

## [Gibbon on Kumar, 'Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World'](#)

Review published on Thursday, December 13, 2018

**Krishan Kumar.** *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Illustrations, maps. 600 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15363-6.

**Reviewed by** Luke Gibbon (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) **Published on** H-Empire (December, 2018) **Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=51875>

### After Augustus

Sharp-eyed visitors to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) entering up the Gurkha Stairs might spot a statue of Major General Stringer Lawrence (1697-1775), commander of East India Company forces in Madras, “father of the Indian army,” and one of the founders of British dominion in south Asia. This is one of a trio of statues of distinguished military and civil company servants commissioned in 1760 from Peter Gaspar Scheemakers and installed four years later at East India House on Leadenhall Street, now in the main FCO building on King Charles Street, London.

One might be forgiven for asking why Stringer did his subcontinental soldiering dressed as a Roman commander. But of course, he did not; he is depicted like this because, as Krishan Kumar writes in his synthesis of the history, sociology, and political science of “the imperial idea” and its ideologies, Rome was for the British, as it was for other European powers, “the fount and emblem of empire” (pp. 7-8, 12-13).[1] These Georgian statues in the classical style are testament to what Kumar describes as “‘a European repertoire of empire,’ a common store of ideas, memories, and experiences that each empire draws upon in staking its claim in the world, even as it declares itself not just the latest but also the only true guardian of the imperial tradition” (p. xv).[2]

Beginning with the Roman Empire and moving through its Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian, British, and French (but notably not its American) descendants, Kumar gives us a chronology of “how in particular their ruling peoples conceived their task in running these vast, rambling, and diverse enterprises (p. xii).”[3] This way he hopes to show “each empire’s awareness of its predecessors as well as its contemporary rivals” (p. xv). His analysis focuses on the relationship between “nationness” and empire. Nationness or nationalism, here used interchangeably, are not equally present in all of these empires, nor does the age-old distinction between land (Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian) and overseas empires (British, French) hold. Both the English/British and French built empires on land before expanding overseas. The House of Habsburg linked land (Austria) and overseas (Spanish Atlantic) empires, while its Spanish branch alone encapsulated both. In “all the empires under consideration,... however strong the degree of nationness, the ruling people are compelled by the very nature of empire to suppress the expression of their own particular identity as a nation. Not to do so is to put the imperial enterprise at risk” (pp. xiii-xiv). In terms of managing multiethnic

populations, Kumar makes the case for empire over nation-state: “at its best, the Ottoman Empire offered to the world a remarkable model of how different communities can coexist under the shelter of a supranational power” (p. 144). Similarly, “the Habsburg Empire is the most tortuous, treacherous, and protean.... But at the same time it is also—if such a thing is permitted of empires, the most *lovable*” (p. 145).

Nationalism and the nation-state could not themselves bring down multinational empires. Kumar rejects the notion of the inevitable decline of an effete Habsburg Empire trapped in a “prison of nations,” a myth promoted by nationalist heroes and Habsburg enemies, such as the Hungarian Louis Kossuth (1802-93) and the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), and further perpetuated by such historians as A. J. P. Taylor.[4] Though the longevity of the Russian Empire is explained by a fear of nationalism and the prophylactic separation of state and society, it was the First World War not minority nationalisms that brought it, and the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, to an end. Instead and with no little irony, “nationalism picked up the pieces where it could, as did the Bolsheviks in Russia (and promptly recommended the empire)” (p. 267). Though a stimulator of nationalisms through deliberate social and economic development the Soviet Empire was destroyed not by them but by international competition. Throughout *Visions of Empire* Kumar provides comprehensive and insightful summaries of the historiographies of each of these imperial regimes as they refer to the mission and identity of the “architects of empire.” To my mind, this is the greatest strength and value of the book.

However, Kumar is not interested in providing us with “a detailed account of the mechanics of imperial rule,” defending his focus on ideology on the grounds that “ideas were not irrelevant to imperial rule, not simply a smoke screen that hid other, less idealistic, motives and interests” (p. xii). Is it possible to assess how these imperial regimes shaped the modern world without looking at how they worked in practice and what impact they had on the ruled? This approach leads to some historiographical blind spots and unsubstantiated conclusions. For example, citing a single forty-year-old source,[5] Kumar makes the bold claim that the “British, by common consent of most scholars, let go of their empire with the least degree of violence and suffering.” He does go on to acknowledge “some responsibility” for Partition and “the obduracy of British settlers in East Africa” but holds to the conclusion that British decolonization was less violent and bloody than French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Belgian decolonization (p. 469). There is scant engagement with a substantial academic literature cataloguing the comparable violence of Britain’s colonial exits, most controversially in Kenya (1952-56).[6]

In drawing his narrative to an end, Kumar asks “Is empire truly over? Is a whole era of world history, the ‘age of empires’—at end?” (p. 472). It does not appear so, given the existence of new forms of colonialism and dependency, the often blurred lines between empire and nation-state (the Russian Federation, the United States, the People’s Republic of China), the European Union, the United Nations, international nongovernmental organizations, and migration. Kumar finishes by offering what, I imagine, will be the most troubling of his conclusions to students of empire: “Empires, for all their faults, show us another way, a way of managing the diversity and differences that are now the inescapable fate of practically all so-called nation-states. That by itself seems sufficient grounds for continuing to study them, and to reflect on what they may be able to teach us” (p. 475).

Again, Kumar has only given us the rulers’ own, and therefore unreliable, assessment of how they

managed difference in their empires. The majority of the world is now made up of non-European peoples and territories formerly part of these empires, yet the voices of their forebears are absent from this account. Kumar, looking at the case of British decolonization from the perspective of British colonial administrators and ideologues, goes so far as to speculate that “it may even be that the relatively easy manner of exit made for a deeper impact than in those societies where the anger and hatred bred by crippling colonial wars led to a strong desire to bury the empire, to expunge it from the collective memory” (p. 469).

Kumar also makes a provocative contribution to debates on how the trauma and pain of decolonization has affected the ruling or, as Kumar describes them elsewhere, “state-bearing” peoples (pp. 28, 467). For example, paraphrasing earlier research of his (*The Making of English National Identity* [2003]), Kumar claims that the problem posed by empire to its makers, by that he means the imperial idea and ideology, in particular their national identity has been most acutely felt by the English: “Others in the United Kingdom certainly played major roles, but when the empire disappeared they were able to fall back on reasonably well-developed national identities, Scottish, Welsh, Irish. No such recourse was possible for the English, who had passed most of their history without the need for such an identity, suppressing it in the commitment to the wider enterprise of empire” (p. 470).

This is contrasted with the French, who, traumatized by the Algerian War (1954-62), have both learned to forget this recent past and to invest their identity, as would-be leaders, in the European Union. Finally, Kumar also offers some broader conclusions on the end of empire/decolonization, which he promises to build on in future research. He highlights the relative short lifespan of modern empires compared to their ancient forebears. The modern ones unwittingly undermined their own longevity by spreading the organizational and technological advances that were themselves the basis of their superiority. Imperial decline begins when the ruling people start to express their own nationality: “The paradox of empire is that it at once creates nations, often where they have never existed before and at the same time has to act vigorously to suppress them,” a pattern best exemplified by the Soviet Union (p. xiv).

Anyone researching how monarchs, proconsuls, administrative and social elites, artists, and intellectuals legitimized these empires (at least among themselves) and contemporary legacies for these state-bearing peoples could do no better than start with this book. But one wonders whether the world needs such an uncritical even laudatory reinscription of imperial ideas and ideologies. Those interested in how such empires worked in practice, in the experience of the ruled and/or non-Europeans, and, indeed, in how these five imperial regimes shaped much of their modern world would be advised to look elsewhere.

#### Notes

[1]. Kumar here builds on, among other works, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press); Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Richard Koebner, *Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

[2]. Compare John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Allen

Lane, 2007). Darwin begins his deliberately less Eurocentric analysis with the death of the Tartar emperor Tamerlane (1336-1405), characterizing it as “a turning point in world history.” He writes that Tamerlane was “the last of the series of ‘world-conquerors’ ... who strove to bring the whole of Eurasia—the ‘world island’—under the rule of a single vast empire” (p. x).

[3]. This is contrasted with the comparative approach of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper in their *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[4]. Kumar cites A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary* (1948; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1990).

[5]. Tony Smith, “A Comparative Study of French and British Decolonization,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, no. 1 (1978): 70-102.

[6]. For example, David Anderson’s *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, 2005); and Caroline Elkins’s *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005) are both in the bibliography but not cited while the colonial war in Kenya at the end of the British Eempire as well as those in Malaya (1948-58) and Cyprus (1954-59) are only given short shrift in seven pages on “End of Empire—or Empire by Other Means?” (p. 379).

**Citation:** Luke Gibbon. Review of Kumar, Krishan, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. December, 2018. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51875>

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