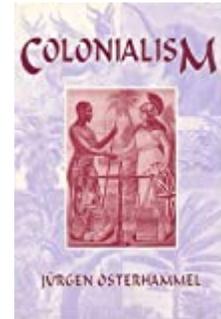




Jurgen Osterhammel. *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview.* Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997. 146 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55876-130-8; \$42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55876-129-2.



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This is a little book about a big subject. Jurgen Osterhammel, author and co-editor of works on topics as diverse as the British empire, China, and Max Weber, declares that “the task of this book is to construct a theoretical and historical overview of colonialism with a minimum of value judgements.” (p. 3). Along the way, he promises to “probe questions that have rarely been addressed in scholarly studies,” including: how is “colonialism” different from other forms of dominance and expansion? What is the relation between “colonialism” and “imperialism?” And how do we understand colonialism in the modern era? (p. 3). The result is a short introduction to “colonialism” that is both sweeping as well as comparative and at the same time offers a broad synthesis of the recent scholarship.

Osterhammel acknowledges that “colonialism” is multifaceted, uneven, and “a phenomenon of colossal vagueness,” but insists that it must be seen from all angles, “with a central focus on both perpetrators and victims.” (p.4) This is why he devotes much of his first two chapters defining the word and its many related terms. He begins by contending that “[c]olonization” is a *process* of territorial acquisition, “colony” a particular type of sociopolitical *organization*, and “colonialism” a *system* of domination. The basis of all three concepts is the notion of expansion of a society beyond its original habi-

tat. These processes of expansion are a fundamental phenomenon of world history. (p. 4)

So far so good. Osterhammel then discusses the “six major forms” of these “processes of expansion,” which include the total migration of whole populations, mass individual migration, settlers pushing a “frontier” into the “wilderness,” and the construction of networks of naval bases. Perhaps one of the most important forms of expansion, however, is what he calls “[e]mpire-building wars of conquest” or the “classic or Roman” form of establishing the rule of one people over another.” (p. 8).

This last classification will puzzle those who assume the word “empire” [from the Latin word *imperium* (meaning “rule” or “authority”) and the related verb, *imperare* (meaning “to command”)] originates from the time of the Roman Republic and is the basis for the concept of “imperialism.” According to Osterhammel, the “classic or Roman” example is not necessarily “imperialism.” For him, “imperialism” is the creation and control of what he calls “transcolonial empires.” “Colonialism” concerns only colonial politics, but “imperialism” implies both colonial and international politics where colonies are not “just ends in themselves, but also pawns in global power games.” (p. 21) Thus, only Great Britain and the United States “have been imperialist powers in the full sense of the term, although the United States is an ex-

ample of "imperialism without a major colonial empire." France, Germany, Russia, and Japan were imperialists in "a more limited sense" while "colonial empires without imperialism" were the rule during the early modern period of European expansion. (p. 21).

Osterhammel similarly insists that "colonization" and "colony" should not be too closely identified with one another. Colonization can occur without creating colonies, such as during North America's westward expansion in the 19th century. Conversely, colonies can result from military conquest, not colonization, with British India an example of "colonial rule without colonization." (p. 10). After confessing that "juridical circuitousness" is "the price of terminological precision," he lists what he considers the "major types" of colonies: "maritime enclaves such as Britain's Hong Kong; "settlement colonies" including French Algeria and Canada; and "exploitation colonies" usually acquired by military conquest. (pp. 10-11).

The primary purposes of "exploitation colonies," according to Osterhammel, are economic gain, strategic interest, and prestige. These colonies, such as British India, Egypt (British), Indochina (French), Togo (German), Philippines (American), and Taiwan (Japanese) have "autocratic governments by the mother country sometimes with paternalistic solicitude for the native population." Yet, to complicate matters further, Osterhammel later explains that "colonialism" can take the shape not only of this type of "formal" colonial rule, but "quasi-colonial control" or informal rule, and even "non-colonial *determinant* influence" as well. (p. 20-21).

After these first two short, but somewhat bewildering, chapters, Osterhammel examines several large themes that require additional complex definitions and new lists. In eight brisk chapters, he marches his readers through the six "colonial epochs" from 1520 to 1960; the eight phases of "colonial conquest;" the three types of "indirect rule;" the colonial state's three "basic sociological types of rule;" the four principal results of the impact of European religion; the three elements of "colonialist ideology;" and the "six dimensions" of decolonization.²⁰ He also takes time to explain "colonial economic forms," the ambiguities of "resistance," and the culture of colonial societies. Osterhammel concludes his final chapter with the observation that while colonialism is not entirely responsible for "the current crisis of the southern hemisphere," the "post-colonial rule world has retained forms of manipulation, exploitation, and cultural expropriation, even if colonialism itself belongs to the past." (p.

119).

Osterhammel's book does have some advantages over other similar works. It is certainly more coherent than Marc Ferro's *Histoire des colonisations: des conquêtes aux indépendances, XIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris, 1994). Ferro's book was recently translated and takes a broad view, but it is over four hundred pages long and poorly organized.[1] *Colonialism* is more compact and more comparative and is based on fresher secondary works than Raymond F. Betts's highly readable *Uncertain Dimensions: Western Overseas Empires in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis, 1985) and other books of comparable vintage.[2] Lastly, Osterhammel's study might appeal to a larger audience than either the collection of essays edited by Nicholas Dirks or Edward W. Said's recent work.[3]

Advanced students will find Osterhammel's twenty pages of notes and list of "selected readings" useful. Both contain standard texts as well as recent studies on colonial theory and other "big books" written in English, French and German during the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these works should be familiar to scholars of the subject, but those looking to acquaint themselves with the particular issues, fashions, and language of the field will find *Colonialism* a good starting point.

Despite these relative strengths, *Colonialism* presents a number of problems. Many of the definitions are very hard to follow and the lists wearisome. Together, they give the work a highly rigid and artificial quality. Oddly, the book is probably too brief and overly broad. When one disregards the references, index, illustrations, and the blank pages between chapters, only about ninety-six pages are left to examine the five hundred year record of "a fundamental phenomenon of world history" (p. 4). For these reasons, this particular "theoretical overview" would not be useful as a student textbook. Further, it is easy to conclude after reading about "perpetrators," "victims," "exploitation," and "cultural expropriation" that *Colonialism* is more than a little hostile to European expansion, particularly the motives of the colonizers, and really does not contain "a minimum of value judgements." Lastly, it is worth noting that appearing at the end of Osterhammel's list of "selected readings" is H.S. Wilson's recent *African Decolonization* (London, 1994) which offers the following useful advice:

"Be gentle, as you fold away a cast off creed" seems especially appropriate to historians charged with explaining such recent, highly controversial processes as African decolonization. However beguiling the patterns and paradigms currently prescribed by the social sci-

ences, historians must focus on people, their actions and their beliefs. (p. 205).

NOTES

[1]. *Colonization: A Global History*. Trans. K. D. Printhipaul. World Heritage Studies in Colonialism. (St.-Hyacinthe, Quebec, 1997).

[2]. For example, D.K. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism 1870-1945: An Introduction* (London, 1981); V.G. Kiernan, *From*

Conquest to Collapse: European Empires from 1815 to 1960 (New York, 1982) and Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, 1986).

[3]. Specifically, *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1992) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

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