

Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped The World, by Krishan Kumar, Princeton University Press, 2017, xviii + 576 pp., (cloth)

(To be published in *The European Legacy* in 2019)

The title of this book, “Visions of Empire”, expresses exactly what it is about: how different empires have seen or still do see themselves, what Empire meant or means to them, why and how they were or are motivated to behave and organize imperialistically. They have been driven characteristically by a “civilizing mission”, a self-endowed certainty about their destiny and obligation to conquer and unite the whole world – which is obviously never fully achieved, but is always in some curious and self-evidently impossible way held to be their ultimate purpose.

For the five empires considered closely in this book, only in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire, the Soviet empire, and in the Ottoman Empire, was Christianity not in one or another variant central to this “civilizing” Messianism (though the British and French Empires had large secular elements as well), and it is a mistake to think that this was no more than a mere ideological fig-leaf for the dark realities of greed. The thirst for power and superiority, the self-approbation and self-love that accompanied or still accompanies the imposition of one’s beliefs and culture upon others, is of course quite inseparable from the religious conversion or indoctrination of less powerful and subjugated peoples. But although material and economic “interests” always lock in with these beliefs, never are their pursuit the sole purpose of empires, Kumar believes. In the first place, empires have not been economically rewarding all the time for the imperial powers, whilst strong voices within these empires have often claimed that they are a burden. Thus free trade throughout the world, not colonization, was the best way for a Great Power to enrich itself, argued Richard Cobden, the arch British anti-imperialist in the Nineteenth Century. Whilst Sir Charles Dilke, in 1869 warned that “Flouzy Britannia, with her anchor and ship, becomes a mysterious Oriental despotism, ruling a sixth of the human race.” (Quoted 338).

But a dominant, opposing view came from W.E.H. Lecky, as one example, who in 1893 claimed that “An England reduced to the limits which the Manchester School would assign to it would be an England shorn of the chief elements of its dignity in the world.” (Quoted 501). Here it seems it is “dignity”, above economic interest, that prompts imperialism.

Throughout Krishan Kumar’s intellectual quest this is an extraordinary, “hard to put down” book, long (over 500 pages), dense, filled with facts and ideas, with mind-

blowing detail and an immense number of references to scholars, writers, and poets who have been writing for more than 2000 years, or who are writing now.

The sub-title of the book is “How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World.” The five that Kumar considers in amazing detail are: the Roman, the Ottoman, the Spanish-cum-Habsburg, the Russian and Soviet, the British, and the French Empires. At first, when starting to read the book, I wondered if the sub-title should not have been something more like “How Five Imperial Empires (Among Others) Shaped The World”, or “How Five Imperial Empires Partially Shaped The World”, though with time I came to see more into the subtle way that the author seeks to dovetail his chosen five empires into one another: they are treated in the order in which they began in time; there are constant cross-references, contrasts, and comparisons made in regard to all five empires in each chapter, with insights presented concerning the meanings of Empire, Colonization, and Imperialism in many contexts, including in the Preface and the Epilogue. There are plenty of shorter references to empires besides the Five; Kumar registers that there have been many empires besides these: for example the Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Arab empires in the Middle East, the empires of China and India; and those of the Aztecs and the Incas.

There is a certain amount of revealing discussion about the American empire too: about how the U.S. started as an off-shoot from the First British Empire and continued as an empire right from the beginning, and was for a while a fully “formal” empire with its annexations in the Caribbean, the Philippines and elsewhere; then becoming, especially after the Second World War, world hegemonic as an immensely expanding “informal” empire.

There are also intriguing suggestions made about Italian Fascism and Nazi Germany, which are particularly sharp concerning the relationship between Nationalism and Imperialism, which Kumar argues are not the same, and are sometimes in contradiction, though at other times they can coincide or overlap. Their attitudes concerning “races” are quite different, taken as “ideal types” in the Weberian sense. Empires have traditionally not wanted to emphasize the superiority of their “leading peoples” unduly, as that does not help them rule over many different peoples. The nightmare of Hitler’s short rule is very helpfully illuminated in the discussions about these issues: how different was Hitler from the last Habsburg Emperor, whom of course Hitler loathed. The crown prince Rudolf explained to his father Franz Joseph in 1884 that:

“The Austro-Hungarian monarchy still lacks a great ethnographic work, founded on the most advanced scientific research of the present day, and embellished by the highly perfected means of reproduction.....This work will show at home and abroad what a rich treasure of intellectual power this Monarchy possesses in the peoples of all her countries, and how these co-operate in a splendid achievement.....

By the growing recognition of the qualities and characteristics of the single ethnographic groups and of their mutual and material dependence, that feeling of solidarity which is to unite all the peoples of our Fatherland must be strengthened.” (Quoted 198).

As Kumar himself puts it:

“...it would be fatal if (the Empire) were to identify itself with any national cause or group. The multinational empire had to have a multinational philosophy.... In Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Cracow, Lvov, and many of the other leading cities of the empire, Jews found an opportunity, unequalled elsewhere in Europe, to cultivate their intellectual, professional, and commercial lives. When, in 1916, Franz Joseph died, Moritz Gudemann, the chief rabbi of Vienna, wrote: “His memory will remain a blessing.” When the Hapsburg Empire collapsed in 1918, Sigmund Freud said: Austria-Hungary is no more. I do not want to live anywhere else....” (199-202).

The Hungarian journalist Aurel Kecskemethy wrote in his diary in 1856: “I’m more of a Magyar than a Czech or German, but above all I’m a citizen of the Austrian empire, and only as such am I a Magyar.” (204). Hofmannsthal and Gustav Mahler, like many other Viennese Jews felt they could be Jewish most easily by being loyal citizens of the Empire.

Many thinkers have come to the conclusion that the fates of Czechoslovakia and Poland, and of other small states in central Europe, both between and after the two World Wars, confirm the thought that a “third power” between Russia and Germany had been needed. For all the inadequacies of the Austrian Empire, its blowing apart in 1918, assured that Central Europe “lost its ramparts”, according to the Czech novelist Milan Kundera.

This example serves to illustrate how the collapse of any state or society may result in a situation far worse for nearly all strata and groups of the population than that which pertained beforehand. Whole societies can be plunged into disaster that lasts beyond a few generations. Also of course, it can be that *not changing* leads to terrible consequences. This book illuminates these sorts of realization about human history and society, very profoundly. In the case of the Habsburg Empire, the Hungarian writer Jászai considered in his book of 1929 that the First World War was not the cause of its collapse; rather it had been simply “the final liquidation of the inner crisis of the monarchy.” (Quoted 205).

Kumar considers that a Gotterdammerung-like quality hangs over many such accounts, holding something in common with the “sick man” image of the Ottoman Empire. But in his view, the evidence does not point to an inevitable collapse, given any particular trigger, in either case. The Habsburg Empire was destroyed by a

protracted war with other empires, not nationalism in either the “master” or the “subject” nations. It had suffered crises before, and no more than many other empires. Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Croatians, Serbians, Bosnian Moslems, Poles, Ruthenians, Romanians, and Jews felt they had more to lose outside the Empire than within it.

With respect to the Second French Empire, little more could be stated about its deepest motivations than those expressed quite openly by Martial Merlin, the governor-general of French Equatorial Africa in 1910:

“After the disaster of 1870 (the Franco-Prussian war), we had to draw in ourselves and, for a time, cease to concern ourselves with European affairs. But, as we are far from finished as a race, whatever some pessimists say, after a few years of self-containment we felt the need to act. As our freedom in Europe was limited, we went to distant countries; and then came the beginnings of that marvellous colonial epoch which, a few years later, put us in all parts of the world on a footing of equality with Britain, the colonial power par excellence, and far ahead of that power which defeated us in 1870 but which is still far behind us in the colonial field.” (Quoted 428).

My initial doubting thoughts about the book’s sub-title did not entirely disappear. When, for example did the Chinese Empire begin, was it a “Civilization” before becoming “Imperial”? The chapter on the Roman Empire is sub-titled “Parent Empire”, but did it start before or after the Chinese, and was it influential over the development of the Chinese Empire? Recent scholarship has led to much focus on the extent to which “pre-modern” China greatly influenced the emergence of European empires both technologically and in terms of the prior growth of global trade that China helped to induce; although the extent to which all the four European empires looked to Rome, desired to emulate or even to surpass it, should not be in any doubt.

In very important analyses Kumar considers the way in which in the later four empires he discusses, there was a “first empire” - not to be confused with the later First and Second empires of Britain and France - founded by a “leading people” which later embarked upon “real” empire-building. These might then develop “First” and “Second” “real” empires. Thus Castile created Spain and as the “leading people” the Castilians “stood in” for Spain in the construction of the Spanish Empire; England conquered or came to dominate a united Great Britain in such a “first empire”. It was similar for the Russians in the case of the Russian Empire then the Soviet empire. And it was similar in the cases of the Turks within the Ottoman Empire, and with the Austrian Germans in the Habsburg Empire.

Was this not also the case for China: was there not one state or group of states that imperialistically came to dominate their neighbouring states to create China in the first millennium BCE, before the latter went on to build a “true” empire? I ask these questions humbly, as I am not a specialist on this matter.

I wonder similarly about the Inca empire, which was probably the largest in the world when the Spanish invaded it. The Inca empire began before that of the Spanish Empire, evolving from important antecedents, in particular the Tihuanacu and the Huari empires among others. The Inca empire was very influential in South America – indeed it still is culturally. I would have loved to read Kushmar’s thoughts about the Chinese and Inca empires – but by goodness no one could complain after the enormous effort already contained in this book!

The question raised earlier about the Habsburg Empire’s attitude to the different ethnicities and religions contained in its Empire is particularly worthy of consideration, as are similar realities in the other empires discussed. The views of the Austro-Marxists at the turn of the 20thC are of particular interest. Kumar writes:

“*Pace* conventional Marxism, the nation was not just an expression of bourgeois class interests. It was a historical, spiritual, and cultural entity worthy of preservation and promotion.....The Habsburg Empire, perhaps uniquely, contained the germ of another, more promising and progressive, principle. This was the multinational state, best organized as a democratic federation of national communities, “a free association of nations,” as Renner put it. Reinterpreting the ideal of “socialist internationalism,” Bauer argued that in the future socialist state national differences – precious, historically formed, resources - would not disappear but would on the contrary be more important, more capable of expressing themselves.” (199-200).

This seems to speak relevantly to the present context of the European Union and “Brexit”, and also for many of President Donald Trump’s policy positions in the U.S.

Kumar is not shy to speak of the atrocities committed by empires; by the Conquistadores in the New World, or those that Britain and France perpetrated in their imperial conquests and ongoing rule. What he points to however is the fact that the empires he considers normally had definite, well-formulated policies which attempted to some extent to reconcile justice with imperial imperatives, however unsuccessfully; and these empires lasted longer than many modern imperialistic nation-states have done, with some kind of “Pax Romana” or “Pax Britannica.” There is something to be learnt here, he thinks, though obviously this does not involve fatuous fantasies of returning to the past. A theme which Kumar stresses is that contrary to one contemporary supposition concerning later modernity, the nation-state has not satisfactorily replaced empires globally, and indeed has

demonstrated if anything even greater problems of violence, instability, and despotism than empires had done. He writes:

“British statesmen aimed to imitate the emperor Caracalla and to make all British subjects equal citizens of the empire. Ironically it was only on the eve of the empire’s demise, in the British Nationality Act of 1948, that Britain came near to fulfilling that promise. But late or not in its realization, and as imperfectly as it was practiced, the ideal of a common imperial citizenship, and the pride and protection that came with it, remained among the central points of comparison between the Roman and the British empires.” (p342) And he writes about how in the Spanish Empire there was:

“extraordinary and impassioned debate over Indian rights and metropolitan responsibilities.....The influence of Las Casas in particular, with his denunciation of the atrocities committed by the settlers and his defence of Indian rights, can be clearly seen in such acts as the New Laws of the Indies of 1542 and the Ordinances of 1573, all aimed at restraining the settlers and affirming Indian rights.” (160).

Rome was frequently invoked in these debates, for the Spanish humanists were trained in Roman law and Roman history. For all the terrible cruelty of the Conquistadores, in subsequent periods there did occur these attempts by the Spanish Crown – only very partially successful - to moderate the domination over the Indians. After Independence, in many respects the situation and conditions of the indigenous Indians often worsened.

As for the Ottoman Empire, after capturing Constantinople in 1453 the Ottomans changed its name to Istanbul – a name derived from the classical Greek *eis tin polin*, meaning “of the city”. The Ottomans saw themselves as inheriting and continuing the Byzantine Empire, and therefore inevitably the original Roman Empire also. Similarly the Russian Empire, resting on Russian Orthodox Christianity, called itself “The Third Rome”, after Rome itself and Byzantium.

Kumar’s overall thematic analysis of Empire bears strongly upon the issue of international groupings and agreements in the world today: through the United Nations, International Climate and Environmental forums orientated to the survival of “Civilization”, the human species, and perhaps even the survival of life on our planet; the long-term elimination of nuclear weapons; the problem of expanding world population; also International Law, global anti-starvation and anti-poverty programmes, and multinational approaches to mass migration; amongst a host of other things, many of which are ultimately intermingled. An endless Hobbesian battle between nations or nation-states, whether militarily, geo-politically, or economically does not seem an appropriate way to proceed with these issues.

This book not only combines, but rather intertwines immense scholarly knowledge with intensely pertinent observations about the human condition, past and present. The whole of pre-history and history has involved the swallowing up of communities, groups, peoples, tribes, chiefdoms, states, civilizations, empires etc. etc., by other such human entities. Much of humanity is now convinced that this must not continue: something else is required. The book throws into relief the need really to think – not “anew” as if no one has been doing so already - though more people are needed to do so. The present state of affairs in the world has come into being as an immensely complex consequence of all that has come before. Although Krishan Kumar does not speak directly about pre-history very much, it inevitably looms up in the mind as one reads his pages. Perhaps we need to think yet again about “human nature”, and its changeability or otherwise, though that issue is too huge even to touch upon here. What is clear is that “to learn from the past”, as so many have urged for so long, may necessitate thinking about the past in hugely varied ways, not just one, two, three, or even a hundred ways.