

Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire. How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 600 pp., ISBN 9780691153636).

It is hard to disagree with the subtitle and basic premise of this book. Imperial regimes shaped – and their legacies continue to shape – the world we live in. From international law to national and postcolonial cultures, from the global economy to international sports events: the history of empires, imperial competition, domination and resistance, left a deep imprint on societies. Although in some societies more than in others, the lingering ‘presence’ of empire is dispersed and dissolved – as well as suppressed – to the point that it sometimes has become unrecognizable; at other moments it vehemently bursts through the surface of public discourse. Over the past few years, in The Netherlands in particular, hardly a week goes by without some form of commotion and contestation about the Dutch imperial past. Likewise, hardly a week goes by without some major academic publication, event, seminar or conference on the history of empires.

Yet the recent upsurge in scholarship on the history of empires is not merely concerned with understanding empires and how they shaped our present. As the nation-state is increasingly being challenged as the ideal unit of political organization and might even fade away ‘as a blip on the historical horizon’ (as the downbeat forecast of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper has it), a growing number of scholars these days turn to historical empires to explore what we can learn from them. Empires are characterized by their layered and often fragmented sovereignty, their ability to exercise power across space (with all its limits and possibilities), and their accommodation of cultural and ethnic diversity. Hence scholars claim that empires offer, if not viable alternative models as such, in any case alternative ways of thinking.

*Visions of Empire. How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* by Krishan Kumar can be seen as another branch of this historiographical tree. ‘Empire,’ Kumar boldly states, ‘can be the prism through which to examine many of the pressing problems of the contemporary world – perhaps even the birth pangs of a new world order.’ Although he is quick to point out that his book has ‘no direct pedagogical purpose’, the normative thrust is unmistakable: there are direct and indirect lessons to be learned, first and foremost concerning the accommodation of diversity.

Kumar, a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, set himself a herculean task: comparing and describing five vast empires over equally vast periods of time. The book’s scope is dazzling and empires are

complex, evolving entities – it is certainly no small feat to present five of them in a succinct and orderly way. As a relative newcomer to the field, Kumar had to master an enormous amount of secondary literature. Fortunately, his writing style is pleasant and clear. No doubt the book will attract a broad range of readers.

Kumar's units of comparison are the Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian/Soviet, British, and French empires. He makes no secret of the fact that his selection of empires is 'arbitrary, a reflection of my own tastes and interests as well as the limits of my knowledge' (xv). Although his candour is charming, such arbitrariness is unsatisfactory. In fact, it is illustrative of the rather thin analytical framework of the book. Judging from the introductory remarks it is a comparative history. In varying formulations, the book is about how 'ruling peoples conceived their task', their 'ideas and ideologies', and 'the outlook and attitudes of elites and intellectuals' (xii-xv). But readers who desire a fine-grained comparative agenda will look for it in vain.

It starts with the chronological framework of the book: there does not really seem to be one. The Roman Empire is not formally part of the comparison, yet a whole chapter is devoted to it to show that modern empires all departed in one way or another from the Roman model. One of Kumar's key arguments throughout the book is that the Roman model offered later imperial elites a sense of carrying out a 'universal mission'. But inter-imperial competition from the early modern period onward certainly challenged the universality of any empire's mission.

More importantly, Kumar essentially treats all five empires as 'modern' empires. Yet the heyday of both the Ottoman and the Spanish Habsburg empires were the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the chapters on the French and British empires, Kumar shifts his focus to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while their early modern trajectories get short shrift. The Russian Empire, yet again, is discussed from the 'vantage point of its reincarnation as the Soviet Union'. All this raises the question of the relative equivalence of the units that are being compared. Major political, economic, and intellectual transformations – industrialization, capitalism, technological advances, the Enlightenment, the rise of parliamentary democracy – transformations that might help us understand why an empire in the mid-seventeenth century was something completely different than an empire in, say, the interwar period, do not seriously affect Kumar's account. In that sense, Jeroen Duindam's recent *Dynasties. A Global History of Power, 1300-1800* (Cambridge 2016), is more convincing as a (still very ambitious) comparative history because of its early modern focus and tight analytical framework resulting in thematic chapters.

The question of what is being compared remains unsettled throughout the book. Can 'intellectuals', 'elites', and 'rulers' be heaped together so easily and indiscriminately, as Kumar seems to suggest? Furthermore, he flexibly draws on and reads 'ideas' *in* institutions – for example the Austrian

Habsburg army or the Ottoman *devshirme* system – as well as practices and policies of toleration. Yet do they and, for instance, the sixteenth-century sultan Suleyman I ('The Magnificent'), the English poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), or the preamble to the 1977 Constitution of the Soviet-Union belong to the same unit of analysis? Because Kumar provides no discussion of his actual source material, of what he considers as evidence, he ends up making comparisons on such a general level that it almost ceases to be a meaningful comparative history.

On this most general level, Kumar still makes a couple of interesting points. One is that ruling elites tend to downplay their own distinct ethnic identity in the interest of the manageability of the different peoples that make up the empire. This is particularly clear for the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, and with varying degrees for the Russian/Soviet Empire. A related point is that the 'nation-ness' of empires comes by degrees: from the least, the Ottomans and Habsburgs, to the intermediate, the Russian/Soviet, to the British, and the most 'national' empire: the French. But this gradual order largely derives from the fact that Kumar pays most attention to the British and French empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Would the relative 'nation-ness' of these empires still be as strong if Kumar would have focused his discussion on the early modern period?

Rigorous comparative history on the scale of empires is extremely challenging, so much is clear. Nonetheless, in the separate chapters on the various empires, Kumar provides an impressive depiction of the longevity of imperial attitudes and mentalities. After reading Kumar's book, it becomes more comprehensible how and why imperial rulers and elites in the twentieth century had so much difficulty abandoning their imperial mindsets. It is no foregone conclusion that they have been abandoned entirely at the beginning of the twenty-first.

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