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PROJECT

Postcolonial Empires: Imperialism and the Politics of Identity in a World of Nation-States

This project addresses the continuing role and meaning of empire in a world that is formally postcolonial and post-imperial. It examines historically the transformation of the notion of empire from a claim made by rulers to legitimate control into a claim made by those opposing rulers about the illegitimacy of control centered around the violation of norms of sovereignty and self-determination. It then probes the contested boundary between empire and nation-state in a world in which the term empire is widely understood as a pejorative, in which international norms recognize colonialism and alien rule as the basis for legitimate claims to independent statehood, and in which no state would openly admit to imperial intent. As a result of the rise of international norms of sovereignty and self-determination, modes of large-scale control have shifted so as to blur the boundaries between empire and nation-state, as states aiming to extend or consolidate their control utilize norms of sovereignty and self-determination as ways of structuring control in order to avoid the appearance of empire. Moreover, recognition of authority as imperial is itself an act of resistance. Based on constructivist approaches to the study of identity politics, the project seeks to rethink what empires are in a post-imperial world, how they emerge, why they collapse or disappear, and what follows after them.

Recommended Reading

Beissinger, Mark. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Beissinger, Mark and Crawford Young, eds. *Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia Compared*. Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Beissinger, Mark. "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11, 2 (April-June 1995): 149-184.

COLLOQUIUM, 26.06.2006

The Nature of the Contemporary Imperial Complaint: Empire in a Post-Imperial World of Sovereignty and Self-Determination

Among other projects, I have been working at WIKO on a book about what I call "post-imperial empire." The project is an attempt to come to grips with the persistence of empire in a world in which empires, at least formally, are not supposed to exist, and how this international normative context affects the nature of the imperial

phenomenon. My central argument is that international norms of sovereignty and self-determination have shaped the meaning and practice of empire in the modern era, transforming the notion of empire into a pejorative, altering the persona of empire's constituent units, changing the behaviors which we identify as imperial, and affecting the ways by which states go about practicing foreign domination. I argue that these fundamental changes in what empires are as a practical category of politics should affect the ways in which we think about empire in the analytical realm, pushing us to a more relational approach to the study of empire and causing us to think about contemporary empire as more than simply a structure, but also as a practice, a claim, and (especially) a reputation. Such a relational approach has implications, I argue, not only for how we identify imperial phenomena, but also for how we explain their emergence, operation, and transcendence.

In its most generic sense, empire can be defined as a large-scale system of foreign domination. But the dilemma of relating similar but not identical things is acutely felt when we talk about imperial phenomena across history. I will discuss the relationship between empire as a shifting practical category of politics and empire as an analytical concept, drawing an analogy with the study of nations and nationalism. I will then focus on four shifts in modern politics that transformed empire from a practice centered around conquest, a claim made by rulers to legitimate control, and a matter of prestige into a practice centered around hierarchical subordination and arbitrary power, a claim made by those opposing a particular rule, and a reputation that states deny and seek to avoid: the rise of norms of state sovereignty; the emergence of nationalism as a form of legitimation; the democratization of imperial states; and the success of decolonization movements in the mid-twentieth century. After examining the linkages between these changes and the shifting practice and meaning of empire, I will turn to demonstrate the specific qualities and practices associated with the imperial complaint today through a content-analysis of more than 2,000 newspaper articles raising accusations of empire against contemporary states or international organizations. I will conclude by reflecting on the implications of empire as practice, claim, and reputation for thinking about the alternatives and counterfactuals to empire and the problems associated with how states overcome established reputations as empire. Throughout the talk, I will provide illustrations from the experiences of two post-imperial states that gained widespread reputations as empires in the post-imperial era: the Soviet Union and the United States.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Beissinger, Mark R. (2007)

Structure and example in modular political phenomena : the diffusion of bulldozer/rose/orange/tulip revolutions

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1047120585>

Beissinger, Mark R. (Cambridge [u.a.],2002)

Nationalist mobilization and the collapse of the Soviet State

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=338105980>

Cambridge studies in comparative politics

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=338105980>

Beissinger, Mark R. (Washington, DC,2002)

Beyond state crisis? : postcolonial Africa and post-Soviet Eurasia in comparative perspective

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African studies, Post-Soviet studies

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Beissinger, Mark R. (Boulder, Colo. [u.a.],1990)

The nationalities factor in Soviet politics and society

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Beissinger, Mark R. (Cambridge, Mass.,1988)

Scientific management, socialist discipline, and Soviet power

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