1 Imperial Beginnings

Because Johan Galtung's structural theory of imperialism is central to my thinking on empire, starting our discussion of imperial systems with a closer look at his contribution will be useful. "Briefly stated," writes Galtung, "imperialism is a system that splits up collectivities and relates some of the parts to each other in relations of harmony of interests, and other parts in relations of disharmony of interests, or conflict of interests."[1] Galtung then unpacks this definition:

> Imperialism is a relation between a Center and a Periphery nation so that 1) there is harmony of interest between the center in the Center nation and the center in the Periphery nation [where, as Galtung notes, the center is "defined as the 'government' (in the wide sense, not the 'cabinet')"], 2) there is more disharmony of interest within the Periphery nation than within the Center nations, 3) there is disharmony of interest between the periphery in the Center nation and the periphery in the Periphery nation.[2]

Several features of Galtung's definition strike me as inadequate. First, I prefer to call this set of relationships *empire*: imperialism is a policy, whereas political relationships constitute a polity. Second, to define the center as the *government* is too restrictive for the core—a variety of political and economic elites are usually implicated in empire—and plain wrong for the periphery, as the concept of government suggests that the periphery possesses sover-

eignty. And, third, Galtung's use of the term *nation* is either incorrect, if it refers to country or state, or almost primordial in its implications, if it refers to a culturally delimited group or community of people.

These conceptual criticisms notwithstanding, Galtung has made a critically important—and mercifully pithy—contribution to our understanding of empire. First, he has underlined that empire is about relationships. Second, he appreciates that empire necessarily presupposes a distinct center in the "Periphery nation": "where there is no bridgehead for the Center nation in the center of the Periphery nation, there cannot be any imperialism by this definition."[3] In other words, what I call the core elite must have a partner in the periphery, or what I term a *peripheral elite*. Third, Galtung understands that empire benefits both centers (or elites, in my terminology); empire is not—indeed, it cannot be—a one-way, zero-sum relationship. Fourth, Galtung's scheme permits empire to arise in any number of ways—via outright aggression or quietly, even surreptitiously.[4] And, fifth, although Galtung does suggest that imperialism is possible in a "two-nation world"—a possibility that I shall decisively reject—he also notes that, within imperial relations, "interaction between Center and Periphery is vertical," whereas "interaction between Periphery and Periphery is missing."[5] As will presently be clear, all these points are also found, if in translation, in the analysis that follows.

Hubs and Spokes

I start with the commonsense proposition that an empire minimally involves a non-native state's domination of a native society. Both parts are housed in territorially distinct regions inhabited by culturally distinct populations—the non-natives and the natives—who share physically real or merely imagined characteristics and are different, with respect to these characteristics, from other populations in other regions.[6] The region housing the non-native state may be termed the core (or metropole), whereas the native regions are the periphery, or, more exactly, peripheries.[7] D. W. Meinig usefully breaks down what he calls the center and the periphery into subcategories: capitals (the seats of authority), cores (the areas immediately adjacent to the capitals and populated by the non-natives), and domains (the areas surrounding the cores and less densely populated by the non-natives).[8] The distinctions are important, but the binary opposition between core and pe-

riphery and non-natives and natives will suffice for our purposes (in addition to, perhaps, eliciting nods of approval from postcolonial theorists).

A few examples will convey the plausibility of this starting point.

- The Assyrian Empire was centered in the cities of Ashur, Nineveh, and Calah in northern Mesopotamia, whereas imperial territories extended from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.
- The Achemenid Empire had Persia as its core, with Pasargadae and Persepolis serving as capitals, and a periphery consisting, after Darius's administrative reorganization, of twenty provinces ruled by satraps.
- The Roman Empire was centered in Italia, whereas its far-flung territories ringed the Mediterranean.
- The core of the Ottoman Empire—like that of Byzantium—was Constantinople and its hinterland was in Rumelia and Anatolia (as was Byzantium's); peripheral Ottoman territories were scattered throughout the Balkans, the Near East, the Arabian Peninsula, and northern Africa.
- The historically Habsburg crown lands, with Vienna as their center, served as the culturally German core of the empire, whereas the other territories were the non-German periphery.
- St. Petersburg and Moscow constituted the core of the Russian Empire, whereas the provinces extending in a vast arc from Finland through Ukraine, Transcaucasia, and Turkestan to the Far East were the periphery.
- European Russia in general, and the area spanning the Moscow-Leningrad axis in particular, served as the core of the Soviet empire, housing the central apparatus of the totalitarian state and the Russian or Russified core elite. The Soviet periphery consisted of three sets of entities: the non-Russian regions of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, the fourteen non-Russian Soviet Socialist Republics, and the people's democracies of east-central Europe.
- The distinction between core and periphery was most obvious in the French, British, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Portuguese Empires, all of which possessed a core in their nation-state and peripheries for the most part overseas.

We expect core elites to run the agencies, organizations, and institutions of the imperial state, and we expect peripheral elites to administer their peripheral counterparts or extensions. The Roman Empire provides a good example of this division of labor. "Roman practice was to rule through the intermediacy of the governing bodies of settled and formally constituted communities," writes Gary B. Miles. "The responsibilities of local leaders . . . provided them with occasions both to exercise power and extend patronage, through the collection of taxes, administration of justice (and thus keeping of the peace), recruitment of soldiers, and organization of corvées when Rome required local roads, postal service, or the like."[9] These "power elites," to use C. Wright Mills's felicitous phrase, are not and need not be monolithic or, as John Armstrong demonstrates, even ethnically homogeneous.[10] The Ottoman core elite, for example, consisted of the sultan and his family; the "divans or councils that deliberated on affairs of state; the *kadı* courts; the imperial hierarchy of religious colleges; the Janissary infantry corps"; and the "ruling class," consisting of the "men of the sword," "men of religion," palace service, and "men of the pen."[11] In Han China the men of the pen, or literati, were an especially important component of the elite in both core and periphery.[12] In the Soviet Union the core elite consisted of those members of the nomenklatura who occupied positions of authority—in the Communist Party, government, army, and secret police—in Moscow and its environs.[13]

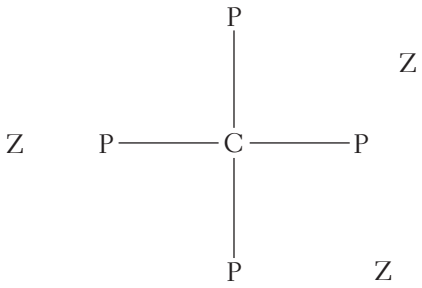
Core elites craft foreign and defense policy, control the armed forces, regulate the economy, process information, maintain law and order, extract resources, pass legislation, and oversee borders. In turn, peripheral elites implement core policies. In a word, the division of labor between core elite and peripheral elites in empires is little different from that between central elite and regional elites in all states. Although the relationship between core elite and peripheral elites is unequal, premised as it is on the dominance of the former and the subordination of the latter, that too is no different from center-periphery relations in many multinational dictatorial or, more generally, hierarchically organized states.

Constructing Empire

How are we to cross the boundary between nonempire and empire? I propose moving beyond the functional division of labor between core elite

and peripheral elites and examining their relationship in terms of the imperial whole and all its parts. Bruce Parrott defines empire as "a dominant society's control of the effective sovereignty of two or more subordinate societies that are substantially concentrated in particular regions or homelands within the empire."[14] We can now see why there must be at least two peripheries. As long as the core elite has only one peripheral unit to dominate, we can never transcend the functional division of labor and establish a definitional boundary for empires. But once there are at least two such units, it becomes possible to relate the parts of an empire to the systemic whole, as in figure 1.1, and actually to speak of a defining structure.

Core-periphery relations in an empire resemble an incomplete wheel, with a hub and spokes but no rim. The most striking aspect of such a structure is not the hub and spokes, which we expect to find in just about every political system, but the absence of a rim—or, to use less metaphorical language, of political and economic relations between and among the peripheral units or between and among them and nonimperial polities (designated as Z in figure 1.1). Galtung also speaks of the "interaction structure" of empires as being vertical between center and periphery and as missing between periphery and periphery.[15] Communist Czechoslovakia could not by this logic have been an empire, because the Czech regions dominated only Slovakia; Tito's Yugoslavia was not an empire because the national republics enjoyed significant relations with one another and with the outside world. In contrast, the Spanish Empire in the Americas was quintessentially im-



Note: C = core; P = peripheries, Z = nonimperial polities.

FIGURE 1.1 The Structure of Empire

perial in structure: all the provinces possessed direct political and economic links to Spain but not to one another. As Gerhard Masur points out, "American goods en route from one side of America to the other had to travel circuitously through Spanish ports, and Spanish navigation had a monopoly on trade with the colonies."[16] Similarly, Meinig suggests that the late eighteenth-century British Empire should be envisioned as "two great sectors of concentric patterns, a radiating set of provinces—anchored on a single point—ringing much of the North Atlantic."[17]

Inasmuch as everything is connected to everything else, it is physically impossible to keep the peripheries of even the most hierarchically organized empire completely separate or isolated. If nothing else, smuggling, everyday human contacts, and chance encounters are inevitable. By the absence of a rim, therefore, I must mean that no significant relations between peripheries and between peripheries and other polities can exist without the intermediation of the core. Significance is anything but a straightforward notion, of course, especially as we approach the conceptual middle between what is obviously significant and obviously insignificant.[18] Even so, the notion of significance entitles us to expect that, in an empire, political consultations, military cooperation, and security arrangements between peripheries take place only, or largely, on the initiative and under the leadership of the core. By the same token, most exchanges of resources—money, goods, information, and personnel—will also take place via the core. Note that the kind, or mix, of resources that flow in an empire can be defined only relationally, in terms of the imperial economy.[19] Ancient empires are likely to have seen flows of material goods; modern empires would have witnessed shifts toward financial flows. In particular, as Arnold Toynbee notes, "Communications . . . are the master-institution on which a universal state [i.e., empire] depends for its very existence. They are the instruments not only of military command over its dominions, but also of political control."[20]

The transportation networks of empires (roads, railroads, sea links, pipelines, and the like), which are the physical channels through which resources flow, generally reflect this hublike structure. In the overseas empires of the British, French, Germans, Dutch, and Portuguese, natural resources were transported from the hinterlands to the coasts of colonies, where they were loaded onto ships that brought them to Europe, which then supplied the colonies with manufactured goods. A more complicated arrangement might involve triangular relationships, such as the transatlantic slave trade, whereby manufactured goods went from England to Africa, which supplied

slaves to the American colonies, which in turn shipped raw materials to England. Many centuries earlier, goods, people, and finance traveled along roads and sea routes to and from such imperial capitals as Rome and Constantinople. Romanov Russia's railroad system had St. Petersburg and Moscow as its hub. In Austria-Hungary roads, railroads, and telegraphs centered on Vienna and to a lesser degree on Budapest and Prague—as we would expect in a severely decayed empire. The Soviet transportation network had Moscow as its reference point, so that even in the late 1980s it was most convenient to travel between republics via the Soviet capital. The Inca system of roads was not, strictly speaking, organized around a hub—the Incan Empire was squeezed between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes—but the capital city, Cuzco, was the center to which all roads led.[21]

Significantly, empires, as I have defined them, bear structural resemblance to totalitarian states.[22] Both types of polities consist of central and peripheral entities implicated in a relationship of dominance, control, and supervision by the former of the latter. In empires these entities are geographically delimited—the core versus the territorial periphery; in totalitarian states they are functionally delimited—the core state versus core and peripheral societies, economies, and cultures. Obviously, totalitarian states are infinitely more totalizing than empires, but the two do have an identical hublike structure: a conceptually distinct core that dominates conceptually distinct peripheries bound minimally to one another. As we shall see in chapter 2, we can draw important theoretical lessons from this isomorphism.

Types

Although all imperial polities possess certain defining characteristics—above all, structure—that enable us to subsume them under a single political genus regardless of the time, place, or circumstances in which they existed, empires are sufficiently diverse to warrant dividing them according to types. As the defining characteristic of greatest relevance to us is structure, it makes sense to make structural variation the key to an imperial typology. One obvious structural feature is the length of the spokes. Some empires are territorially concentrated, whereas others, consisting of far-flung, even overseas, possessions, are not. That is, the imperial wheel can be small, with short spokes, or large, with long ones; more likely than not the wheel will not be circular because it will have both long and short spokes.

A second, equally obvious, feature is the number of spokes—that is, of core-periphery relationships. That number can range anywhere from two to *N*, where *N* is some number less than the total number of potential peripheries in the world at any time. I term empires with few, short spokes *continuous* and those with many, long spokes *discontinuous* (see figure 1.2). In general, continental, or territorially contiguous, empires tend to be continuous (although very large continental empires obviously will not be), whereas overseas, or maritime, empires are almost invariably discontinuous. Empires may also be both continuous and discontinuous, or *hybrid*, thus resembling a "noncircular" wheel. The Habsburg Empire was highly continuous, the British Empire was discontinuous, and the German Reich, with imperial possessions in Europe, the Pacific, and Africa, was a combination.

A variety of scholars also differentiate empires according to the extent of authority, or rule, exerted by core elites over peripheral elites. As David Lake suggests, peripheral elites with least authority are said to participate in a formal empire; those elites with more substantial amounts—the USSR's east-central European satellites, for instance—belong in an informal empire.[23] Table 1.1 details these and related distinctions. In formally ruled empires the core elite appoints and dismisses the peripheral elites, sets the entire internal policy agenda, and determines all internal policies. In an informally ruled empire the core elite influences the appointment and dismissal of peripheral elites, sets the external policy agenda, influences the internal agenda, and determines external policies while only influencing internal

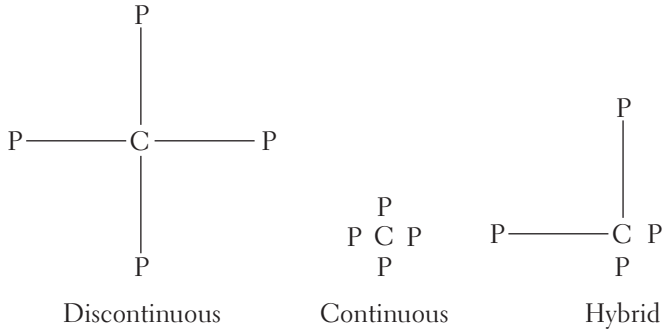


FIGURE 1.2 Types of Empires

TABLE 1.1 Types of Core Rule

	Hegemonic	Informal	Formal
Peripheral elite		(Appointed/dismissed)	Appointed/dismissed
Policy agenda	External	External/(internal)	[No external]/internal
Policies	(External)	External/(internal)	[No external]/internal

Note: Parentheses designate a weak form of control over the action within the empire; brackets designate the absence of that activity.

policies. In a hegemonic nonimperial relationship, such as that between the United States and many Latin American countries, the dominant polity has little or no voice regarding the appointment and dismissal of elites and internal agendas and policies.[24] At most, it determines the external policy agenda and influences external policies.

Although the formal/informal distinction is relevant to understanding imperial trajectories, strictly speaking it is not a feature of empires, as are continuity and discontinuity, but of rule, whether imperial or not. The rule of some imperial peripheries may be formal and of others informal, but all regional elites in all states are also subject to greater or lesser degrees of central control. In nondemocratic states, for instance, rule is much more formal than in democratic states. The formal/informal distinction therefore says far less about empire per se than does structure: although subordinate to the core in some fashion and to some degree, imperial peripheries enjoy few or no significant relations with one another and the outside world.

My use of binary oppositions—continuity/discontinuity and formality/informality—suggests that empires perforce fall into neatly delineated either/or categories. Naturally, most empires at most times will be combinations of the extremes as well as of various midtypes. The British Empire is a case in point, having been, as John Darwin puts it, "a constitutional hotch-potch of independent, semi-independent and dependent countries, held together not by formal allegiance to a mother-country but by economic, strategic, political or cultural links that varied greatly in strength and character."[25] Reality may be messy, but that is all the more reason to use concepts that are less so.

Systems

Conceptualizing empires as hublike arrangements between a core and its peripheries amounts to saying that empires are, as S. N. Eisenstadt recognized many years ago, *political systems*.[26] Empires consist of distinct units—the core state and elite and the peripheral elites and societies—that are constituent parts of a bounded and coherent imperial whole. These units occupy specific places within the empire; their characteristics are defined relationally; and the relations between core and periphery are structured in a way that defines the system as a whole. Empires are thus structurally centralized political systems within which core elites dominate peripheral societies, serve as intermediaries for their significant interactions, and channel resource flows from the periphery to the core and back to the periphery.[27] Metropoles that command peripheries to interact significantly would in essence be withdrawing from empire. Empire ends, then, not when or because the core ceases to dominate the peripheries but when or because the peripheries implicated in such domination begin to interact with one another significantly. Thus the *P-C-P* relationship can be as tight or as loose as possible, but empire will exist as long as *P-P-P* or *Z-P-Z* relationships are weak or insignificant or nonexistent. (Hence my preference for the term *disassemblage* to the simpler, more elegant, but less accurate *dissolution*.)

As systems, empires are bounded sets of interrelated, interactive, and interdependent parts.[28] Systems can be biological, ecological, cultural, linguistic, social, economic, political, and so on.[29] Ponds, rain forests, tribes, languages, markets, and polities can all have systemic characteristics, and they can all behave as systems without being identical.[30] Immanuel Wallerstein and James Rosenau even conceptualize the world as a system. Wallerstein focuses on the core and the periphery of a capitalist world system, whereas Rosenau includes states, collectivities, nongovernmental organizations, firms, and even individuals in his systemic model.[31]

To make the claim that empires, like other entities, may be usefully conceptualized as systems is not to endorse every aspect of the systems theorizing and/or structural functionalism associated with Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or David Easton.[32] To be sure, one cannot make just any claim about systems. The view of empires as systems does oblige us to regard systemic functioning, or stability (Rosenau speaks of "order"), as a given and to distinguish between the "inside" and the "outside"

of the system.[33] It may also, as I shall suggest shortly, compel us to transfer some causal sources of systemic change to the outside, the environment. Each move has potentially troublesome implications, but none is fatal—or, to put it more accurately, no more fatal than moves that flow from other conceptualizations.

The criticism that systems theorizing takes stability as its baseline and treats change as the puzzle is thus fully justified.[34] Where the criticism is entirely off the mark is in suggesting that systems theorizing is therefore either wrong or anomalous. All theories take certain things for granted and, in so doing, convert other things into puzzles. Rational choice theory, for instance, assumes rationality and puzzles over irrationality. "Irrational choice theory," which would be perfectly possible to construct, would do exactly the opposite.[35] One could, by the same token, just as easily start with change and puzzle over stability. There may be excellent normative or practical reasons for doing so but no purely theoretical ones.

The distinction between inside and outside, meanwhile, is no less common to nonsystemic approaches. Every theory, every analysis, every set of concepts has its own specific social science domain. No theory, no analysis, no set of concepts can, or should, address everything (and to the extent that Wallerstein and Rosenau do, they may be rightfully criticized for attempting to construct a theory of everything). In that sense, what is outside the domain is outside the system of thought as well. By the same token, although every theory hopes to account for every cause of some effect as well as for every effect of some cause, as a theory rooted in concepts rooted in language it perforce cannot attain either goal. Nolens volens, some causes and effects will always be outside the theory.

Stability

Because our baseline is systemic stability, an ideally functioning imperial system should, logically and obviously, persist indefinitely. Because empires resemble giant machines consisting of interlocking, interdependent parts arranged in, to use Eisenstadt's phrase, a "very delicate balance," they should hum along so long as the parts fit and function. It is reassuring to know that the expectation of longevity is not unwarranted. Many empires do have remarkable staying power. The Romans maintained imperial rule for about five centuries, the Byzantines for almost 1,000 years, the Ottomans for more

than 500, and the Habsburgs and Russians for more than 400. The Persian, Mongol, French, British, and Dutch Empires performed less impressively, surviving about two centuries apiece, and the Soviets managed to stay in power for only 80 years. Nevertheless, Eisenstadt was surely right to observe that empires have "provided the most massive and enduring form of government man had known prior to the modern period."[36]

Fully cognizant of the perils posed by theories of everything, I suggest that the hublike structure of empire can provide for stability—and therefore promote persistence—on at least two levels.

First, empire is an effective mechanism for channeling resources and providing security. The *P-C-P* channel permits investment, goods, and people to move around a complex system coordinated by core elites and institutions. Empires resemble federal systems in having the capacity to transfer resources from richer regions to poorer ones and for connecting faraway provinces to metropoles.[37] Relatedly, continuous empires are excellent mechanisms for promoting the common defense—assuming, again, that the elites are not, or not yet, rapacious and exploitative. Just as the core can accumulate and distribute economic resources via imperial channels, so too can it mobilize and deploy the armed forces and military resources needed to defend a large realm. In particular, the core of a continuous empire can effectively counter threats by using internal lines of communication. As Edward Luttwak has argued, the Roman Empire, as a discontinuous realm surrounding a large body of water, lacked this advantage and had to deploy troops permanently along its frontiers.[38]

Second, the hublike structure promotes both the core elite's dominance and its acceptance by the peripheral elites. The core elite is, by definition, more resource rich and powerful than any one peripheral elite. Other things being equal, peripheral elites can challenge the dominance of the core elite only if two or more of them band together. Empire addresses this threat in simple structural terms. First, that peripheral elites (ideally) interact via the core means that their capacity to communicate and thus to band together against the core elite is limited. In particular, no one peripheral elite can halt the flow of resources and information from the periphery to the core and back. Second, because all peripheries are simultaneously contributors and recipients of resources, peripheral elites are, structurally, competitors and not cooperators. Their dependence on the core, and their resulting independence of each other, aligns them with the core and against the rest of the periphery. Third, empires are extraordinarily good deals for peripheral

elites. Although the images of empire conjured up by Frantz Fanon and other nationalists suggest that peripheral elites are oppressed and humiliated, we know from Galtung that the structure of empire actually promotes their elite status by guaranteeing their continued governance of peripheral bailiwicks.[39]

Miles shows how these factors contributed to the absence of "nationalist rebellions" against Roman imperial rule. Thus "this reliance on local aristocracies . . . united to Rome the interests of those who already held positions of power and influence among the native populations."[40] Moreover, the absence of horizontal, interperiphery means of communication meant that "traditional leaders . . . might indeed bring the common cause they shared with other communities or other tribes to the attention of their followers, but the very structure of the political situation would mean that individuals participated in common undertakings as members of separate and distinct followings. . . . Ancient alliances, therefore, were characterized by a particular precariousness."[41]

Change

If systems are presumed to be stable, how and why should they ever undergo change? Like all social science puzzles, this particular puzzle is puzzling at first glance only. There is, after all, no reason for us not to locate potential sources of change both outside and inside the system. Exogenously generated change would involve shocks, an indispensable concept I return to later. Endogenously generated change would have to be consistent with the system itself. But how can endogenously generated change both derive from the system *and* be consistent with its bias for stability? We can square this circle, thanks to structure.

Let us look at the inside of a system more closely. Robert Jervis claims that, because change in any one part of a system necessarily affects all other parts, and because other things can therefore never be held constant, in principle it is impossible to claim, in straightforward social scientific fashion, that *A* causes *B*.[42] But if linear cause-and-effect relationships are absent from systems, systems analysis is of little use to social scientists with just such concerns on their minds. Jervis therefore concedes that certain relations are more obviously central than others—if only because some change could not possibly affect all elements of a system equally.[43] It is these more salient

relationships that give a system the property of structure. (As Luhmann notes, systems "could not exist without structure."[44]) But with structural relations in place, we can posit causes and effects, which in turn provide us with a mechanism for accounting for change. Stability may still characterize systems as systems, but their central property—structure—can now serve as a source of change.

Easton suggests that structures may be theorized as limiting the range of systemic tendencies, producing specific outcomes, or facilitating certain tendencies.[45] The first effect is easiest to imagine. If a system has a certain structure, it cannot, ipso facto, have another and will not be susceptible to its influence. As a result, structures may be said to narrow the range of systemic outcomes. System A will not and cannot experience any form of "B-ness," just as system B will not and cannot experience any form of "A-ness"—except as one of the myriad unintended and unpredictable consequences that rightly concern Jervis. This seems to be a trivial conclusion but only at first glance. It is not, I suggest, wholly uninteresting to know that structures narrow the range of the possible.[46]

The second consequence strikes me as being most difficult to entertain. Even if it were conceivable for structures to generate specific systemic outcomes, it is hard to see how, given the relative nonlinearity built into systems, we could ascertain that particular results were determined by structures only and not by other factors as well. More fundamentally, I do not see how structures, as systemic properties, could produce specific outcomes. A structural fault may cause a building to tilt, thereby increasing its chances of, but not directly causing, collapse. An organizational structure may increase efficiency and morale, but it cannot cause complete efficiency and happiness. By the same token, Kenneth Waltz suggests that bipolar international systems tend to be more stable—where stability is defined as the absence of war—than multipolar ones, regardless of whether their constituent parts, the states, are more or less stable.[47] The property of tallness can, by analogy, promote certain behaviors, such as basketball playing, and discourage others, such as being a jockey, and it may be both a necessary and facilitating condition of being a basketball star, but it cannot serve as a sufficient condition of such an outcome. In promoting certain tendencies, therefore, structures can have a probabilistic effect on concrete outcomes but not a determinative causal one.

The third effect is thus of greatest importance. Some systemic tendencies will be likely, or more likely, to occur because the kind of relationships

characterizing a system's units may facilitate just these, and not other, tendencies. Where relationships are complementary, systems will "work." Where relationships are not complementary, and perhaps are even contradictory, systems will "not work." Some such dynamic concerns Janet L. Abu-Lughod as well: "In a system, it is the *connections* between the parts that must be studied. When these strengthen and reticulate, the system may be said to 'rise'; when they fray, the system declines."[48] In particular, some systems will thrive and do well because their structure promotes the efficient use of resources. Other systems will run down and do poorly because their structure promotes the inefficient use of resources. As long-term tendencies and not immediate effects, both "working" and "not working" are compatible with our starting point, systemic stability.

Karl Marx's explanation of capitalist decline is an excellent illustration of "not working." The ideal version of capitalism he constructs necessarily has a tendency to run down, as the rate of profit declines in the long run. But, while withering away is inevitable, systemic collapse becomes very probable, "in the final analysis," happening only for extratheoretical reasons. Indeed, Marx is forced to rely on metaphors to make the point: "Centralisation of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."[49] In contrast, Barrington Moore's explanation of the "social origins of dictatorship and democracy," while Marxist in inspiration, succeeds at establishing that social structures matter to the emergence of different types of regimes but fails to show that they necessarily led to certain outcomes and not to others.[50]

Equally illustrative is Plato's discussion of the decay of the just city. *Justice* refers to the relations between and among the various categories of people inhabiting the republic: it consists in their doing only what they do best and in not trespassing onto others' domains. Because they do not sustain this structure of relations, decay sets in: "Those whom you have educated to be leaders in your city, though they are wise, still will not, as their reasoning is involved with sense perception, achieve the right production and nonproduction of your race. This will escape them, and they will at some time bring children to birth when they should not."[51] The accident of bad birth subverts the compartmentalization at the core of the republic. "As a result you will have rulers who do not have the proper guardians' character to test the races of Hesiod and your own—the golden, silver, copper, and iron races. Iron

will then be mixed with silver and copper with gold, and a lack of homogeneity will arise in the city, and discordant differences, and whenever these things happen they breed war and hostility."[52] The city then degenerates, inexorably moving through timocracy, oligarchy, and democracy and ending with dictatorship.

Structure

Structural theories of system breakdown have, as Mark Hagopian has pointed out, a certain structure.[53] First, they identify a structural contradiction, that is to say, an incompatibility between the relations within which the units of a system are enmeshed. For Marx, a true structuralist, the contradiction is between the relations of production and the mode of production; for Chalmers Johnson, the disequilibrium is the result of systemic decay on the one hand and elite intransigence regarding reform on the other; for Theda Skocpol, the contradiction is between the imperatives of international anarchy, which results in competition and war, and the class-derived limitations on state autonomy; for Joseph Tainter, the tension is between systemic complexity and systemic efficiency; for Frantz Fanon, the contradiction is between the native's humanity and the colonizer's inhumanity.[54] In each case, and in sundry others, the structural contradiction weakens the existing system and ultimately wears it down. Capitalist societies suffer from growing immiseration and a declining rate of profit; prerevolutionary societies become increasingly disequilibrated or insufficiently modernized; complex societies become inefficient; colonial societies develop deep antagonisms between rulers and ruled.

Second, such theories then posit a trigger, accelerator, spark, or shock that pushes rotting systems over the edge.[55] Because structures promote only tendencies, logically no reason exists that contradictions should not, on their own, lead only to the continued withering away of the systems involved and thus only to the heightened probability of certain outcomes. Dramatic caesurae, such as revolutions, breakdowns, and collapses, therefore require that something happen to make sudden ruptures in an otherwise smooth process possible. For Marx, the "capitalist integument" bursts; for Johnson, accelerators intervene; for Skocpol, weak states lose wars; for Tainter, "stress surges" happen; for Fanon, the "guns go off by themselves."[56] Robert Kann's explanation of Austria-Hungary's collapse fits this mold exactly:

> The answer to the question of which special circumstances and conditions made the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy acute is simple: The World War situation. . . . There exists no adequate evidence that Austria-Hungary, in spite of the imperfect integration of her peoples and her far less than perfect administrative amalgamation was bound to break asunder barring the pressure of external events. There is, on the contrary, good reason to assume that, according to a kind of pragmatic law of historic inertia, a power complex which had existed for so many centuries might have continued to exist for some time to come had it not encountered the forces of external pressure.[57]

Similarly, Cho-yun Hsu notes that Han China's exchange network "was delicately balanced and could be upset by disturbances such as war or natural calamity, which could break down the national network into several regional networks."[58]

To be sure, "an external calamity cannot," as Carlo Cipolla insists, "always be assumed as a sufficient cause of the decline of a civilization." He is also correct to note that, "more often than not, the question is complicated by the lack of an adequate response to the challenge, and the lack of response must be explained."[59] But it is no less important not to assume that the existence of bona fide shocks is tantamount to the lack of an adequate response. Powerful shocks can destroy just about anything, whereas weak ones can destroy only weak or weakened objects, but in both cases the shock and the condition of the affected object are analytically, and empirically, different things.

Structural contradictions therefore require the intervention of outside shocks for general tendencies to result in particular outcomes. It would be convenient if contradictions invariably generated, bred, or facilitated corresponding shocks, but we have to recognize that, theoretically and logically, this need not be the case.[60] We cannot ignore what Herbert Kaufman terms the "role of chance," or what Machiavelli called *fortuna*.[61] We may prefer closed theoretical systems to open-ended ones, but no reason exists that social science theory should not accept, perhaps even embrace, theoretically exogenous causal factors. Indeed, to acknowledge the importance of exogenous factors is another way of saying that theories of everything are impossible and that some degree of unpredictability is, as James Fearon argues, unavoidable.[62] Charles Doran goes even further, stating that "forecasts ultimately fail because no technique has been developed that allows the fore-

caster to predict, prior to the event itself, when a nonlinearity ['a total break from the past trend, a discontinuity'] will occur."[63]

No less important, shocks are part and parcel of the everyday explanatory apparatus of the natural and social sciences. The course of evolution, as Stephen Jay Gould reminds us, may be due less to some immanent logic and more to accidents of nature.[64] According to George Soros, emerging markets are supposed to be especially susceptible to financial shocks utterly beyond their control.[65] William McNeill has shown how plagues, and more generally illnesses, have undermined societies.[66] Although the devastation wreaked upon Amerindian societies by European bacteria must, as Cipolla might argue, also be seen in terms of the immunological isolation and hygienic conditions of these societies, certainly the decimation of, say, the Aztecs was overwhelmingly the result of infectious intrusions over which Aztec society had absolutely no control. Brian Fagan extends this argument to "climatic anomalies."[67]

Things obviously get trickier with heroes in history. On the one hand, even extraordinary men and women are the products of their societies, and their ascent to positions of power and influence cannot be divorced from the overall context. And yet we would be hard-pressed to deny that world historical personalities, although products of their times, also have an extrasystemic effect on the very societies that spawned them. Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler obviously come to mind. Sidney Hook's discussion of V. I. Lenin is also instructive. According to Hook,

> Without Nicolai [*sic*] Lenin the work of the Bolshevik Party from April to October 1917 is unthinkable. Anyone who familiarizes himself with its internal history will discover that objectives, policy, slogans, controlling strategy, day-by-day tactics were laid down by Lenin. Sometimes he counseled in the same painstaking way that a tutor coaches a spirited but bewildered pupil; sometimes he commanded like an impatient drill sergeant barking at a raw recruit. But from first to last it was Lenin. Without him there would have been no October Revolution.[68]

Hook may or may not have proved his case, but that it is plausible and that Lenin was somehow critical, and surely not incidental, to the revolution is clearly true. Indeed, Alexander Rabinowitch's painstakingly detailed examination of Lenin's decisive role at a crucial central committee meeting

just before the seizure of power in November lends Hook's case strong support.[69]

In like fashion, Robert Wesson identifies a "single and all-powerful ruler, whose person is elevated far above ordinary mortals," as the central defining characteristic of empire.[70] Unlike Hook's heroes, however, Wesson's rulers can more easily be translated into mere holders of institutional power—they are, after all, subordinate to the "basic axiom of empire, the dominion of those who are on top, the rule of power for the sake of power"—and thus be reconciled with structure.[71] Even so, no one would dispute that structural accounts of empire do not sit well with emperors in general and charismatic emperors in particular.

Extraordinary circumstances and ordinary structures approximate a crude eclecticism only if the former openly contradict the premises of the latter. While resorting to extrasystemic factors is a blow to theoretical parsimony, it need not be fatal so long as those factors are not incompatible with the conceptual underpinnings of a theory.[72] Only genuine heroes in history, who necessarily make momentous choices, are incompatible with such a theory. Plagues, hurricanes, droughts, and their social equivalents—invasions, wars, economic collapses, and so on—are not. As I argue in chapter 3, a structural theory of imperial decline is least incompatible with structurally—or, at least, unintentionally—generated shocks to the system. That way, both the dynamics of the system and the immediate cause of its breakdown are beyond human choice and thus within the same semantic field.

Maxima Culpa

Besides being intrinsically incapable of accounting for the timing of particular events, structural theories are also open to other accusations. One is that such arguments deemphasize or ignore human behavior. While true enough, this charge misses the point. First, all theories that are not theories of everything deemphasize or ignore something, because all theories can hope to explain only what they purport to be able to explain.[73] Second, although one may insist, à la Anthony Giddens, on the equal theoretical importance of human beings, who presumably complement methodological holism with methodological individualism and structure with agency, such a self-consciously eclectic move either rests on incompatible assumptions

(and therefore self-destructs) or amounts to a trivial ontological claim about the reality of people.[74]

There is no alternative to abandoning the quest for theories of everything and choosing—between contradictory and thus incompatible premises in general and between structure and agency in particular.[75] Either alternative is perfectly legitimate, because both structure and agency can on their own generate coherent theoretical accounts. "Methodologically socialist" approaches are, as Arthur Danto has shown, no less true than methodologically individualist ones. If, according to Danto, structural statements can be translated into, and therefore reduced to, individualist ones, the latter can also be translated into the former. And if structural statements cannot be translated downward, neither can individualist ones be translated upward. In sum, we have no obvious grounds for claiming that one approach is more basic than, and therefore preferable to, the other.[76] They simply are different. Thus, unless one is wedded to individual choice for nontheoretical reasons, no reason exists for not treating choice as an intermediate step—or a constant form of foreground noise—that does nothing to alter the causal effect of structure on systems.[77] Ironically, as Gabriel Almond points out, rational choice theory does just that. By taking preferences as given and transforming choices into logically necessary behavior, rational choice theory effectively eliminates any meaningful notion of choice from its domain.[78]

Equally misplaced is the charge that structural approaches neglect ideology and culture, issues with which Jack Goldstone, Theda Skocpol, and their detractors, such as Nikki Keddie and Said Amir Arjomand, have grappled.[79] There is little to say in response to this accusation, except to admit that it is justified. By the same token, we would, in the spirit of Danto's remarks, also be justified in pointing out that just as structural arguments tend to ignore—and cannot be translated into—ideology and culture, ideological and cultural arguments do not translate into structure. Both approaches are different ways of slicing reality, which is to say that both approaches involve theories that, like all theories, engage in crass oversimplifications.

Structural theories are woefully incomplete theories. But so are all theories. Structural theories neither tell the "whole story"—after all, their function is not to tell the whole story, and telling the whole story is an impossible task anyway—nor provide lawlike explanations of the parts of the story that they do address. Like nets, structural theories catch some of reality and let

most of it pass through. And like nets, they catch more and less than they would like to catch. But so do all theories.

Pitfalls

I began this chapter by placing the cart before the horse. I treated empires as systems partly because they can usefully be conceptualized as such, and partly because my approach to explaining imperial trajectories is structural, and structures presuppose systems. But I have opted for a structural theory of empire not because structural approaches are the best—that they certainly are not—but because they are the least bad. Their flaws strike me as far less egregious than those of their leading competitor—agency-oriented, choice-based, intentionalist accounts. Indeed, structural carts help us steer clear of pitfalls commonly encountered in studies of empire:

1. *Conflating imperialism with empire*

Imperialism is a policy, whereas empire is a polity, and although it should be obvious that policies and polities are different things, it is remarkable how many scholars—including, alas, Johan Galtung—fail to recognize this elementary point.[80] More important, although policies frequently *are* chosen, polities generally are not.[81] To quote Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach: "Some polities prosper, while others wither or nest. In the clashes, both 'winners' and 'losers' are modified and typically assume some of the other's characteristics. Shaped by their own contests as well as broader economic and social trends, polities are always 'becoming.'"[82] And, although the central purpose of expansion may be empire, it is surely untrue that, as Imanuel Geiss claims, the "central purpose of empire is expansion."[83]

2. *Attributing empire formation only to imperialism*

There is no reason that, logically, relations of dominance must be the product only of military expansion purposely intended to create empire. Reinhold Niebuhr puts it well: "The word 'imperialism' to the modern mind connotes aggressive expansion. The connotation remains correct in the sense that empire, in its inclusive sense, is the fruit of the impingement of strength upon weakness. But the power need not be expressed in military terms. It may be simply the power of a superior organization or culture."[84] Empire comes into being anytime its defining characteristics are clustered in some time and space.[85] Imperial relations may therefore emerge quietly, as the result of subtle shifts over time in power, wealth, and status. The historical

record offers many examples of dynastic unions between powerful and weak monarchs that led to the incorporation of the latter's realm on imperial terms. "Ready-made" peripheries can be bought or otherwise acquired, perhaps by thievery, guile, or stealth.[86] Geir Lundestad even speaks of "empire by invitation."[87] And, as Geoffrey Parker notes, it is "anachronistic . . . to see the West as bent upon world domination from the voyage of Vasco da Gama onwards. In fact, the Europeans originally came to Asia to trade, not to conquer."[88]

3. *Interpreting empire formation and imperial decline as the product of choice*

Although it may be true that leaders of state can desire empire, it makes little sense to claim that they "choose" empire or any of its subsequent trajectories, such as persistence, decay, or collapse. In the vast majority of cases of empire formation, no logically or empirically identifiable point exists at which such a choice could be contemplated and, least of all, made. Elites could choose to buy or steal or marry into ready-made empires—precisely those instances of empire formation that choice-centered accounts usually ignore—but they surely do not choose empire when and if they choose to attack a state. Choosing to attack may be to choose imperialism, but, unless we conflate empire with imperialism, that too is not to choose empire. Even if we grant that elites can choose empire, it strains the imagination to think that they would choose collapse, which is tantamount to collective suicide, or could choose persistence or decay. As the latter usually takes place over hundreds of years, during which time millions of choices are made, it would be as unhelpful to suggest that any one choice was decisive as it would be useless to claim that millions of choices mean that choice matters. Finally, even if choice matters, it is obviously true that—pace the language and logic of much IR theory—"states," as clusters of institutions, cannot possibly choose. To claim otherwise is to lapse into reification and anthropomorphism of the worst kind.[89]

4. *Explaining empire formation and imperial decline as the product of conscious cost-benefit analysis*

We have no reason to suppose that imperial elites are capable of measuring or even appreciating the "real" costs and benefits of empire.[90] Elites may be blinded by myths, ideologies, and strategic cultures (of which more later); more important, measuring the costs and benefits of empire may be impossible except in some rough and painfully obvious way—when, for instance, continual humiliating defeats on the field of battle obviously sug-

gest that something is wrong. How, exactly, are contemporaries—or, for that matter, scholars—supposed to say whether the acquisition or loss of some territory, big or small, was a cost or a benefit or both?[91] What time line is significant? Whose standards of cost and benefit are we to use? Whose costs are real costs, and whose benefits are real benefits? (Analogously, whose interest is the "national interest"?) If elites benefit from a territorial acquisition, is that good or bad for the empire? What if the masses benefit? The multiplicity of questions suggests that using a cost-benefit analysis, by anyone and at any time, may be a chimerical effort. Not surprisingly, D. K. Fieldhouse's study of "economics and empire" strongly suggests that the link between the two was not, as a cost-benefit analysis would require, strong but "coincidental and indirect."[92]

5. *Attributing elite inability to appreciate the "real" costs and benefits of empire to the myths, ideologies, or strategic cultures the elite at one time created in order to advance imperialist agendas*

These myths, accordingly, acquire explosive force and the elites are hoist with their own petard. But why should this happen? Elites do not create beliefs ex nihilo. They have to counter, mold, or refashion existing values, beliefs, and norms. If they can do so at time t, why not at time $t + n$, when experience and maturity should make them all the more capable of effecting ideational change? To state that myths and culture assume a life of their own and become impervious to elite attempts to change them is not to solve the problem but merely to restate it.[93] This is not to say that ideas cannot drive expansion. The Inca belief that dead emperors should inherit the lands they ruled when still alive may, as Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest suggest, have impelled their successors to seek territory for themselves.[94] But such an argument is utterly unlike the claim that consciously constructed imperialist myths promote imperialism.

6. *Using the concept of overextension or overreach to suggest that empires, like states in general, have an ideal size that should or does guide the policy choices of the elite*

What the optimal size of states could be is, I submit, a mystery.[95] Historically, as today, states have ranged in size, and in resources, population, and the like, from very small to very large. If the world can accommodate Bhutan, Estonia, and Brunei on the one hand as well as the United States, China, and Russia on the other, surely it strains the imagination to think that some size is best. The argument is even weaker in any particular case. Would China be optimal with or without Tibet? With or without Macao?

Would the United States be worse off or better off with or without Rhode Island or Staten Island or even California? Would Canada benefit from Quebec's secession? Did the Czech Republic suffer from Slovakia's departure? To be sure, a certain size—"large" as opposed to "small"—might be optimal for economies of scale; a smaller size might reduce transaction costs; a very small size might, as Jean Jacques Rousseau believed, foster a spirit of togetherness.[96] But is it possible for all these sizes, and a multitude of others, ever to overlap? Surely not. Even if they could at time *t*, one would have to espouse an unusually static view of life to expect them to remain identical at time $t + n$. And if it is impossible to determine the optimal size of states, it is just as impossible to say that any one state is or is not too large or too small at any particular time.[97]

Choosing Everything

These six pitfalls are, I suggest, the product, either directly or indirectly, of agency-oriented, choice-centered, intentionalist accounts of imperial trajectories on the one hand and of the temptation to create theories of everything on the other. Such accounts are of little use in understanding empire for two reasons. The first is that empires are, as macro units of analysis, on a different level of the ladder of abstraction than such equally abstract micro units as intentions and choices. The second reason goes deeper, addressing the rootedness of agency-oriented, choice-centered, intentionalist accounts in rational choice theory (RCT). As I hinted at earlier, RCT self-destructs upon closer examination.[98] The fatal flaw is the way it deals with human rationality, defined as the maximization of utility, the minimization of risk, or some variant thereof (where both utility and risk are defined in terms of preferences). Given this assumption, RCT can follow one of two equally self-defeating paths. If RCT insists that all human preferences at all times and in all places are identical—say, material—it is making a patently false and easily falsifiable claim. Counterexamples are simply far too numerous. False assumptions matter, because they permit theories to prove anything and thus to parade as theories of everything. If instead RCT accepts diversity of preferences as its axiomatic starting point, it can account for the emergence of preferences only in terms of culture, ideology, institutions, and the like. To do so, however, is to give explanatory priority not to choice—after all, there is nothing to choose—but to culture, ideology, institutions, and so on.

Worse, to accept the diversity of preferences and preference structures necessitates that RCT also admit the a priori possibility of many maximizing and minimizing strategies. Once such a move is made, however, RCT has in effect been reduced to culture, ideology, and institutions. But if culture, ideology, and institutions are "what really matters," RCT is not a theory, but at best a formula, for calculating the effects of culture, ideology, and institutions on human behavior and at worst a random collection of values and operations. Either way, agency disappears from the picture. But if agency is irrelevant to RCT, so too are the agents and their choices. Seen in this light, RCT amounts to a crude form of determinism at best and mystification at worst.

Why then—if this analysis is even minimally persuasive—is RCT virtually hegemonic in the social sciences? One part of the answer must entail the profession's general lack of interest in methodological questions and conceptual issues relating to what makes theories tick. Another part probably involves RCT's ability to generate formulae and use numbers, evidence of its supposedly scientific *and* value-free status. A third may have something to do with the culture that has spawned RCT. It is, one suspects, no accident that notions of rationality and utility maximization have caught on most, if not quite solely, in a country that claims to venerate just these values.[99] Ironically, this third point is most consistent with RCT's own means of accounting for preferences, as described at the beginning of this section.

Rational choice theory is, of course, a theory of everything par excellence, and that failing would be fatal even if RCT were not internally flawed. The problem, as I have already noted, is that theories of everything are not theories. If our goal is theory, and not cosmic faith, we have to recognize that all theories are limited—after all, all theories presuppose initial conditions that limit their range—and thus that a theory of imperial decline cannot account for empire formation and that a theory of empire formation cannot account for imperial decline.[100] Even if decline and formation are mirror images of each other, we have no reason to suppose that one theory could explain a process and its reverse. Just because factors A, B, and C may have been relevant to the emergence of empire does not mean that the absence of A, B, and C must therefore account for the disappearance of empire. If, say, strong metropoles, weak peripheries, transnational forces, and a favorable international environment promote empires, it does not follow that weak metropoles, strong peripheries, the absence of transnational forces, and an unfavorable international environment promote the dissolution of em-

pires. Indeed, any theory claiming to explain both *X* and *not-X* is probably an exercise in circularity.

Second, theories of *X* and *not-X*, even if seemingly alike, are different because their initial conditions are miles apart. The central initial condition of empire formation is the nonexistence of empire; that of imperial decline is the existence of empire. Third, because these qualifications apply with equal force to persistence, Taagepera's parabolas reflect at least three distinct and equally complicated theoretical tasks.[101] Finally, the ways in which empires rise and decline are so many and varied—in 1423, for instance, Byzantium sold Thessalonika to the Venetians for 50,000 ducats—that it strains an already overstrained imagination to think that even one complete and unassailable theory of only emergence, of only decline, or of only persistence is possible.[102]

Faute de Mieux

Because agency-oriented, choice-centered, intentionalist accounts are, at best, of limited utility and at worst either self-contradictory or meaningless, the only theoretical alternative is, for better or for worse, structural, not centered on choice, and nonintentionalist. While hardly ideal, such an alternative deals with empire on the requisite level of abstraction and it eschews determinism. Fortunately, structuralist-inspired scholarship is old hat, and its practitioners are many. Consider but three. In *The Structures of Everyday Life* Fernand Braudel focuses on the development of economic forces and material life. In *The Great Wave* David Hackett Fischer examines the rise and fall of prices and their influence on political change. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel* Jared Diamond investigates the effect of environmental factors on the course of human history. All three scholars create compelling narratives that feature no heroes in history.[103]

Closer to home is Michael Doyle's *Empires*. In isolating the factors that promote empires—a strong metropole, a weak periphery, transnational forces, and a favorable international context—Doyle has in effect proferred a structural theory.[104] Thus empires emerge under the following conditions:

> The interaction of a metropole and a periphery joined together by transnational forces generates differences in political power which permit the metropole to control the periphery. This relationship is pro-

> duced and shaped by the three necessary features [a "metropole," a "transnational extension of the economy, society, or culture of the metropole," and a "periphery"], which are together sufficient. It is influenced and shaped by the structure of the international system ["which may be unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar"].[105]

Like Braudel's, Hackett Fischer's, and Diamond's, Doyle's account eschews reference to agency, choice, and intention.

One need not fully agree with Doyle's list to appreciate the importance of the claim that empires tend to emerge, persist, or decline when the structural conditions promoting their emergence, persistence, or decline are in place. Although Doyle errs in claiming to have isolated a set of conditions that account for emergence, persistence, *and* decline, his error does have the salutary effect of reminding us that structure is as fallible as agency and that, like agency, it too can underpin theories of everything.