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## **EMPIRE**

Empire is a widely-used and highly contested word that has been imagined in economic, geopolitical, and cultural forms. Empire, however, is best understood not as a political reality which can be defined by quantifiable characteristics, but as an evolving **discourse** of superiority, legitimacy, duty, and destiny.

Linguistically and conceptually, empire stems from the classical Latin *imperium*, from *imperare*, ‘to command’, and *imperator*, ‘commander’. *Imperium* had many meanings to the Romans and cannot be translated into a single term in any modern language. Following the fall of the Western Roman world in the fifth century, early medieval Europeans used the term “empire” to legitimise political projects both retrospectively and in the present, to suggest that they were the continuation of Rome. Early Modern explorers used “empire” to loosely describe powerful non-European societies, while nineteenth-century European historians used the word to describe pre-Roman civilisations. Today, “empire” is a pejorative term used to loosely describe hegemony, but still lacks a clear understanding. Importantly, empire is distinct from **imperialism**, a nineteenth-century word specifically describing an expansionist foreign policy.

Empire is best understood through the writings of the Roman statesman Cicero (106-43 BC), who identified two related but distinct concepts. For Cicero *imperium* is the right to rule; *patrocinium* can be read as the responsibility to lead. While *imperium* has evolved into “empire”, *patrocinium* has not survived: however it is a crucial component. Cicero’s writings demonstrate that *imperium* and *patrocinium* – hard and soft power, right and responsibility – are mutually reliant. This linguistic narrowing of *imperium* reflects intellectual narrowing over its meaning, which illustrates the nature of empire as a discourse rather than as a definable concept or a static political manifestation.

Today, this ideologically-framed discourse is characterised as sovereignty, legitimacy, duty, and destiny; and the discourse manifests as unequal **core-periphery** relationships. These relationships frequently manifest asymmetrically as material (military and symbolic) power and discourses. This core-periphery relationship further emphasises a territorial aspect in which borders are not fixed but are vague and in constant flux: the *march*. This further

distinguishes empire as a discourse inclined towards universalism in contrast to discourses inclined towards particularism, such as nationalism.

Conceiving of empire as a discourse is thus a critique of all structuralist accounts, such as Marxist, geopolitical, or taxonomical definitions, which identify “empire” according to quantifiable characteristics. The discourse of empire, for which Cicero is a key analytical device and which has been translated over the centuries to describe many societies which are otherwise unconnected, allows us to connect different “empires” in history. Not because of their characteristics, but because this discourse permeates the visions of those who lead. It is the presence of this discourse which allows us to identify “empire” among the Aztecs, Austrians, Chinese, and today in the United States and the European Union.

“Empire” is therefore understood not as a set of quantifiable characteristics, but as the existence of a self-appointed discourse of superiority, legitimacy, duty, and destiny, in the mindsets of imperial leaders.

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