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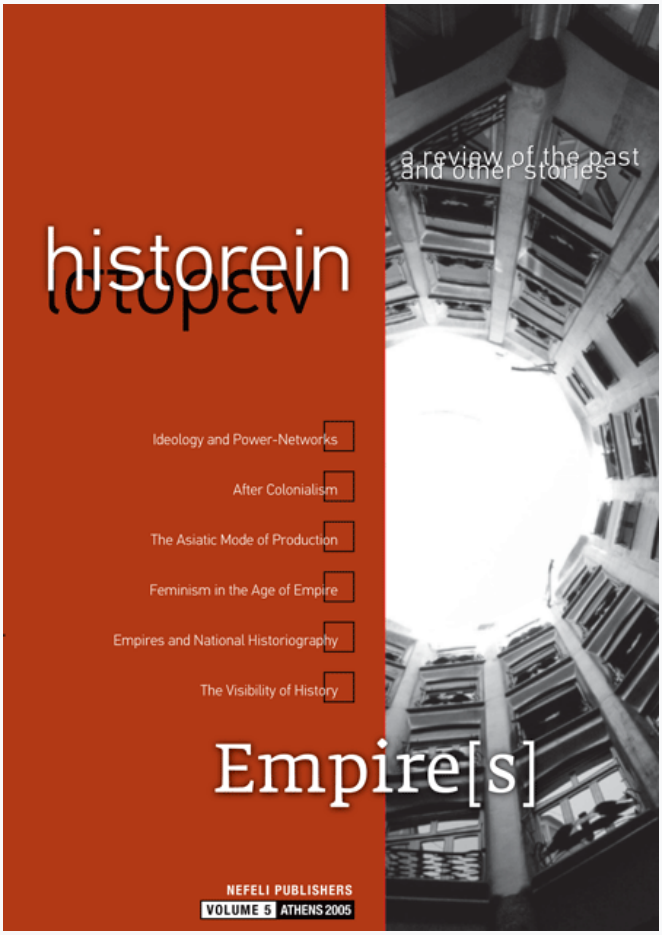

Nation and Empire Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN), 20–21 April 2005

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Nation and Empire

Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN), 20–21 April 2005

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If it is possible to draw conclusions on the increasing interest in the phenomenon of empire through the publications and the conferences that have taken place in recent years, two parallel debates may be discerned. The first one involves the preconditions of imperial domination and the decline of the nation-state in the post-Second World War period. The latter was the outcome of the disastrous effects of nationalism – the ideology which gave birth to and sustained the nation-state – to which two world wars are testimony. After a long course of transformation, this ideology, which heralded popular sovereignty and the liberation from imperial tyranny, eventually triumphed after the First World War when the traditional empires collapsed and the map of the Western World, at least, was changed radically. Subsequently, the Second World War brought about the dwindling of the colonial empires, even though they were leading members of the victorious Allies. The anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa emerged soon afterwards and took the lead in the emancipation of non-Western nations. Concomitant to this transformation, however, was the rise of the American and the Soviet superpowers in addition to the endeavor in creating what is now known as the European Union. Eventually, the collapse of communism opened the way for the United States to emerge as the only unchallenged global authority. In their widely discussed book *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described this development not so much in terms of the political domination of one particular empire but rather as a new cultural and political condition. The second debate involves a comparative reevaluation of the 'traditional' colonial or continental empires. While it stems from exactly the same socio-political transformation, the book has managed to build upon a long European academic tradition of Orientalism and area studies.

The two debates described above are not always seen as being compatible; indeed, there are participants on each side of the debate who do not recognize the other as legitimate fields. The 2005 annual conference of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN), which took place at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), provided a convincing example. The two-day conference addressed the relation between nation and empire and was structured hierarchically. The first day, which opened with a welcome address given by John Breuilly, consisted of plenary sessions in which well-known historians working on different empires presented comprehensive accounts on their field of expertise with the emphasis clearly on the historical comparison of empire. Owing possibly to the wide

spectrum of case studies – from the Roman Empire, presented by Peter Heather, to the Ottoman Empire, as described by Selim Deringil, and from the Soviet Empire, presented by Geoffrey Hosking, to the American Empire as described by Michael Mann – the major point of contention revolved around the very definition of empire. In his keynote speech for instance, Dominic Lieven, an expert on the Russian Empire and author of the seminal *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), claimed that empire constitutes the "rule over a large population, vast lands and enormous power". The other point of contention was whether the level of global domination presently exercised by the United States may be classified as an empire according to similar definitions.

The lack of a firm conceptual framework was the major methodological drawback of the conference. One could easily see that all speakers, experts in their respective fields, aimed at presenting the complexities of their own case while at the same time making insightful comments on the particular characteristics of each empire. For instance, Deringil and Hosking demonstrated how the Ottomans and the Soviets won control over vast territories and populations partly thanks to their success in appeasing and even suppressing ethnic differences as an element of identity. Deringil narrated incidents of religious conversion during the *Tanzimat* reform period of the mid-nineteenth century, when local authorities were determined to implement imperial orders which stipulated equality and justice among all subjects despite the opposition of the Muslim majority which believed that the reforms represented a deterioration of its position vis-à-vis non-Muslims. Hosking, in turn, demonstrated how the Soviet nomenclature was actually composed of members of several ethnic minorities and thus had every reason to suppress Russian nationalism. Therefore, the latter subsequently reemerged as a reaction to the Soviet regime. In all presentations, however, there was very little effort to devise a conceptual framework which could encompass all these cases and demonstrate the common social and cultural experience that the phenomenon of empire entailed. While it is generally accepted that empire involves vast lands, abundant resources, huge power, the loose relations of the center with the periphery, or successful social engineering, there is no consensus on why the phenomenon of empire survived so much longer in history than the phenomenon of the nation-state, which is so recent and modern, or on whether it still survives in the modern phenomenon of international relations.

Lieven, for instance, rejected the idea that the United States is an empire on the grounds that in the age of globalization power intrudes into every aspect of everyday life whereas this was not the case in the age of empire. Moreover, he maintained that in its modern Western form, democracy is incompatible with empire while making at the same time the peculiar claim that democratic empires are the "more vicious ones". One wonders whether such a claim could provide the stepping stone for the study of the contemporary United States, which even though it describes itself as a liberal democracy, behaves like an empire. As Andrew Cayton and Fred Anderson recently have argued in their *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York: Viking, 2005), Americans have always perceived theirs as a liberal nation which fought against evil empires, be

it the British Empire from which they won independence, the Nazi Empire from which they liberated Europe, or the Soviet Empire to accomplish the global dominance of liberal values. Therefore, Americans find it extremely hard to admit that their county exercises an imperial authority. Yet, in his *Incoherent Empire* (London/New York: Verso, 2003), which examines the rise of American imperial might, Michael Mann responded differently to the same dilemma. He claimed that there are four forms of empire, whose exercise of power may be direct, indirect, informal or in the form of a hegemony respectively. As the United States has presumably gone through all these different stages, it can therefore be described as an empire on a number of grounds. Despite the vivid discussion triggered by Mann's arguments, the most controversial of all presentations was definitely Alexander Motyl's "Is everything an Empire, is Empire everything?", based on a close reading of two opposing discourses on empire. The first one has been employed by popular British historian Niall Ferguson, who in several publications and television documentaries has propagated the view that there are malign and benign empires and that the British Empire was ultimately one of the latter. In his book *Colossus: the Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004) in particular, he not only pays tribute to the British Empire but he also urges the United States to realize its historical role and to behave like an empire. The other case Motyl tackled was Hardt and Negri's *Empire* as well as their most recent work *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). (Surprisingly, Motyl's was the only reference to Hardt and Negri at the conference). Motyl caricaturized the two opposing accounts, describing the first one as a right-wing and the second as a left-wing reading of the empire phenomenon. This endeavor to bring together the two discourses at the same scale with the obvious purpose of ridiculing them produced an uneven result. Such an approach, which disregards the repercussions of the phenomenon of empire as a cultural experience that transgresses particular historical circumstances, indicates the incompatibility of the two debates, as described at the beginning of this presentation.

On the second day, the conference took the form of a number of parallel workshops, each one focusing on a particular empire. Despite the impressive variety of topics and empires on offer, the comparative aspect suffered owing to the tendency of participants to attend the workshop dealing with their particular empire of study. This reviewer, for example, attended one workshop on the Habsburg Empire and two workshops on the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, in which friends and colleagues of his participated. As a result, he learnt nothing new about the Chinese or Soviet empires. This problem could have been avoided had the workshops been organized along thematic and not geographical lines and had they engaged participants with different expertise in discussions on specific issues. What was more striking though was the absence throughout the conference of any reference to gender relations. It is well known that both the imperial and the post-colonial nation were engendered long ago. However, it seems that gender has been ignored in this particular debate on the comparative approach to empire. On the second day, when dozens of papers were presented on topics related to memory, revolution, modernization, visual representation, reformation,

demography, education, ethnic divisions, race, colonial discourse, transnationalism, and historiography, there were no papers on gender relations. This is all the more interesting considering that the participants on the first day were all male historians. Does this mean that there are no female historians dealing with empire? This is clearly not the case and although I am not a specialist on gender issues, I cannot help but assume that this overwhelming male representation is somehow related to the way empire was defined at the beginning of the conference. In other words, the common denominator of all empires is vast and imposing power and in this sense empire has ended up representing a very masculine narrative trope. Therefore, one has the feeling that empire has always been an autocratic masculine figure which imposed its authority. It is not necessary to emphasize its gender dimension in all debates. It is really bizarre, however, when it is implicitly assumed that empire cannot be female.