Frederick Cooper, a specialist in African history who is also currently at New York University (Ph.D. Yale 1974). In it the authors argue that, while today we see empires as passé and abnormal, the historical reality is that it is the nation-state that is a modern anomaly and empire is the most common political form throughout world history. The book is loosely divided into two halves, with the first half setting up the theoretical framework the authors will use and focusing mostly on empires prior to the modern period (chapters six and seven deal with the early portion of what is traditionally seen as the modern era). Discussed in the first chapter, the conceptual framework is based on the idea that empires maintain distinction and modes of hierarchy as they incorporate new peoples. To prove their argument the authors use five themes: differences within empires (and how they deal with them); Imperial intermediaries (sent out to take charge of new territories); Imperial intersections (the relationship between and among empires); Imperial imaginaries (i.e. imperial context); and repertoires of power (empire, according to the authors, is an ambiguous type of state which can and often does redefine its allocation of power depending on the situation). The major criticism with this work is that while the authors have big ideas and patterns, these patterns are based on specific locations and interactions, thus fall apart when applied to locations outside of those chosen by the authors. The second criticism is that the authors do make mistakes when dealing with empires outside of their own areas.

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