Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Chapter 19: 11. Imperial Visions

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Imperial Visions

THE ANCIENT ROMANS WERE USED TO being defeated. Like the rulers of most of history's great empires, they could lose battle afte win the war. An empire that cannot sustain a blow and remain standing is not really an empire. Yet even the Romans found it hard to sto news arriving from northern Iberia in the middle of the second century A small, insignificant mountain town called Numantia, inhabited by the peninsula's native Celts, had dared to throw off the Roman yoke. Rome at the time was the unquestioned master of the entire Mediterra having vanquished the Macedonian and Seleucid empires, subjugated the proud city states of Greece, and turned Carthage into a smou The Numantians had nothing on their side but their fierce love of freedom and their inhospitable terrain. Yet they forced legion after legion surrender or retreat in shame.

Eventually, in 134 Roman patience snapped. The Senate decided to send Scipio Aemilianus, Rome's foremost general and the man levelled Carthage, to take care of the Numantians. He was given a massive army of more than 30,000 soldiers. Scipio, who respected th spirit and martial skill of the Numantians, preferred not to waste his soldiers in unnecessary combat. Instead, he encircled Numantia with fortifications, blocking the town's contact with the outside world. Hunger did his work for him. After more than a year, the food supply ran the Numantians realised that all hope was lost, they burned down their town; according to Roman accounts, most of them killed themsel not to become Roman slaves.

Numantia later became a symbol of Spanish independence and courage. Miguel de Cervantes, the author of Don Quixote, wrote a tragedy called *The Siege of Numantia* which ends with the town's destruction, but also with a vision of Spain's future greatness. Poets composed paeans to its fierce defenders and painters committed majestic depictions of the siege to canvas. In 1882, its ruins were declared a 'national monument' and pilgrimage site for Spanish patriots. In the 1950s and 1960s, the most popular comic books in Spain weren't about Superman and Spide told of the adventures of El Jabato, an imaginary ancient Iberian hero who fought against the Roman oppressors. The ancient Numantia this day Spain's paragons of heroism and patriotism, cast as role models for the country's young people.

Yet Spanish patriots extol the Numantians in Spanish – a romance language that is a progeny of Scipio's Latin. The Numantians spoke a now and lost Celtic language. Cervantes wrote *The Siege of Numantia* in Latin script, and the play follows Graeco-Roman artistic models. Numantia had no theatres. Spanish patriots who admire Numantian heroism tend also to be loyal followers of the Roman Catholic Church – don't miss word – a church whose leader still sits in Rome and whose God prefers to be addressed in Latin. Similarly, modern Spanish law derives law; Spanish politics is built on Roman foundations; and Spanish cuisine and architecture owe a far greater debt to Roman legacies than the Celts of Iberia. Nothing is really left of Numantia save ruins. Even its story has reached us thanks only to the writings of Roman histo tailored to the tastes of Roman audiences which relished tales of freedom-loving barbarians. The victory of Rome over Numantia was so that the victors co-opted the very memory of the vanquished.

It's not our kind of story. We like to see underdogs win. But there is no justice in history. Most past cultures have sooner or later fallen armies of some ruthless empire, which have consigned them to oblivion. Empires, too, ultimately fall, but they tend to leave behind rich a enduring legacies. Almost all people in the twenty-first century are the offspring of one empire or another.

What is an Empire?

An empire is a political order with two important characteristics. First, to qualify for that designation you have to rule over a significant number of distinct peoples, each possessing a different cultural identity and a separate territory. How many peoples exactly? Two or three is not sufficient. Twenty or thirty is plenty. The imperial threshold passes somewhere in between.

Second, empires are characterised by flexible borders and a potentially unlimited appetite. They can swallow and digest more and mo and territories without altering their basic structure or identity. The British state of today has fairly clear borders that cannot be exceeded altering the fundamental structure and identity of the state. A century ago almost any place on earth could have become part of the Britis

Cultural diversity and territorial flexibility give empires not only their unique character, but also their central role in history. It's thanks to characteristics that empires have managed to unite diverse ethnic groups and ecological zones under a single political umbrella, thereby together larger and larger segments of the human species and of planet Earth.

It should be stressed that an empire is defined solely by its cultural diversity and flexible borders, rather than by its origins, its form of government, its territorial extent, or the size of its population. An empire need not emerge from military conquest. The Athenian Empire b life as a voluntary league, and the Habsburg Empire was born in wedlock, cobbled together by a string of shrewd marriage alliances. No

empire be ruled by an autocratic emperor. The British Empire, the largest empire in history, was ruled by a democracy. Other democratic
republican) empires have included the modern Dutch, French, Belgian and American empires, as well as the premodern empires of Nov
Rome, Carthage and Athens.

Size, too, does not really matter. Empires can be puny. The Athenian Empire at its zenith was much smaller in size and population th
Greece. The Aztec Empire was smaller than today’s Mexico. Both were nevertheless empires, whereas modern Greece and modern Me
because the former gradually subdued dozens and even hundreds of different polities while the latter have not. Athens lorded it over mo
hundred formerly independent city states, whereas the Aztec Empire, if we can trust its taxation records, ruled 371 different tribes and

How was it possible to squeeze such a human potpourri into the territory of a modest modern state? It was possible because in the p
were many more distinct peoples in the world, each of which had a smaller population and occupied less territory than today’s typical pe
land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, which today struggles to satisfy the ambitions of just two peoples, easily accomm
biblical times dozens of nations, tribes, petty kingdoms and city states.

Empires were one of the main reasons for the drastic reduction in human diversity. The imperial steamroller gradually obliterated the
characteristics of numerous peoples (such as the Numantians), forging out of them new and much larger groups.

Evil Empires?

In our time, ‘imperialist’ ranks second only to ‘fascist’ in the lexicon of political swear words. The contemporary critique of empires comm
two forms:

1. Empires do not work. In the long run, it is not possible to rule effectively over a large number of conquered peoples.

2. Even if it can be done, it should not be done, because empires are evil engines of destruction and exploitation. Every people has a
determination, and should never be subject to the rule of another.

From a historical perspective, the first statement is plain nonsense, and the second is deeply problematic.

The truth is that empire has been the world’s most common form of political organisation for the last 2,500 years. Most humans during
and a half millennia have lived in empires. Empire is also a very stable form of government. Most empires have found it alarmingly easy
rebellions. In general, they have been toppled only by external invasion or by a split within the ruling elite. Conversely, conquered people
a very good record of freeing themselves from their imperial overlords. Most have remained subjugated for hundreds of years. Typically,
been slowly digested by the conquering empire, until their distinct cultures fizzled out.

For example, when the Western Roman Empire finally fell to invading Germanic tribes in 476 AD, the Numantians, Arverni, Helvetians
Lusitanians, Umbrians, Etruscans and hundreds of other forgotten peoples whom the Romans conquered centuries earlier did not emerg
empire’s eviscerated carcass like Jonah from the belly of the great fish. None of them were left. The biological descendants of the people
identified themselves as members of those nations, who had spoken their languages, worshipped their gods and told their myths and leg
thought, spoke and worshipped as Romans.

In many cases, the destruction of one empire hardly meant independence for subject peoples. Instead, a new empire stepped into the
created when the old one collapsed or retreated. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the Middle East. The current political cons
that region – a balance of power between many independent political entities with more or less stable borders – is almost without paralle
in the last several millennia. The last time the Middle East experienced such a situation was in the eighth century BC – almost 3,000 yea
the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BC until the collapse of the British and French empires in the mid-twentieth cen
the Middle East passed from the hands of one empire into the hands of another, like a baton in a relay race. And by the time the British a
finally dropped the baton, the Aramaeans, the Ammonites, the Phoenicians, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites and the other pe
conquered by the Assyrians had long disappeared.

True, today’s Jews, Armenians and Georgians claim with some measure of justice that they are the offspring of ancient Middle Easte
Yet these are only exceptions that prove the rule, and even these claims are somewhat exaggerated. It goes without saying that the poli
economic and social practices of modern Jews, for example, owe far more to the empires under which they lived during the past two mill
to the traditions of the ancient kingdom of Judaea. If King David were to show up in an ultra-Orthodox synagogue in present-day Jerusal
would be utterly bewildered to find people dressed in East European clothes, speaking in a German dialect (Yiddish) and having endless
about the meaning of a Babylonian text (the Talmud). There were neither synagogues, volumes of Talmud, nor even Torah scrolls in anc

Building and maintaining an empire usually required the vicious slaughter of large populations and the brutal oppression of everyone wh
The standard imperial toolkit included wars, enslavement, deportation and genocide. When the Romans invaded Scotland in AD 83, they
by fierce resistance from local Caledonian tribes, and reacted by laying waste to the country. In reply to Roman peace offers, the chieftai
called the Romans ‘the ruffians of the world’, and said that ‘to plunder, slaughter and robbery they give the lying name of empire; they make
desert and call it

This does not mean, however, that empires leave nothing of value in their wake. To colour all empires black and to disavow all imperi
to reject most of human culture. Imperial elites used the profits of conquest to finance not only armies and forts but also philosophy, art, ju
charity. A significant proportion of humanity’s cultural achievements owe their existence to the exploitation of conquered populations. The p
and prosperity brought by Roman imperialism provided Cicero, Seneca and St Augustine with the leisure and wherewithal to think and w
Mahal could not have been built without the wealth accumulated by Mughal exploitation of their Indian subjects; and the Habsburg Empi
from its rule over its Slavic, Hungarian and Romanian-speaking provinces paid Haydn’s salaries and Mozart’s commissions. No Caledon
preserved Calgacus’ speech for posterity. We know of it thanks to the Roman historian Tacitus. In fact, Tacitus probably made it up. Mos

today agree that Tacitus not only fabricated the speech but invented the character of Calgacus, the Caledonian chieftain, to serve as a n for what he and other upper-class Romans thought about their own country.

Even if we look beyond elite culture and high art, and focus instead on the world of common people, we find imperial legacies in the m modern cultures. Today most of us speak, think and dream in imperial languages that were forced upon our ancestors by the sword. Mo Asians speak and dream in the language of the Han Empire. No matter what their origins, nearly all the inhabitants of the two American from Alaska's Barrow Peninsula to the Straits of Magellan, communicate in one of four imperial languages: Spanish, Portuguese, French Present-day Egyptians speak Arabic, think of themselves as Arabs, and identify wholeheartedly with the Arab Empire that conquered Eg seventh century and crushed with an iron fist the repeated revolts that broke out against its rule. About 10 million Zulus in South Africa ha the Zulu age of glory in the nineteenth century, even though most of them descend from tribes who fought against the Zulu Empire, and were incorporated into it only through bloody military campaigns.

It's for Your Own Good

The first empire about which we have definitive information was the Akkadian Empire of Sargon the Great Sargon began his career as the Kish, a small city state in Mesopotamia. Within a few decades he managed to conquer not only all other Mesopotamian city states, but a territories outside the Mesopotamian heartland. Sargon boasted that he had conquered the entire world. In reality, his dominion stretche Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, and included most of today's Iraq and Syria, along with a few slices of modern Iran and Turkey.

The Akkadian Empire did not last long after its founder's death, but Sargon left behind an imperial mantle that seldom remained uncla the next 1,700 years, Assyrian, Babylonian and Hittite kings adopted Sargon as a role model, boasting that they, too, had conquered the Then, around 550 Cyrus the Great of Persia came along with an even more impressive boast.

Map 4. The Akkadian Empire and the Persian Empire.

Neil Gower

The kings of Assyria always remained the kings of Assyria. Even when they claimed to rule the entire world, it was obvious that they for the greater glory of Assyria, and they were not apologetic about it. Cyrus, on the other hand, claimed not merely to rule the whole wo do so for the sake of all people. 'We are conquering you for your own benefit,' said the Persians. Cyrus wanted the peoples he subjected and to count themselves lucky to be Persian vassals. The most famous example of Cyrus' innovative efforts to gain the approbation of a under the thumb of his empire was his command that the Jewish exiles in Babylonia be allowed to return to their Judaean homeland and their temple. He even offered them financial assistance. Cyrus did not see himself as a Persian king ruling over Jews – he was also the ki Jews, and thus responsible for their welfare.

The presumption to rule the entire world for the benefit of all its inhabitants was startling. Evolution has made Homo like other social mammals, a xenophobic creature. Sapiens instinctively divide humanity into two parts, 'we' and 'they'. We are people like you and me, who share our religion and customs. We are all responsible for each other, but not responsible for them. We were always distinct from them, and owe t nothing. We don't want to see any of them in our territory, and we don't care an iota what happens in their territory. They are barely even the language of the Dinka people of the Sudan, 'Dinka' simply means 'people'. People who are not Dinka are not people. The Dinka's bi are the Nuer. What does the word Nuer mean in Nuer language? It means 'original people'. Thousands of miles from the Sudan deserts ice-lands of Alaska and north-eastern Siberia, live the Yupiks. What does Yupik mean in Yupik language? It means 'real

In contrast with this ethnic exclusiveness, imperial ideology from Cyrus onward has tended to be inclusive and all-encompassing. Eve has often emphasised racial and cultural differences between rulers and ruled, it has still recognised the basic unity of the entire world, t existence of a single set of principles governing all places and times, and the mutual responsibilities of all human beings. Humankind is s large family: the privileges of the parents go hand in hand with responsibility for the welfare of the children.

This new imperial vision passed from Cyrus and the Persians to Alexander the Great, and from him to Hellenistic kings, Roman empe caliphs, Indian dynasts, and eventually even to Soviet premiers and American presidents. This benevolent imperial vision thus justified the existence of empires, and negated not only attempts by subject peoples to rebel, but also attempts by independent peoples to resist imperial expan

Similar imperial visions were developed independently of the Persian model in other parts of the world, most notably in Central Ameri Andean region, and in China. According to traditional Chinese political theory, Heaven is the source of all legitimate authority on earth. H chooses the most worthy person or family and gives them the Mandate of Heaven. This person or family then rules over All Under Heave benefit of all its inhabitants. Thus, a legitimate authority is – by definition – universal. If a ruler lacks the Mandate of Heaven, then he lacks to rule even a single city. If a ruler enjoys the mandate, he is obliged to spread justice and harmony to the entire world. The Mandate of H not be given to several candidates simultaneously, and consequently one could not legitimise the existence of more than one independe

The first emperor of the united Chinese empire, Qín Shǐ Huángdì, boasted that ‘throughout the six directions [of the universe] everything belon to the emperor . . . wherever there is a human footprint, there is not one who did not become a subject [of the emperor] . . . his kindness even oxen and horses. There is not one who did not benefit. Every man is safe under his own In Chinese political thinking as well as Chi historical memory, imperial periods were henceforth seen as golden ages of order and justice. In contradiction to the modern Western vi just world is composed of separate nation states, in China periods of political fragmentation were seen as dark ages of chaos and injusti perception has had far-reaching implications for Chinese history. Every time an empire collapsed, the dominant political theory goaded th that be not to settle for paltry independent principalities, but to attempt reunification. Sooner or later these attempts always succeeded.

When They Become Us

Empires have played a decisive part in amalgamating many small cultures into fewer big cultures. Ideas, people, goods and technology easily within the borders of an empire than in a politically fragmented region. Often enough, it was the empires themselves which deliber spread ideas, institutions, customs and norms. One reason was to make life easier for themselves. It is difficult to rule an empire in which every little district has its own set of laws, its own form of writing, its own language and its own money. Standardisation was a boon to emperors.

A second and equally important reason why empires actively spread a common culture was to gain legitimacy. At least since the days and Qín Shǐ Huángdì, empires have justified their actions – whether road-building or bloodshed – as necessary to spread a superior culture fro which the conquered benefit even more than the conquerors.

The benefits were sometimes salient – law enforcement, urban planning, standardisation of weights and measures – and sometimes questionable – taxes, conscription, emperor worship. But most imperial elites earnestly believed that they were working for the general w all the empire’s inhabitants. China’s ruling class treated their country’s neighbours and its foreign subjects as miserable barbarians to wh empire must bring the benefits of culture. The Mandate of Heaven was bestowed upon the emperor not in order to exploit the world, but i educate humanity. The Romans, too, justified their dominion by arguing that they were endowing the barbarians with peace, justice and refinem The wild Germans and painted Gauls had lived in squalor and ignorance until the Romans tamed them with law, cleaned them up in pub bathhouses, and improved them with philosophy. The Mauryan Empire in the third century BC took as its mission the dissemination of B teachings to an ignorant world. The Muslim caliphs received a divine mandate to spread the Prophet’s revelation, peacefully if possible b sword if necessary. The Spanish and Portuguese empires proclaimed that it was not riches they sought in the Indies and America, but co the true faith. The sun never set on the British mission to spread the twin gospels of liberalism and free trade. The Soviets felt duty-boun facilitate the inexorable historical march from capitalism towards the utopian dictatorship of the proletariat. Many Americans nowadays m that their government has a moral imperative to bring Third World countries the benefits of democracy and human rights, even if these go delivered by cruise missiles and F-16s.

The cultural ideas spread by empire were seldom the exclusive creation of the ruling elite. Since the imperial vision tends to be unive inclusive, it was relatively easy for imperial elites to adopt ideas, norms and traditions from wherever they found them, rather than to stic fanatically to a single hidebound tradition. While some emperors sought to purify their cultures and return to what they viewed as their ro the most part empires have begot hybrid civilisations that absorbed much from their subject peoples. The imperial culture of Rome was G almost as much as Roman. The imperial Abbasid culture was part Persian, part Greek, part Arab. Imperial Mongol culture was a Chines the imperial United States, an American president of Kenyan blood can munch on Italian pizza while watching his favourite film, Lawrence British epic about the Arab rebellion against the Turks.

Not that this cultural melting pot made the process of cultural assimilation any easier for the vanquished. The imperial civilisation may absorbed numerous contributions from various conquered peoples, but the hybrid result was still alien to the vast majority. The process c assimilation was often painful and traumatic. It is not easy to give up a familiar and loved local tradition, just as it is difficult to understand and adopt a new culture. Worse still, even when subject peoples were successful in adopting the imperial culture, it could tal if not centuries, until the imperial elite accepted them as part of ‘us’. The generations between conquest and acceptance were left out in They had already lost their beloved local culture, but they were not allowed to take an equal part in the imperial world. On the contrary, th adopted culture continued to view them as barbarians.

Imagine an Iberian of good stock living a century after the fall of Numantia. He speaks his native Celtic dialect with his parents, but ha impeccable Latin, with only a slight accent, because he needs it to conduct his business and deal with the authorities. He indulges his wi penchant for elaborately ornate baubles, but is a bit embarrassed that she, like other local women, retains this relic of Celtic taste – he’d her adopt the clean simplicity of the jewellery worn by the Roman governor’s wife. He himself wears Roman tunics and, thanks to his suc cattle merchant, due in no small part to his expertise in the intricacies of Roman commercial law, he has been able to build a Roman-sty even though he can recite Book III of Virgil’s *Georgics* by heart, the Romans still treat him as though he’s semi-barbarian. He realises with frustrat that he'll never get a government appointment, or one of the really good seats in the amphitheatre.

In the late nineteenth century, many educated Indians were taught the same lesson by their British masters. One famous anecdote te
ambitious Indian who mastered the intricacies of the English language, took lessons in Western-style dance, and even became accusto
eating with a knife and fork. Equipped with his new manners, he travelled to England, studied law at University College London, and bec
qualified barrister. Yet this young man of law, bedecked in suit and tie, was thrown off a train in the British colony of South Africa for insis
travelling first class instead of settling for third class, where 'coloured' men like him were supposed to ride. His name was Mohandas Kara
Gandhi.

In some cases the processes of acculturation and assimilation eventually broke down the barriers between the newcomers and the o
conquered no longer saw the empire as an alien system of occupation, and the conquerors came to view their subjects as equal to them
Rulers and ruled alike came to see 'them' as 'us'. All the subjects of Rome eventually, after centuries of imperial rule, were granted Rom
citizenship. Non-Romans rose to occupy the top ranks of the officer corps of the Roman legions and were appointed to the Senate. In AD 48 the
emperor Claudius admitted to the Senate several Gallic notables, who, he noted in a speech, through 'customs, culture, and the ties of m
have blended with ourselves'. Snobbish senators protested introducing these former enemies into the heart of the Roman political syste
reminded them of an inconvenient truth. Most of their own senatorial families descended from Italian tribes who once fought against Ro
were later granted Roman citizenship. Indeed, the emperor reminded them, his own family was of Sabine

During the second century AD, Rome was ruled by a line of emperors born in Iberia, in whose veins probably owed at least a few dro
Iberian blood. The reigns of the Iberian emperors – from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius – are often seen as the empire's golden age. After tha
ethnic dams were let down. Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211) was the scion of a Punic family from Libya. Elagabalus (218–22) was
Emperor Philip (244–9) was known colloquially as 'Philip the Arab'. The empire's new citizens adopted Roman imperial culture with such
for centuries and even millennia after the empire itself collapsed, they continued to speak the empire's language, to live by the empire's
believe in the Christian God that the empire had adopted from one of its Levantine provinces.

A similar process occurred in the Arab Empire. When it was established in the mid-seventh century AD, it was based on a sharp divis
the ruling Arab–Muslim elite and the subjugated Egyptians, Syrians, Iranians and Berbers, who were neither Arabs nor Muslim. Many of
subjects gradually adopted the Muslim faith, the Arabic language and a hybrid imperial culture. The old Arab elite looked upon these par
deep hostility, fearing to lose its unique status and identity. The frustrated converts clamoured for an equal share within the empire and i
of Islam. Eventually they got their way. Egyptians, Syrians and Mesopotamians were increasingly seen as 'Arabs'. Arabs, in their turn – w
'authentic' Arabs from Arabia or newly minted Arabs from Egypt and Syria – came to be increasingly dominated by non-Arab Muslims, in
by Iranians, Turks and Berbers. The great success of the Arab imperial project was that the imperial culture it created was wholehearted
by numerous non-Arab people, who continued to uphold it, develop it and spread it – even after the original empire collapsed and the Ar
ethnic group lost their dominion.

In China the success of the imperial project was even more thorough. For more than 2,000 years, a welter of ethnic and cultural grou
termed barbarians were successfully integrated into imperial Chinese culture and became Han Chinese (so named after the Han Empire
China from 206 BC to AD 220). The ultimate achievement of the Chinese Empire is that it is still alive and kicking, yet it is hard to see it a
except in outlying areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang. More than 90 per cent of the population of China are seen by themselves and by oth

We can understand the decolonisation process of the last few decades in a similar way. During the modern era Europeans conquered
the globe under the guise of spreading a superior Western culture. They were so successful that billions of people gradually adopted sig
parts of that culture. Indians, Africans, Arabs, Chinese and Maoris learned French, English and Spanish. They began to believe in huma
the principle of self-determination, and they adopted Western ideologies such as liberalism, capitalism, Communism, feminism and natio

The Imperial Cycle

During the twentieth century, local groups that had adopted Western values claimed equality with their European conquerors in the na
these very values. Many anti-colonial struggles were waged under the banners of self-determination, socialism and human rights, all of w
Western legacies. Just as Egyptians, Iranians and Turks adopted and adapted the imperial culture that they inherited from the original A
conquerors, so today's Indians, Africans and Chinese have accepted much of the imperial culture of their former Western overlords, whi
mould it in accordance with their needs and traditions.

Good Guys and Bad Guys in History

It is tempting to divide history neatly into good guys and bad guys, with all empires among the bad guys. For the vast majority of empires
founded on blood, and maintained their power through oppression and war. Yet most of today's cultures are based on imperial legacies.
are by definition bad, what does that say about us?

There are schools of thought and political movements that seek to purge human culture of imperialism, leaving behind what they clai
authentic civilisation, untainted by sin. These ideologies are at best naïve; at worst they serve as disingenuous window-dressing for cru
nationalism and bigotry. Perhaps you could make a case that some of the myriad cultures that emerged at the dawn of recorded history
untouched by sin and unadulterated by other societies. But no culture since that dawn can reasonably make that claim, certainly no cult
exists now on earth. All human cultures are at least in part the legacy of empires and imperial civilisations, and no academic or political s
cut out the imperial legacies without killing the patient.

Think, for example, about the love–hate relationship between the independent Indian republic of today and the British Raj. The British
and occupation of India cost the lives of millions of Indians, and was responsible for the continuous humiliation and exploitation of hundr
millions more. Yet many Indians adopted, with the zest of converts, Western ideas such as self-determination and human rights, and we

when the British refused to live up to their own declared values by granting native Indians either equal rights as British subjects or indepe

Nevertheless, the modern Indian state is a child of the British Empire. The British killed, injured and persecuted the inhabitants of the subcontinent, but they also united a bewildering mosaic of warring kingdoms, principalities and tribes, creating a shared national conscio a country that functioned more or less as a single political unit. They laid the foundations of the Indian judicial system, created its admini structure, and built the railroad network that was critical for economic integration. Independent India adopted Western democracy, in its incarnation, as its form of government. English is still the subcontinent's lingua franca, a neutral tongue that native speakers of Hindi, Ta Malayalam can use to communicate. Indians are passionate cricket players and chai (tea) drinkers, and both game and beverage are Br Commercial tea farming did not exist in India until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was introduced by the British East India Company snobbish British sahibs who spread the custom of tea drinking throughout the subcontinent.

28. The Chhatrapati Shivaji train station in Mumbai. It began its life as Victoria Station, Bombay. The British built it in the Neo-Gothic style that was popular in late-nineteenth-century Britain. A Hindu nationalist government changed the names of both city and station, but showed no appetite for razing such a magnificent building, even if it was built by foreign oppressors.

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How many Indians today would want to call a vote to divest themselves of democracy, English, the railway network, the legal system, tea on the grounds that they are imperial legacies? And if they did, wouldn't the very act of calling a vote to decide the issue demonstrate to their former overlords?

29. The Taj Mahal. An example of 'authentic' Indian culture, or the alien creation of Muslim imperialism?

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Even if we were to completely disavow the legacy of a brutal empire in the hope of reconstructing and safeguarding the 'authentic' cu preceded it, in all probability what we will be defending is nothing but the legacy of an older and no less brutal empire. Those who resent mutilation of Indian culture by the British Raj inadvertently sanctify the legacies of the Mughal Empire and the conquering sultanate of De whoever attempts to rescue 'authentic Indian culture' from the alien influences of these Muslim empires sanctifies the legacies of the Gupta Empire, the Kushan Empire and the Maurya Empire. If an extreme Hindu nationalist were to destroy all the buildings left by the British conqueror Mumbai's main train station, what about the structures left by India's Muslim conquerors, such as the Taj Mahal?

Nobody really knows how to solve this thorny question of cultural inheritance. Whatever path we take, the first step is to acknowledge complexity of the dilemma and to accept that simplistically dividing the past into good guys and bad guys leads nowhere. Unless, of cou willing to admit that we usually follow the lead of the bad guys.

The New Global Empire

Since around 200 BC, most humans have lived in empires. It seems likely that in the future, too, most humans will live in one. This empi necessarily be ruled by a single country or ethnic group. Like the Late Roman Empire or the Chinese empires, it might be ruled by a mul elite, held together by common interests and a common culture.

In the early twenty-first century, the world is still divided into about 200 states. But none of these states is truly independent. They all d one another. Their economies form a single global network of trade and finance, shaped by immensely powerful currents of capital, labor information. An economic crisis in China or a new technology coming out of the USA can instantaneously disrupt economies on the othe planet.

Cultural trends also spread with lightning speed. Almost everywhere you go, you can eat Indian curry, watch Hollywood movies, play association football or listen to the latest K-pop hit. A multi-ethnic global society is forming over and above the individual states. Entrepre engineers, bankers and scholars throughout the world speak the same language and share similar views and interests.

Most importantly, the 200 states increasingly share the same global problems. Intercontinental ballistic missiles and atom bombs reco borders, and no nation can prevent nuclear war by itself. Climate change, too, threatens the prosperity and survival of all humans, and n government can single-handedly stop global warming.

An even greater challenge is posed by new technologies such as bioengineering and artificial intelligence. As we shall see in the last chapter, these technologies could be used to reengineer not just our weapons and vehicles, but even our bodies and minds. Indeed, they could b create completely new types of life forms and change the future course of evolution. Who will decide what to do with such divine powers creation?

It is unlikely that humankind can deal with these challenges without global cooperation. It remains to be seen how such cooperation c secured. Perhaps global cooperation can only be secured through violent clashes and the imposition of a new conquering empire. Perha could find a more peaceful way to unite. For 2,500 years since Cyrus the Great, numerous empires have promised to build a universal po for the benefit of all humans. They all lied, and they all failed. No empire was truly universal, and no empire really served the benefit of all Will a future empire do better?