

Title—Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference
Authors—Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper
Year: 2010

Categories: Empire, Colonialism, Politics, World History

Place: World

Time Period: 27 BCE—1990 CE

Argument Synopsis:

Burbank and Cooper attempt to craft a comprehensive history of empire, from ancient Rome and China to the present, with a focus on how various empires have utilized the **politics of difference** to rule over large territories. They begin with an exploration of ancient Rome and China, determining why both empires were so enduring and influential. For Rome: empire held together by taxation and imperial economy. For China: controlling elite intermediaries and preventing them from becoming warlords and challengers.

The authors highlight how Rome and China represented opposing approaches to the politics of difference, which has been taken up by various other empires throughout history. Rome projected a single political community based on shared rights, culture, and eventually religion. China accommodated outsiders and paid respect to the reality of alien powers. Burbank & Cooper argue that China enjoyed more longevity than Rome because China was built upon longstanding ideas of rule and Rome's militant republicanism had no direct political ancestor.

Empire and their interactions **shape the context in which people gauged political possibilities, envision their society and pursue their ambitions.** The concept of the nation-state emerged from the revolutions of the eighteenth century, including the American and Haitian Revolutions. The idea of a nation as a unique political community hinged on the commonality of its people was a radically new way to envision political communities.

The authors use the British Empire as a case study to demonstrate their argument that empires shape the vision of society for colonized people. As the British colonized the globe, they brought with them Enlightenment values. These ideals were not intended by the British to be fully applied to the colonies, but exposure to the concepts through interaction with empire led many colonized people to demand same rights and equality (using the language of their colonizers).

Burbank and Cooper argue that race became the key factor in the politics of difference during the nineteenth century, as Europe divided up Africa and began to gain more substantial control in Asia. For the European empires, race became the essential aspect of the politics of difference and racial ideology became inextricably tied to colonialism. They conclude with the claim that WWII was the beginning of the end of imperial empires, at least in this form.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Use of politics of difference as a methodology for assessing empires across time/space
- Empires not as extension of nation-states—breaking with nation-state modernity claims
- Large political units, expansionist that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people (empire)
- Themes: difference within empires, imperial intermediaries, imperial relationships, imperial imaginaries, repertoires of power