Introduction: Finding Empire

Empire is back in fashion.[1] Not since the end of European rule in Africa and Asia galvanized social scientists in the aftermath of World War II has there been as much interest among scholars in what S. N. Eisenstadt once called "this very delicate balance."[2] Historians, of course, have had a long-standing interest—going back to at least Edward Gibbon—in particular empires.[3] Archaeologists and anthropologists have investigated a variety of ancient or extinct civilizations.[4] International relations (IR) theorists have written extensively about imperialism.[5] But empire, as a distinctly *political* system, has received scant attention from social scientists; the last four decades of the twentieth century witnessed the appearance of only a handful of books and articles. Until recently, Michael Doyle's truly was a voice in the wilderness.[6]

Several reasons for this lacuna come to mind. One is conceptual. Empires are hard to pin down and define. Scholars generally agree that empires are multinational and politically centralized, but what state is not? Are empires repressive multinational states? Are they very big multinational states? Are they repressive *and* big multinational states? Or are they just great powers?[7] No answer obviously leaps to mind and no answer could—the etymology of *empire* can tell us only how the term has been used and not what the concept means—until we first make a conceptual leap toward it.[8]

Another reason—theoretical—has to do with the hybrid nature of empires. As a polity that is simultaneously an international actor and a peculiarly structured political system with a core and peripheries, empire fits awkwardly

in research agendas. IR theorists can easily accommodate empires as great powers but not as systems.[9] Some, such as Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach, subsume empires under the category of "polities," thereby transforming them into but one species of a huge genus.[10] Comparativists have an even harder nut to crack, as international relations are traditionally outside their field of interest, whereas hybrid entities with a core and peripheries appear to be both more and less than the systems or states the comparativists usually study.

A third reason may be historical. The last of self-styled empires—those of the British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese—disappeared in the aftermath of World War II. While decolonization generated some interest in empire, it understandably focused attention on such postcolonial tasks of "political development" as participation, penetration, and legitimation, along with the crises and sequences presumably involved.[11] That literature was both enormous and influential, whereas the comparable political science literature on imperial dissolution was tiny. Even now, the recent resurgence of interest in empires pales in comparison to the far greater interest in political development's reincarnation as transitions to democracy, the market, civil society, and rule of law.[12]

A fourth reason may be political. Although mainstream scholars largely ignored empire, those on the Right and on the Left did not. Non-Russian nationalists denounced the Soviet Union as an empire—the histrionics of the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations were an especially good example of such rhetoric—but their political agendas tainted the concept and led to its becoming identified with "rabid anticommunism" and "cold war messianism" in the liberal—that is to say, in the mainstream scholarly—mind.[13] President Ronald Reagan's characterization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" merely confirmed these suspicions. Together with the concept of totalitarianism, which also suffered from guilt by association, empire became a litmus test of political attitudes in general and of attitudes toward socialism and capitalism in particular.[14]

The Left also contributed to politicizing the concept of empire by applying it only to the United States and its often aggressive, exploitative, and imperialist behavior abroad. Left-wing critics were absolutely right to criticize U.S. imperialism but dead wrong to define empire and imperialism only in terms of capitalism. This conflation of definitions and causation—traceable at least to J. A. Hobson, Rudolf Hilferding, and V. I. Lenin—meant that capitalism, and only capitalism, produced imperialism and that, in turn, imperialism was merely its highest stage.[15] This maneuver reduced the

USSR to a simple multinational state and excluded precapitalist empires from analysis or exposed them as being "really" capitalist. Another unfortunate consequence of the Left's conceptual sloppiness is that, with the demise of the USSR and its universal rechristening as an empire, the left-wing critique of the United States appears both irrelevant and quaint today.

These excellent reasons for ignoring empires notwithstanding, we cannot. Important as historical reality, conceptual category, and analytical device, empires refuse to go away. Fortunately, we need not fret excessively about the obstacles to grasping them. Defining empires may be difficult, but it cannot be impossible. Theorizing about empires may be a challenge, but it is not insurmountable. History can neither set agendas nor undermine them. And politics, while unavoidably embedded in everything scholars do and say, should no more trouble us than the air, however polluted, that we breathe.

Empire Redux

The sudden unraveling of the USSR was the puzzle that revived the interest in empires. The abrupt and peaceful end of a superpower manifestly had something to do with the Soviet Union's internal constitution. And yet, although multinationality, hypercentralization, and other features frequently associated with empire had long been evident to Soviet nationality experts, if not to mainstream Sovietologists, they were rarely conceptualized in imperial terms.[16] Hélène Carrère d'Encausse's provocative study of Soviet decline sparked a minor storm in 1979 because it dared to suggest that the "nationality question" was the Soviet Union's Achilles' heel and that empire was an appropriate scholarly designation for such a polity.[17]

It took the intervention of non-Russian popular fronts, which began referring to the USSR as an empire during the years of perestroika, to purge the term of its pejorative connotations.[18] Once that happened, empire became politically respectable. And once the Berlin Wall fell and the USSR collapsed, cold war agendas appeared either moot or even persuasive. The conjunction was perfect: something exceptionally dramatic had happened to an entity that one could, without fear of violating academic norms of semantic rectitude, call an empire.

Ironically, the Soviet Union "became" an empire at the very moment it ceased to exist.[19] As Mark Beissinger notes, calling the USSR an empire has become as de rigeur at present as shunning the label used to be in the past.[20]

Such terminological ups and downs are of interest—especially in what they have to say about the sociology of the group using the terms—but they should not distract us from, or be confused with, the actual concepts and their empirical referents. Communities of people do not become nations simply because we wish to imagine them as such; regimes do not become democratic just because we use the modifier; and political entities do not become—or stop being—empires merely because terminological fashion says so. Concepts usefully apply to reality if and only if we can isolate their defining characteristics *and* find appropriate empirical referents. Far more than wild-eyed imagination and inventive whim is involved.[21]

Concepts

The concepts that are central to this book, both substantively and organizationally, are empire, decay, attrition, collapse, and revival. Others, such as continuity, formality, decline, and disassemblage, will also rear their heads but as spin-offs of these five.

- I define *empire* as a hierarchically organized political system with a hublike structure—a rimless wheel—within which a core elite and state dominate peripheral elites and societies by serving as intermediaries for their significant interactions and by channeling resource flows from the periphery to the core and back to the periphery.
- Continuous empires are tightly massed and, in all likelihood, territorially contiguous; discontinuous empires are loosely arranged and often involve overseas territories.
- The core elite's rule of the periphery may be formal, involving substantial meddling in the personnel and policies of the periphery, or informal, involving significantly less interference and control.
- Decay is the weakening of the core's rule of the periphery.
- Decline is a reduction in the imperial state's power in general and military capability in particular.
- Disassemblage entails the emergence of significant interperiphery relations and spells the end of empire as a peculiarly structured political system.

- Attrition is the progressive loss of bits and pieces of peripheral territories.
- Collapse is the rapid and comprehensive breakdown of the hublike imperial structure.
- Revival, or reimperialization, is the reemergence of empire—that is to say, the reconstitution of a hublike structure between a former core and all or some of the former periphery.

As with all concepts, no clear-cut, nonsemantic line divides continuity and discontinuity, informality and formality, and so on.[22]

Despite the length of its subtitle, this book explicitly aims *not* to provide the last word on all aspects of empires but only to make sense of the downward slope of their trajectories. My approach is structural, less so because I am wedded to its charms and rather more so because the alternative—agency oriented, choice centered, and intentionalist—persuades me even less. Because incompleteness and imperfection distinguish theory from faith, structural theories, like all theories, are severely flawed. The structural framework I use in this book is also flawed, and I make no attempt to hide its wrinkles, cracks, and scars. Quite the contrary, I shall push the theory as far as it can go while purposely exposing its weaknesses and showing at which points it, like some stubborn mule, can be budged no further and when, exhausted by its own weight, it just falls to the ground. This exercise in self-reflective theorizing may or may not persuade readers, but at least they will or will not be persuaded for the right reasons.

I start the story in the middle, with an analysis of empires as peculiarly structured political systems. I ask why such systems are prone to decay, why some decayed empires experience attrition and others do not, why some collapse by falling apart rapidly and comprehensively, and why some collapsed empires—including, perhaps, the former Soviet empire—then revive. I argue that the very structure of empires promotes decay and that decay in turn facilitates the progressive loss of territory. At any point of this trajectory, shocks can intervene and lead to collapse. Throughout the book I claim to have isolated, at best, the necessary and facilitating—*not* sufficient—conditions of the phenomena I explore. I borrow shamelessly—especially from historians, whose understanding of individual empires is infinitely more sophisticated than mine—and make no claims for earth-shattering originality.

Although I am fully aware of the impossibility of divorcing normative concerns from the social sciences, I do wish to emphasize that, my use of

declinist terminology notwithstanding, I do not necessarily share the pessimism of, say, an Oswald Spengler.[23] The "good" society, whether imperial or not, need not be doomed to decline because of what makes it good. By the same token, I see no reason to share the optimism of a Francis Fukuyama and conclude that the good society must triumph because of what makes it good.[24] A declinist teleology is the flip side of a belief in progress.[25] Although these beliefs cannot, as beliefs, be refuted or confirmed, the experience of the twentieth century—human rights, democracy, and international institutions on the one hand, and world wars, genocides, and totalitarian systems on the other—may provide some grounds for being skeptical of both.[26]

Debts

This book is dreadfully old-fashioned. It draws its primary inspiration—not from recent theoretical developments in IR, comparative politics, and other branches of political science—but from a collection of half-forgotten articles written many years ago. I have several reasons for bucking fashion. First, the political science literature has, as I have already noted, relatively little to say about empires. Second, many of the more recent contributions strike me as riddled with fatal failings. Foremost among them is a penchant for "theories of everything"—explanatory frameworks that attempt to account for more, indeed much more, than they, or any theory, possibly can—and for theories that privilege agency, choice, and intention.[27] Third, the IR literature that anthropomorphizes "the state"—which is to say, the IR literature—thereby engages in the crudest form of reification and, by using predicates of the form "the state does," lapses into semantic meaninglessness. There is, I fear, little to be learned from theories that operate on such precarious assumptions.[28] Last but not least, I am genuinely impressed by the contributions of three scholars.

Conceptually, I am indebted to Johan Galtung, whose "structural theory of imperialism" underpins my definition of empire and, more generally, my preferential option for a structural approach to empire. Although Galtung's theory is not without flaws—for one thing, it is not really a theory—it remains a model of clear thinking that, to my mind at least, has gotten empire just about right.[29]

Theoretically, I draw on Karl Deutsch's theory of "disintegration in totalitarian systems."[30] Deutsch's remarkably prescient analysis is, I shall argue,

of equal relevance to empires, not because empires are totalitarian but because Deutsch's theory is structural and because the structures of empires and totalitarian states are isomorphic. Structural isomorphism means that a structural theory of totalitarian disintegration is, ipso facto, a structural theory of imperial decay.

Empirically, I cannot overstate the importance to this enterprise of Rein Taagepera's painstaking plotting of the rise, persistence, and fall of virtually all historical empires.[31] In a series of articles written over two decades, Taagepera calculated and plotted the areas over time of more than one hundred empires and great powers. Although Taagepera's primary concern was to explain variation in the height (territorial expanse) and length (temporal existence) of empires, I submit that his central contribution is that he demonstrated that all imperial trajectories are fundamentally alike and that the ideal trajectory resembles a parabola.[32] As mine is primarily a work of interpretation, the vast amounts of information contained in Taagepera's parabolas serve as this study's de facto empirical foundations. My discussion of individual empires is thus purely illustrative of the empirical trends that Taagepera identified.

Because imperial trajectories have a definite geometric shape, Taagepera's parabolas permit me to claim that parabolas may be considered the geometric equivalent of algorithmically compressible data and thus as close to "lawlike" as is possible in the social sciences.[33] In turn, Galtung and Deutsch permit me to argue that imperial decay is a consequence of the intrinsic features of empires as peculiar kinds of structured systems. With parabolic trajectories driven by decay as the norm, it follows that nonattrition and collapse must be anomalies and thus the products of intervening or exogenous variables.

To argue that the life span of all empires would, *other things being equal*, resemble a parabola is to engage in a counterfactual. As I shall make frequent use of counterfactual conditionals in this book, it is important to understand what counterfactuals do and do not entail in general and for my project in particular. James Fearon has argued that comparativists must resort to counterfactuals in order to enlarge the number of cases underpinning their otherwise empirically impoverished theories.[34] In other words, counterfactuals supposedly help corroborate a theory. But that, alas, is exactly wrong. Counterfactual conditionals cannot and do not corroborate some theory, *T*, because, as Nelson Goodman has shown, counterfactuals presuppose laws—or, in the case of the social sciences, theories. We are entitled to engage in

"what if" scenarios, not because they provide additional evidence of the validity or invalidity of *T* but because a different theory, *T′*, permits us to consider what would have happened if some premise were different from the reality.[35]

Use of the ceteris paribus clause is therefore premised on some existing theory—namely, *T′*—that claims to have isolated a causal relationship between two or more factors. Imagining other things as being equal presupposes an underlying theoretical connection. In this sense, the clause clears the air and lets us see further and better. My argument thus rests on an implicit use of ceteris paribus. I claim that Taagepera's parabolic plotting of the rise and fall of empires *would* be the norm for all empires, if other factors did not intervene. Such an argument can be persuasive if and only if lawlike empirical evidence exists to support it—and, I submit, Taagepera's parabolas provide that evidence because they establish a uniformity for a large *N*, and a conceptually coherent explanatory story—that is to say, a theory, in this case Deutsch's—underpins it. To be sure, where some see uniformity, others may see variation. Imperial trajectories may *really* resemble parabolas, as I claim, or the parabolas may be the exception to a rule that resembles a crazy zigzag. Both approaches are a priori legitimate, although the social scientific preference for regularities and patterns would, for reasons that postmodernists would probably reject, favor the former.

Overview

Chapter 1 examines the concept of empire and defines it as a political system characterized, as Galtung noted many years ago, by a peculiar kind of structure. The relations of dominance between the core elite and the peripheral elites have a hublike structure: that is, peripheries interact with one another politically and economically via the core. In this sense, and in this sense only, empires are structurally isomorphic with totalitarian states. I continue with a general discussion of political systems, of systems theorizing, and of what structural theories can and cannot do. I conclude with a critique of commonly encountered claims—all agency oriented, choice centered, and intentionalist—about empire and of theories of everything. If such approaches and their instantiation, rational choice theory, are as useless as I believe them to be, structural approaches to empire can only be less bad.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of Taagepera's parabolas, arguing, as I have already noted, that they represent an algorithm for a large *N* of em-

pires. Proceeding from the structural isomorphism between empires and totalitarian states and drawing on Deutsch's structural explanation of totalitarian disintegration, I then argue that imperial structure holds the key to the secular tendency of core-periphery relations to loosen and thus to decay. More important, I argue that Deutsch effectively provides the theoretical underpinnings of the algorithmic regularity expressed in the downward slope of Taagepera's parabolas. As such, Deutsch's theory amounts to something like a "covering law" of imperial decline.[36] Chapter 2 also discusses how attrition takes place, by means of war and liberation struggles, and why.

Chapter 3 first examines one exception to this rule—the nonattrition of obviously decayed empires—and explains this anomaly in terms of intervening variables, those indispensable theoretical devices that invariably pull social science from the brink of predictive failure and, in our case, "prop up" the imperial structure and keep it whole.[37] Chapter 3 then examines another exception to this rule—imperial collapse. I suggest that system-shattering events that no theory of empire can predict or explain push imperial systems over the edge. The best one can do is suggest which kinds of shocks are likely to affect which kinds of empires under which kinds of conditions.

Chapter 4 looks at the aftermath of collapse and suggests that reconstitution is for the most part a function of four structural variables: the extent of decay, the evenness of decay, the relative power of the former core, and the continuity of the former empire. One combination precludes imperial revival, as in the case of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires after 1918. Another promotes revival, as in post-Romanov Russia. A third may, as with interwar Germany, lead to attempted revival.[38] I then transpose these arguments to the post-Soviet context. The east-central European polities appear to have escaped post-Soviet Russia's sphere of influence completely, whereas the non-Russian republics are still precariously positioned between independence, hegemony, and empire. For better or for worse, the case for "creeping reimperialization" culminating in partial revival is not unpersuasive. Several exogenous factors will promote that process. The expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) on the one hand and globalization on the other will isolate Russia and its neighbors, thereby promoting their dependence on one another and facilitating the institutional repenetration of the periphery by the former core.

Finally, the conclusion briefly examines the implications of Russian imperial revival. Post-Soviet Russia's structural resemblance to a decaying empire may ultimately doom any imperial project and perhaps Russia itself. Although reimperialization is only possible, the collapse of a revived Russian

empire is probable, and instability, insecurity, and conflict in the formerly Soviet space are virtually certain for some time to come. Evidently, structural theories may not be without policy relevance.

In Lieu of a Preface

Besides relegitimizing the study of empire, the Soviet Union's collapse also precipitated my interest in empires. After all, if the USSR fell apart because it was an empire, a closer look at empires, both historically and theoretically, promised a better understanding of the Soviet case. Astute readers will have no difficulty seeing that my thinking about the Soviet Union has influenced my thinking about empires as much, if not more than, the reverse.

My thinking about empires is, like this book, the product of much zigging and zagging. I had written a number of papers, some published, some unpublished, on empire in the mid-1980s and 1990s and felt emboldened in late 1996 finally to write a book.[39] It soon became obvious that, while the papers were more or less consistent with one another, many of the arguments were not. Smoothing out the rough edges and eliminating the contradictions has been an enlightening exercise, partly for what I have relearned about the complexity of empires and mostly for what I have come to understand about the exceedingly tricky business called theorizing.

I have been struck yet again by the overdetermination of facts and the underdetermination of theory and by the concept-dependence of both.[40] For better or for worse, we live in a theoretically plural world, and to deny that fact, as the professional dynamics of the social science profession compel us to do, cannot be good for scholarship, policy making, or personal integrity. Nor, on the other hand, can it be good to follow the fashion that confuses conceptual chaos with conceptual pluralism. Concepts provide us with excellent means of negotiating treacherous theoretical waters. Because the concepts used by a theory must be coherent and fit one another, fuzzy concepts, like weak foundations, cannot sustain even the most richly empirical and theoretically flamboyant edifices. The proposition is hardly new, having been advocated by Giovanni Sartori for many years, but, alas, it needs repeating.[41]

Readers should not be surprised that, despite its use of such words as *algorithm*, *lawlike*, and *counterfactual conditional*, this book neither tests a

theory nor proves that others fail tests. Except for conceptual incoherence, there is, I suspect, no test that a minimally coherent theory can fail so completely as to be discredited.[42] Whatever the reason for the social science profession's declared infatuation with positivist procedure, I do not share it. And, as the remarkable capacity of good, bad, and god-awful theories to survive all manner of assaults and even achieve hegemony suggests, neither does the profession.[43]

A large number of colleagues have provided criticism, comments, and guidance in the course of this project. They are, I am certain, fully responsible for the parts of this book that make most sense. Many thanks go to Dominique Arel, John A. Armstrong, Karen Ballentine, Karen Barkey, Mark Beissinger, Mark Blyth, Ian Bremmer, Michael Brown, Rogers Brubaker, Yitzhak Brudny, Walter Clemens, Alexander Cooley, Istvan Deak, Oded Eran, Valentina Fedotova, Stephen Handelman, Leonid Heretz, Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, Juozas Kazlas, Paul Kolstoe, Viktoriya Koroteyeva, Taras Kuzio, David Laitin, Allen Lynch, Michael Mandelbaum, Warren Mason, Rajan Menon, Gusztav Molnar, Andrew Nathan, Laszlo Nemenyi, Barnett Rubin, Zoltan Rostas, Nikolai Rudensky, Nadia Schadlow, Oleh Shamshur, Corinna Snyder, Jack Snyder, Ronald Grigor Suny, Raphael Vago, Mark von Hagen, and Veljko Vujacic. Special thanks also go to Seweryn Bialer, Irwin Selnick, Richard Rudolph, David Good, and the late William McCagg, who first got me thinking about the USSR as comparable to Austria-Hungary and other empires.

To the Smith Richardson Foundation goes an especially large dollop of gratitude for providing me with the funding to take a leave of absence in the fall of 1998. Without its generous support, this book, like so many empires, might have taken an inordinately long time to end.