

*Empires between
Islam and Christianity
1500-1800*

Sanjay Subrahmanyam
Albany (NY) SUNY Press 2019
[ISBN 9781438474359]

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This newly published work by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Empires between Islam and Christianity 1500-1800*, benefits from the decades-long devotion of the author to the study of empires. Starting with the Portuguese empire in Asia, Subrahmanyam has progressively broadened his interest to the Mughal, the Ottoman and the Ming empires. In his latest work, he not only offers a sample of his published research – ten of the eleven chapters are revisions of essays that have appeared in the last ten years – but also endeavours to give a coherent and comprehensive view of his reflections on empires.

Breaking with the single-empire framework that has characterised the bulk of works on this theme, Subrahmanyam insists that historians should take into account the connections between empires, as the majority of them existed not «in lonely splendour» but «in a wider inter-imperial context» (pp. 2-3). The book, then, is a successful attempt to address the theme of empires from the perspective of “connected histories”. As Subrahmanyam states, the aim of “connected histories” is to bypass those conventional and often arbitrary geographical and spatial divisions that have become dominant in the historiography, given their aprioristic implications. The intention is therefore to look for connections – when they are present – in order to design, on a case-by-case basis, new and perhaps unexpected geographies that could offer fresh vantage points from which to survey the phenomena under investigation. These chapters brilliantly show the potential of «connected histories» in current historical debates, as a method that is well-suited to different geographical scales, besides the global, and that can be fruitfully combined with other methodological approaches, ranging from micro- and macro-history to intellectual history.

But what is an empire? Although providing a strict definition appears to be difficult and somehow misleading, Subrahmanyam agrees with Anthony Pagden’s view on the few pivotal elements that characterise empires. In particular, what makes empires one of those «major sites of reflection» of historians and histories – namely a small group of concepts around which, according to Subrahmanyam, people have organized their comprehension of reality in different epochs and parts of the world –

is their «size» and their consequential tendency to be cosmopolitan, albeit not often “liberal”, political systems. Because of their great territorial extent, all empires were called to rule over people of different religions, languages, and customs, and each of those empires proved able to cope with the intrinsic challenges of such diversity. A new image of empires as political actors that were able to develop a rich and varied array of political, institutional and cultural strategies allows us to dispense with a monolithic and simplistic vision of imperial history, based on settlement and economic exploitation, in which empires coincide with colonial powers.

Subrahmanyam thus charts the irreducible complexity of these diverse imperial experiences. As he points out in his first chapter, the main issues that he wishes to address and to analyse throughout the book are threefold: a problem of «synchronicity», one of «diachrony», and the «passage» from empires to nation-states. As regards the synchronic issues, Subrahmanyam maintains that account should be taken of the wide array of institutions and policies that the same empire could adopt in different parts of its territory, on a case-by-case basis. For example, regarding the Portuguese empire, the author examines the varying attitudes held by the Portuguese toward their Asian and Brazilian territories, and the image he offers us of that empire is one of «a composite politico-fiscal system» (p. 147). In this fashion, it would be easier to understand «the very different trajectories followed by societies in Asia and America in face of European empire-building projects» (p. 3), namely the reasons why the same empire had very different long-term effects on the various territories under its rule.

Not only does Subrahmanyam offer a useful epistemological instrument by which to recast or reset the study of empires, but he also challenges the ideological assumption whereby early modern empires are seen as archaic political structures. Most historians nowadays agree that there is a clear watershed between the empires of the early-modern period and those established after 1750, between an Iberian imperialism deemed to be obsolete, intolerant and oppressive, and the purportedly liberal, secular Anglo-French imperialism that arose after the Enlightenment – say, an «empire of liberty» (p. 188). Against this teleological and ideological bias, Subrahmanyam invites us to reconsider the continuities between the early-modern and modern empires and to face this diachronic problem in a different way. If we are accustomed to think of the *translatio imperii* as an ideological, political and institutional legacy extending over time and entailing a linkage between different empires, Subrahmanyam invites us to take a broader view, and to envisage a “transfer of imperial models and notions” (p. 114) crossing the porous borders of multiple empires both chronologically and geographically.

At the same time, the putative archaism of empires must be related to the likewise putative, and somehow complementary, “modernity” of the nation-states. In Subrahmanyam’s view, nation-states are, like empires, both a concrete historical and political realisation and one of those «major sites of reflection» through which people

have in the past read and still do read the world. It is no wonder that nation-states, as a historical-geographical category, appear to be one of Subrahmanyam's main targets. Not only are they an anachronistic tool to analyse the early-modern world, but they also constitute the Trojan horse of an – unfortunately – not wholly superseded idea that serves to link modernity with European society. Forged in Europe, the nation-state, or so the argument went, would have progressively spread across the world bringing with it, in the guise of a new Prometheus, the torch of modernity. Against this Eurocentric exceptionalism and its ideological implications, Subrahmanyam rejects the idea of a monopolistic and unidirectional «transition between the world of empires and that of nation-states» (p. 14) in order to show how empires, and of course not only the European ones, were also themselves able to foster certain political and institutional strategies that brought about the birth of nation-states. So, for example, in chapter six the comparison between the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Mughal empires leads Subrahmanyam to identify three models of empire, namely the colonial model, the empire founded on toleration and on a decentralization based upon respect for the customary privileges of its various regions, and, lastly, the empire built on an institutional centralisation that allowed non-Muslim peoples to be included in a trans-religious élite sharing a common Persian culture. According to the author, this last «politics of élite integration» (p. 183) can explain why, some centuries later, in those territories that were once under the Mughal empire a united nation-state – namely the Republic of India – was born, instead of the myriad nation-states that replaced the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires. In other words, as different models of empire existed, so too were the «longer-term trajectories for political institutions that they produced» (p. 150) divergent, as of course were the nation-states that sprung from those empires.

To analyse more closely the structure of the book, after chapter one – which serves as a theoretical introduction – it can be divided into three main parts. The first part – which comprises chapters two, three and four – deals with the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* in the first decades of the sixteenth century, covering a range of different problems and adopting various different geographical scales. Chapter two addresses the macro-problem of the so-called first “long decade” of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean (1498-1509). Its aim is to investigate the reasons and the extent to which the original Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean was able to change the commercial and political equilibrium both locally and, through the opening of the new Cape Route, in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Subrahmanyam stresses the limited ability of the Portuguese to realise locally the projects designed in Lisbon. While in Lisbon the king, Dom Manuel, was interested in building new fortresses in the Indian Ocean in order to interdict the trade with the Red Sea, locally the viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeria opted for a “minimalistic” intervention, aimed at the control of spice production in Cochin and Malabar. Moreover, Subrahmanyam approaches critically the testimony of fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Venetian sources regarding

the destructive consequences of the new Cape Route on the Venetian spice trade – a theory that too many historians have uncritically accepted. Drawing on the work of Jean Aubin, the author shows that the decline of the spice trade in the eastern Mediterranean was in fact linked to the political crises in Yemen and in Hijaz which at that date were having a devastating impact on the commerce in the Red Sea, the main route between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

This leads the author to identify two problematic aspects of the initial Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, which he develops in the following chapters: on the one hand the importance of knowledge – namely, the pivotal role of people who were able to provide pieces of information about the Indian Ocean as well as supervising logistical arrangements to strengthen the imperial presence on the territory – on the other hand the emergence within the empire of various contrasting voices “from below”, namely groups with different interests. In chapter three, through the life of the Corsican galley builder Sylvestro Corco and his family, the author analyses the role played by Italians and Corsicans – communities whose presence in the Indian Ocean had already been consolidated during the Middle Ages – in the emerging Portuguese empire, pointing out on the one hand the Italians’ inability to establish their own power in Asia and, on the other hand, the importance of their know-how for the new Portuguese empire. In chapter four the author moves on to analyse the discontent and the opposed interests of local social groups – namely the Asian merchants of Melaka and the so-called Portuguese *casados moranodres* – and their dialectical relationship with the Portuguese Crown.

In the second part of the book, Subrahmanyam addresses the already mentioned theme of the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of institutional, political and ideological arrangements from one empire to another. In chapter five he focuses on the Spanish and Portuguese empires in order to show how, already before the Iberian Union of 1580, the borders of these two empires were highly porous. Subrahmanyam thereby suggests that the extent to which the Spanish and Portuguese empires influenced one another, the strong commercial, cultural and institutional links that connected these two imperial systems over time can explain the difficulties that arose in these two empires after the Restoration of 1640, because «disentangling a congeries of assets and projects that had become thoroughly entwined proved to be not a simple matter» (p. 148). In the already mentioned chapter six and in chapter seven – a chapter coauthored with Anthony Pagden –, Subrahmanyam tries to outline some examples of long-lasting political and institutional legacies of empires. Here, Subrahmanyam highlights the importance of the Spanish and, even more, the Portuguese examples for the birth of the British empire in India by stressing the continuities between these imperial experiences, for example the sharing of the same sources of legitimation.

The last four chapters focus on some forms and strategies through which peoples across the world have shaped their – factual and fictional – world. The birth

of “world history” as a new historiographical genre in the sixteenth century is investigated in chapter eight, while in chapter nine the author analyses the contemporary tendency of both Christian and Islamic culture to delight in the representation of wonders and monsters. All such examples indicate a need to write a truly global intellectual history, a project discussed in chapter ten. Arguing for the fashioning of a new atlas, one featuring a multiplicity of «cross-cutting intellectual networks» (p. 24), the author adumbrates an intellectual history in which ideas do not exist in a vacuum but move along the trails followed by real people and cross borders with them. In other words, we have to reconstruct the intellectual networks in which ideas moved during the Early Modern period across the borders of empires, throughout the world.

Thus, in the final chapter the author shows how “Asia” itself can be seen not only as a geographical space in which historical connections and clashes between different imperial projects occurred, but also as a cultural creation born of the stratification of antagonistic ideologies. When in 1730 Philip Johan Von Strahlenberg moved the borders of Asia towards the Urals, he was, above all, redefining a European identity: the deeper the gap between ourselves and the “other”, the more stable our own identity would be.

Much food for thought is in this way provided by Subrahmanyam’s book, and the implications of his reading about empires in the Early Modern age are manifold. For example, particular attention should be paid to Subrahmanyam’s concern to underline the very different ways in which nation-states were born, not only from the aggregation of pre-existing polities, but also from the empires that preceded them. If some nation-states can be seen as heirs of the empires’ multi-ethnic character, others coincide only with the old imperial centre, and still others are a consequence of the fragmentation of empires into smaller political units. From this point of view, one can ask if this book might also be seen as an attempt, albeit partial, to address a long-lasting historiographical problem that so far has been underestimated by Global History and more generally by scholarly works on empires, that is, the nature of the state in the Early Modern period. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, the supposed crisis of the national state has revived the historiographical debate on the nation-state and its origins. Some participants in that debate see the national-states as a natural development of early-modern states, while others, being resolutely opposed to this teleological vision, stress the discontinuities of those political institutions. But, in either case, even if the crisis of the national-state is often linked to nascent globalisation, the analyses of the early-modern state are still centred on European events, and barely anything has been said about what happened outside Europe. By looking beyond Europe, by «detaching the history of the state from its European trajectory and

focusing on the multiple connections between states and empires across the world»,¹ as Giuseppe Marocci pointed out some years ago, it should be possible to add complexity to our view of the birth of the state and to recast in a different light this historiographical issue. Subrahmanyam's reflections about the manifold transitions from a «world of empires» to that of nation-states can bring new life to this debate, although the image that he suggests of an early-modern world as «a patchwork of competing and intertwined empires, punctuated by the odd interloper in the forms of a nascent “nation-state”» (p. 113) still cannot explain the essence, the peculiar nature of the state in the Early Modern age, unless one is willing to see the Early Modern state as a political form teleologically directed towards the nation-state.

What is certain is that, thanks to his use of «connected histories» as a starting point for the study of empires, and to the wide range of primary sources which he has drawn upon – including texts of different languages and less usual sources such as the tombstones of Agra's Christian graveyard or maps – to create a useful antidote to teleology, Subrahmanyam manages brilliantly to bypass aprioristic historiographical and geographical categories with their heuristic bias and ideological implications. At the same time, broadening the geographical scale of inquiry means that the reader must leave her or his “intellectual – too often Eurocentric – comfort zone” and deal with unfamiliar «terms such as *rasa*, *dhvani*, *ziker*». In other words, this book is a plea to expand our own «conceptual vocabularies, to take on board new and unfamiliar concepts (and even whole conceptual constellations)» (p. 343) in order to reject sterile and simplistic explanations of irreducibly complex historical phenomena, and to overcome boundaries that sometimes exist only in our own imaginations.

¹ GIUSEPPE MAROCCI, “Too Much to Rule: States and Empires across the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 511–25.