

**Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 600 pp., ISBN: 9780691153636, £30**

The international system of the twenty-first century has principally been marked by the prominence of nation-states. Their emergence from the ashes of the Second World War marked the culmination of a long struggle for nationhood for many of the subject-peoples of world and regional empires. At least, this was the common narrative spread by both newly established national elites, and academics. In recent years, researchers have questioned the inevitability of the nation-state system, and whether empires have truly been cast to the dustbin of history.<sup>1</sup> In *Visions of Empire*, Krishan Kumar supports the latter view. By examining the Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian/Soviet, British, and French empires, he demonstrates that the disintegration of the imperial system during the twentieth century was anything but certain. Rather, the imperial policies of these empires are shown to be fluid and adaptive to the necessities of ruling large, multicultural, and multiethnic territories. Kumar contends that the study of empire is all the more important today given the numerous global issues facing nation-states, whether that is terrorism, or mass migrations to the European continent.

By starting with an investigation of the definition of empire, and the differences between colonialism and imperialism, Kumar provides his reader with the necessary framework for examining each of the empires in the following chapters. The book, largely a synthesis of existing theories and histories on empire, rapidly brings the reader up to date on past and current debates on the rather expansive and obfuscating theme of empire. Through providing a history of each of the above-mentioned empires in successive chapters, Kumar hopes to

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

answer how empires were able to exist for such a long period in human history. As well, how did ‘state-bearing’ peoples – the ethnic group that leads the charge within a particular empire – view their own position in relation to the rest of the empire? Moreover, what were the consequences for this group and the subjects they ruled once the empire came to an end (p. 36)? What is most interesting about the book is its revisionist and counter-narrative approach to much of the previous publications on the negatives of empire. For Kumar, empires such as the Ottoman and the Habsburg were not necessarily entities imprisoning the national destinies of their subject peoples; rather, they provided a check on potential regional nationalistic antagonisms. Thus, *Visions of Empire* presents a well-rounded review of the composition of empire and the implementation of imperial policy.

Key to understanding imperial policy is the sense of a universalizing mission inherent in the justification of modern empires. For Kumar, imperial missions were more than just rhetoric; they were intertwined with the functioning of empires, for without them no empire would be able to endure for long (p. xii). Significantly, it was Rome that served as a model, and possessed ‘a rich storehouse of ideas and experiences,’ that could be transported to a modern setting and fit to the needs of the Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian, British and French empires (p. 73). While the mission for Rome was to spread its laws and institutions, thereby instilling a Roman identity within conquered territories, for the Ottomans it was to spread Islam, for the Habsburgs Catholicism, for Russia Orthodox Christianity, for the French Republican values, and for the British to Anglicize or civilize the natives. All of these missions were, in essence, meant to uplift a way of living that was considered backward. However, while the claim for France’s imperial mission is convincing, given the inherent universality of its revolutionary ideas such as the Rights of Man and liberty, equality, and fraternity, the chapter on Britain is

rather elusive in clearly defining a unique imperial mission beyond the simple desire to civilize India or Africa.

Yet, Kumar should be commended for emphasizing an important aspect of imperial rule. That is, the resistance by 'state-bearing' peoples in brandishing the centrality of their ethnicity to the functioning and profitability of the empire. For the empire to endure, the concept of nationality had to be opposed. Once the Turks, Austrians, English, French and Russians emphasized their own unique national identity within the empire, the imperial system would begin to disintegrate (p. xiv). This is why the Germans within the Habsburg Empire resisted being swept into nationalist movements in the nineteenth-century, and why the Ottomans resisted Turkish nationalism until the fate of the empire had been sealed following the First World War. To do so would have meant the legitimation of nationalist movements by the minority groups of the empire instead of projecting an image of a universal, multicultural, and multi-confessional political system (p. 144, 181). In fact, in the Ottoman Empire, where to be called a 'Turk' meant to be uncultured and provincial, the ruling elite – many of whom originated from the Balkan regions of the empire – portrayed themselves as cosmopolitan with a linguistic mixture of Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Greek, French, Italian and Slavic (p. 95).

However, there is some inconsistency in Kumar's assertion that modern empires were against highlighting the 'state-bearing' people's identity, while simultaneously pursuing a universal imperial mission. In the Ottoman case just examined, Kumar's emphasis on the multi-confessional nature of Ottoman society runs counter to his claim that the spread of Islam was the universal mission of the Sultans. This is even more evident given that high Ottoman officials, taken as children from Balkan Christian communities, had to convert to Islam during

the process of their education (p. 88). The same applies to British and French imperial missions that imposed their institutions and values on the subject-peoples. This was, in essence, the glorification of the 'state-bearing' people's identity. Moreover, Kumar's argument that nationalism was resisted by prominent officials in each empire only works because his focus is on the elites, rather than wider sections of the society (p. xiv). Thus, when the analytical scope is widened to include the rest of society, nationalism may not have been a concept that was averted by the 'state-bearing' peoples.

Yet, it should be remembered that *Visions of Empire* is a synthesis of other works on the theme of empire. As such, experts in the field will probably find little original, ground-breaking research. However, the book is of great value for students looking to gain knowledge in the field of empire, as the bibliography itself is a tremendous resource for finding both older and recent scholarship on the topic.

**Sheragim Jenabzadeh**

University of Toronto