

**Interview with Jane BURBANK
and Frederick COOPER**

**THE CHALLENGE AND SERENDIPITY
OF WRITING WORLD HISTORY
THROUGH THE PRISM OF EMPIRE***

Ab Imperio (AI): We welcome Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper to the *Ab Imperio* series of conversations with authors, which in past years has hosted a number of scholars, including Carl Schorske, Benedict Anderson, and Clifford Geertz, whose work and insights have been central for new imperial history. So, thank you for agreeing to give an interview and present your new book to *Ab Imperio* readers.¹ This is certainly a very important book in many respects. Now we have a book to assign to students, one that will be a tremendous help to those who teach history of empires, world history, or global history as well as the history of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Now we have a book that aspires to make sense of world history from the truly comparative and entangled perspective of the history of empires. This book is a challenge in a good way. It requires rereading, going back and forth between the methodological section and historical chapters. The book is rich in insights and we're sure it will generate different readings. So, we would like to start with your own reading of the book. In your view, what is the most important intellectual experiment you have done or the

* Interviewers: Marina Mogilner, Alexander Semyonov, and Ilya Gerasimov.

¹ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper. *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

most important finding that you have discovered in the process of writing the book? How did you conceive of the structure of the book and how did you select the cases of imperial political formations in world history for your analysis?

Jane BURBANK (JB): Why don't we start with the question of our reading of the book and the kinds of things we wanted people to get out of it. One major goal was to avoid a very widespread notion we were taught in our youth as graduate students—the notion that world history is about transition from empire to nation-state. We wanted to show in this book that this view does not correspond to historical reality; that the history of most of the world is about big complex polities that are not based on a single national group; and that intersections and conflicts, contests and competitions among these big empires is what accounts for a great deal of change and dynamism in the world.

Frederick COOPER (FC): What we tried to do in the book is not simply to present an argument along the lines that Jane has just outlined, but to *do* the history. So the book in large part is narrative. It is telling stories. But it is telling stories based around a particular way of seeing world history. We think that to convince people who are skeptical about our overall conception we need to tell the story in a coherent way and in the way that covers two thousand years of world history.

JB: Another goal of ours was to tell a *world* history. As you mentioned it is impossible to tell the history of every empire in the world, particularly because most of the world was concerned with empires for most of the time, ever since people created political formations. We had to choose among empires in order to tell a coherent story so that people could read the book in a reasonable number of days. We do not try to cover all of human historical time. But we did have some goals with regard to our selection of historic empires. One of them was to avoid a Euro-centric position. That is, not to focus on European, overseas, nineteenth-century empires as does, for example, most of colonial studies. While we wanted our work to engage people who are working in colonial and postcolonial studies, we wanted to put their field of research into a longer term historical perspective and into a much wider geographical perspective. Another goal was to avoid a modernist perspective. We do not think that you can understand European colonial expansion as a unique historical event. Europeans were not doing something entirely new. By telling a story of empire that starts two thousand plus years ago and begins not just with Rome, which is the conventional approach, but

with China, too – these are the first pair of empires in our narrative – we hope that we tell a more worldly story of diverse imperial settings.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): A quick question: is there a particular reason that Athens is not included in your narrative?

FC: The question is why we did not start earlier. We could have started earlier than Athens, we could have started with Egypt.

JB: Or with the Assyrians. Unfortunately, every reader whose favorite empire is not included in the book may get offended.

FC: The choice is really a writer's choice, not a historian's choice, anyway. The question is how does one write a coherent book? I think it would be quite legitimate to start earlier than we did. But by starting with Rome and China we take on two ways of doing empire that had a great deal of influence on the histories that ensued. The line becomes harder to trace if one pushes back earlier. But with Rome and China we have important models of empire that happened to be extremely durable. So that is why we decided to start where we did.

JB: Of course, this book went through many, many, many drafts. Much of the revision had to do with cutting things out. One of the things we cut out was a section on Alexander the Great. In earlier drafts there was a description of Alexander, and what he learned from the Persians in the territories that he conquered. Many themes we were interested in could have been illustrated by Alexander's story. But we decided in the end just to make the simple, but important point that his empire died with him.

AI (Ilya Gerasimov): Both the Roman and Chinese empires are considered classical, perhaps because the languages of self-description of a polity as empire were elaborated by the Romans and the Chinese.

JB: Both of them bequeathed to us a long-term literature about themselves and, through it, a consciousness about empire. As a colleague of ours, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite,² reminds us, the Assyrians did not leave the kind of textual legacy the Romans and the Chinese produced, though they may have made an enormous imprint on the world. There are ongoing arguments about who invented the gridded city, who invented the outside borders of states,

² Associate professor of history, Department of History, New York University. A specialist in world history, Chinese history, Islam in Asia, and religious minorities in world history. His recent books include: *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History*. Oxford, 2009; *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA, 2005.

who invented the title “king of kings.” These are important questions for scholars and for world history, but we did not have sufficient information to work with them. On the other hand, as Fred said, we see quite clearly the influence of the Roman and Chinese models going forward in time. Still, we’re not arguing that the Romans and the Chinese are the only empires that made major impacts on the world.

AI (Marina Mogilner): Are you then suggesting that your book can be a model of a course for students that can replace the old-fashioned Western Civilization course, but also enter the competition with the now rising paradigms of global history and transnational history?

AI (Alexander Semyonov): Perhaps, to add to this question I wanted to return to Fred’s remark. You said that it is the writer’s choice of how to tell the story not the historian’s choice but, arguably, the work of historians is not so different from that of writers, because history is a narrative, construction, and representation. So as you construct a new interpretation and narrative you do enter the dialogue or competition with other attempts to rethink history and suggest alternative ways of telling the story.

AI (Marina Mogilner): At this very moment, there is another wave of attempts to rethink and revise Western Civilization courses. I recently read an article by Ted Weeks in *NewsNet*, the publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.³ He says that he is writing a chapter on Europe for a new edition of a Western Civilization textbook. What is interesting is that Ted Weeks is a historian who has studied European borderlands and the margins of Europe and he is the one writing the chapter on Europe. In his view, this is a revolutionary moment – at which he broadens the narrative of Europe and the educational horizon of U.S. students by bringing in strange-sounding East European names and historical realities of European borderlands.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): In short, are you rethinking or unthinking the Western Civilization course?

JB: We want to go further, much further.

FC: The Western Civilization course has been under attack for decades. I myself took a Western Civilization course when I was an undergraduate in 1965 at Stanford University. Eventually, that course at Stanford was replaced

³ Theodore Weeks. “Western Civilization” and Russian/“Eastern European” History // *NewsNet*. 2010. Vol. 50. No. 2. Pp. 7-10. The association has recently been renamed as the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

by a kind of *smörgåsbord* of different options and different places around the world. In other words, people gave up on coherence, especially those who no longer accepted the Eurocentrist aspects of the Western Civilization course. People also gave up on the coherence of any large synthesis. The more recent trend has been to try to write global history. And there have been quite successful attempts to do that – a couple of which we cite in our sources at the end [of the book]. We see our book as complementary to that effort rather than as competitive.

AI (Marina Mogilner): It is complementary. It is not an attempt to offer a new version of global history.

FC: People who are doing global history have committed themselves to recounting the whole of world history, including all the diverse elements that make up historical processes. What we are doing here is focusing on political history. Ours is an explicitly political history book. It is not an economic history book or a cultural history book. We are focusing on particular problems of state structure without trying to say that these are the only or even the principal questions of global history encompassing everything. That gives us the freedom to take certain threads and follow them across two thousand years. People who say they are doing world history do not have that freedom. So, we could see a course using one of these quite good world history books that also assigns our book, so that students could get a perspective encompassing a large span of time that also helps them to think in a different way about a set of problems.

JB: As you know there is an active organization of world history in the United States.⁴ But people who are teaching world history have discovered that teaching world history, that is, teaching about everything, is impossible. In other words trying to be encyclopedic is impossible. One way the story often turns out if you teach world history is that a slice of what is going on at a particular time in one part of the world is juxtaposed with a narrative about the same time in another part of the world with no idea about whether these phenomena are connected or not or what causes them. Spreading out space tends to reify time. Saying that in the first century this happened and in the year 1000 this happened, seems to make time itself a causal factor for what happens in the world. One thing that we tried to do in the book is to show that there were many connections and competitions that had an impact on likenesses and differences, but not to reify time as a factor in itself that makes things happen. We have taught this book, in draft, to undergraduates

⁴ The World History Association (<http://www.thewha.org/>).

and we also teach it in a graduate course. We think the book can be read at very different levels. We have learned from our students what works and what does not. We have also found that undergraduates are very receptive to the story as it is told.

AI (Marina Mogilner): Connecting this question about the theoretical framework and narrative and the fact that the book will be read by different audiences, we would like to ask you a question about your methodology. It seems to us that your methodology of treating “empires” as political regimes of managing diversity is very interesting and offers a synthesis of the most recent approaches in the field of imperial history. You refuse to apply binary classifications (modern vs. premodern, overseas vs. land-based empires). You introduce an analytical framework that treats both empire and nation as ideal types, as models of integrationist polities, one of which strives for homogenization, while the other attempts to manage diversity. You also focus on the political repertoire of managing diversity and on the role of imperial intermediaries. It seems that such an innovative theoretical approach requires a new, different kind of narrative. Yet, you produced a book that is easy to read and still very much driven by a chronological narrative of the historic experience of empires. Did you experience any difficulties with translating your theoretical insights into the narrative? Are you satisfied with the outcomes of that transfer? If it were not for the demands of the academic market and genre, how would you see an ideal textbook about empires in world history?

FC: Let me start with the first part of your question about the difficulty of doing this book project. This question connects to the history of this project, which began as a graduate course we taught at the University of Michigan in 1999. We taught a one year-long graduate course called “Empires, States, and Political Imagination”. The first semester of this course consisted of reading other historians who wrote on a series of discrete topics in the history of empires. In the second semester students did research projects of their own. In that course we had explicit concerns of dealing with theory and historiography. Every session focused on a certain problem in historiography or theoretical analysis. After we moved to New York University in 2002 we taught this course again as a stand-alone one-semester course. Then in 2004 we decided to take on a different task – to teach an undergraduate version of the course and not only an undergraduate, but a beginning undergraduate course, that is, without prerequisites.

JB: We should say why we chose to do this undergraduate course because it relates to your question. After teaching this course to three or four sets

of graduate students at two different universities we found (this does not happen anymore) that at the end of the course, having gone through all the sophisticated literature, having explored things in different ways, having tried to get our message across, some of the graduate students kept coming back and asking: “But where are the colonizer and the colonized?” – exactly the binary that we had been trying to get away from, about which Fred has written in *Tensions of Empire*.⁵ And this after we had tried in these graduate courses to emphasize the role of intermediaries that became one of the threads of the book. At the end of the course graduate students were still asking questions about what they thought they knew at the beginning. Of course, many scholars want to find something that they think exists, rather than looking for or allowing themselves to find something new. So at that moment we said to ourselves, we have to get to beginners in history if we want to get our message across.

AI (Marina Mogilner): To educate a graduate student for yourselves.

JB: Yes perhaps, and something in fact seemed to happen because recently graduate students have become much more receptive to our ideas although they are not the same people who took our undergraduate course. Anyway, this is why we started to teach undergraduates.

FC: In any case, the real challenge for us began when we decided to teach an undergraduate course because then we not only had to do the historiography, we in fact had to do history. Because at this beginning undergraduate level, given the nature of American high schools, most students knew nothing about the topics we were talking about. We had to tell them a historical story and the story had to make sense to them. At that point we started writing lectures that traced historical processes over time. And we had to teach the entire course in one semester. That is to say, we were dealing from the start with quite severe constraints. But there were also the constraints of our own knowledge. Sometimes we were 48 hours ahead of our student in figuring our stories out.

JB: Sometimes we were three hours ahead of our students in this!

FC: So that’s when we started thinking about our tasks in terms of what became the structure of the book. As we worked on the book, we started to operate under another set of constraints – the publisher’s ideas about what the book could be. Of course, these ideas were not entirely arbitrary, and

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper (Eds.). *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley, 1997.

the publishers are not necessarily wrong about people being impatient with long books. This book weighs 1.4 kilos and we may well have exceeded the patience and lifting capacity of many potential readers. So as you see we always operated under constraints, but writing a book without constraints may be equivalent to writing a book without readers. We had to try to find some middle ground that allowed us to talk about a certain degree of complexity as you are suggesting, but in a way that was still accessible to people who are at the beginning of thinking about history, not after five years of doing so.

JB: I'd like to go back to the question on the origins of the project and the relationship between the theoretical take and the narrative. When we started our very first project, our international seminar, we issued a call. Its title was: "Empires, States and Political Imagination." We were already thinking about empires and political imagination; in other words, it was the political that we were concerned about. Our very first description of this project said something like "throughout history people have lived in states with others not like themselves." The idea of difference was there. But it was not articulated in the same way as it was articulated at the end of the project. We held that first international seminar in conjunction with our graduate course in 1999–2000. Readers of *Ab Imperio* would be interested to know that when we issued the seminar call we got a lot of responses, some from very famous people, some from people who were not famous at all, and I think we turned down a few famous people and made a few enemies. But the interesting thing is where the applications came from. A lot of them were from people working on Russia and Eastern Europe, as well as Africanists. Maybe it had to do with our interests and people who knew us, but we sent the call everywhere, to various centers and institutes all over the world, we put it on the Internet. But we got many applications from people in Russia, and from the CEU.⁶ Elena Vorob'eva visiting from St. Petersburg was an assistant in our course.⁷ We got a lot of input from the people we did not know, as well as from colleagues at the University of Michigan and from people with whom we were already in touch. So there was a real openness at the beginning of the project. The students were reading debates about empire in a particular period, but they were also listening to people who were doing research in different fields. Willard Sunderland gave a paper on the Russian monument in Kazan as part of his stay.⁸ We

⁶ Central European University in Budapest, Hungary.

⁷ Elena Campbell, now assistant professor at University of Washington, Seattle.

⁸ Willard Sunderland. *Commemorating Conquest: The Story of a Russian Imperial Shrine* / A seminar paper.

learned a lot from our colleagues through this project and we restructured the project as we went along. In the first variant we focused on the Chinese empire only for the period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and not earlier. It was only as we worked on a longer-term narrative that we realized it was absolutely essential to start with the early Chinese empires. We were not taking a theory and then finding the parts of world history that fit. We were taking an approach and a question about political imagination and then taking in information and learning from other scholars and only then putting pieces together into the story.

AI (Marina Mogilner): I would like to clarify my question. Your book opens with a methodological chapter, which, it has to be added, was translated and published in *Ab Imperio*.⁹ Then each chapter opens with a little introduction that is also of a methodological nature. This provides a way to look at the period and interpret the given case study. And then you have case studies of imperial formations that are collated in an interesting, thought-provoking, and experimental way. Still, you have a structural division between the methodological part and the narrative part. This division presupposed the translation of a methodological framework into the structure of the narrative. Are you satisfied with how this translation occurred and are you satisfied with how the theoretical insights are implemented in the form of historical narration and comparative case studies?

FC: Well, time will tell. We have to see how readers react to the way we put the book together. We've tried to weave our argument into narrative rather than letting structural determinants shape what we do. What we tried to do is to change the focal length as we went through the book. So that the different dimensions we outline in the introduction can be dealt with. We have a series of chapter that are pairs: for example, the chapter on Ancient Rome and China or the one that compares nineteenth-century Russia with the nineteenth-century United States. Then we have chapters that you might say are intersections. The first chapter in the book on the Roman and Chinese empires is about empires that have practically nothing to do with one another. Their histories are completely autonomous. The next chapter is entirely about the intersection. The chapter is on the Byzantine, Islamic, and Carolingian empires that existed in the post-Roman space and shaped the development of each other. This chapter on intersections emphasizes a different theme that is not present at all in the introductory chapter. In terms of the structure of the

⁹ Jane Burbank, Frederick Cooper. *Traektorii imperii // Ab Imperio*. 2007. No. 4. Pp. 47-85.

book we have some pairings of empires that are comparative; some chapters that focus on intersections between empires; and still some pairings that are intersecting, particularly the one between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs. In the last case, the reigns of Charles V and Suleiman the Magnificent were almost to the year contemporaneous and they were each other's biggest enemy. And in that case you see two styles of empires that were very much influencing each other. In this way, by changing focal lengths we try to bring out different dimensions of the themes we present in the introduction.

JB: I think in good books introductions are not written first, before the next chapters. It was only over time, as we worked on chapters of the book, that we decided how to pair these cases of empire in these different ways that Fred described. It is also over time that we articulated major themes of the book. We sat down and talked to each other and said "what we are really emphasizing is imperial repertoires" or "what we are really looking at is trajectories of empires." Coming up with major themes of the book allowed us to write this introduction.

Marina Mogilner asked about what we are not satisfied with. We will have to see if people accept this reimagining and representation of world history. For us, once you see things as empires – once you understand that nineteenth-century Europe was about contentions among empires and about empires; that Germany made itself an empire in 1871; that the nineteenth century was not about nation-states – historical developments make a lot more sense. One could argue that we had to write too much about nation-state in the introduction because we were trying to counter a dominant narrative. This narrative in our view is inadequate, but still we had to discuss it. If people accept our argument then the second version of this book could make less of an argument about why not nation-state and make a more complex argument about political formations.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): It is very interesting to learn that in the process you as authors encountered things unexpected and made findings that were not projected. You mentioned that your call was unexpectedly answered by specialists in Russian and East European history. Of course you can write a world history without Russia being a case at all and we know many instances of that. So my question is what specifically the Russian case (not just any other peripheral empire) brings to the book. How would your book and argument have been different without the Russian case?

JB: The Russian case presents a series of states – imperially based political units – whose history is shaped by a variety of imperial experi-

ences, layered one on top of another, assimilated, and transformed: Kiev, a would-be empire, a state for a while that later fails, then Muscovy leading into imperial Russia, and then leading into the Soviet Union. So the Russian case is ideal for showing the impact of empires, their cultures, and political practices. We see the merging of Byzantine and hence Roman and Christian imperial cultures with, if you speak about Kiev, the practices of the Rus', who had already absorbed Eurasian, steppe, Turkic, nomadic imperial cultures – remember that the Rus' who founded Kiev had already been influenced by their journey down the Volga and their encounter with steppe peoples. Then there is Muscovy, whose princes become powerful as clients of the Golden Horde, absorbing administrative tactics and serving the Mongol Khan. Ivan the Terrible was both a khan and a tsar (Caesar).¹⁰ Russian history is shaped by layering in, taking from, transforming (not transferring), and molding imperial traditions. And the next layer is, of course, the West European layer. And now, we have a maybe quick thin American layer. If you take an imperial perspective on Russia, Russia ceases to be a mystery. If you stay fixated on a European normalcy, you may find Russia puzzling because it is not living up to or fitting European standards. People pose these questions about not fitting because they have a single normative model of a polity. But if you look at history as a transforming process, you can see that Russia as a political organization has had the capacity to bring in imperial traditions, merge them, and recreate them in its own way. From this kind of imperial perspective, we can understand why, for example, the tradition of state-given law in Russia does not seem to fit European notions of “rule of law.” We know what were at certain points the particular models for Russian state law. One could say that Russian law did not come out right according to some Western and European standard. But say instead: because of Russia's ongoing and transformative administrative-political culture, there were certain things that were incorporated flexibly into the tradition of Russian state law, and these merged into a complex legal tradition. We can account for both similarity and particularity using our interpretative framework. Russia is a great case of putting together different imperial pathways into a singular specific imperial entity.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): What you said about the Russian case is quite interesting. It seems to correspond to what Fred said about the book's chapter on imperial intersections. One can see from your answer that the

¹⁰ See Donald Ostrowski. *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589*. Cambridge, 1998.

Russian Empire in itself is a locus of intersections of different imperial traditions, which destabilizes the notion that there is a Russian Empire, so to speak ...

FC: The Russian Empire with a capital R and capital E.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): That's right.

FC: Oh, we are quite happy to make this move. The flip side of this question about how having a lot of material on Russia reframes the wider issue is related to what we do in the book with the empires that are part of a more conventional narrative of the expansion of Europe. This really means the expansion of Western Europe from the fifteenth century and onward. In discussions of the book so far, we have found one objection is, to put it somewhat more crudely than anybody actually has: "Are you making colonialism disappear in the way you tell the story about empires?" This is exactly the reverse of the question you ask.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): We had exactly this question on the list.

FC: We are certainly not letting the colonial take up the entire stage. The colonial question in our book is being placed in an imperial framework that does not center on nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism or sixteenth-century colonialism and European expansion for that matter. And that is what we want to do. My reply to this objection, having published not so long ago the book *Colonialism in Question*,¹¹ is that if you actually want to understand the importance of colonialism, you need to understand its place in the wider spectrum. If you want to understand what is distinct about the nineteenth century you are not going to find it out by continuously studying the nineteenth century, you have to study earlier and later periods. Otherwise the argument about the distinctiveness of the nineteenth century becomes a tautology. The approach we take actually enables you to appreciate colonialism in its historical context.

JB: For example, a big question in Russian studies recently has been whether the Russian Empire is a colonial empire. This is a bad question. It is a typological question. It assumes that there is such a thing as a colonial empire and then says whether Russia is more or less like other ones. Well, was there such a thing as colonial empire? Is this the category that we really want to work with? There were colonies at many times in world history; in our languages the word comes from the Romans. Making colonies was

¹¹ Frederick Cooper. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley, 2005.

an ancient tactic of sending people away to go live (and exploit) some distant place. Machiavelli could spell out the difference between the colonial approach and the hit-and-run approach, and go-there-and-stay-and-then-absorb-it approach to expanding power. There is really nothing structurally new in European colonies, except one thing. This was the moment when the political economy of the West European powers had become stronger and made these states more powerful than their rivals; this was the Europeans' historical moment in terms of technological advance. So, other imperial powers – Russians, Japanese, Chinese – would be looking at these particular empires and scratching their heads and saying: “do we need colonies, should we be doing colonization?” and so on. But this is not to say that the typology of colonial empires was established in the nineteenth century, or that “colonial empire” is a useful category.

FC: There are particularities about empire that did exist in the nineteenth century. And they are about the way these empires were done by different actors in different parts of the world. We do try to see that. But not by reifying a single category as if it is supposed to stand in for the whole of the nineteenth century.

AI (Marina Mogilner): So you are writing the political history of empire, the repertoire of empires that evolved over time. And you pay a lot of attention to the cultural frames that produced different meanings associated with political processes, say, in the Roman Empire. Then you trace the repertoires of empire over time, but you seem not to do so with cultural frames that, arguably, kept changing over time and informed different kind of politics. In short, don't you think that because you are writing the political history of empire you underestimate how changing cultural frames created new meanings for the political practice of empires that you talk about in the book?

FC: We see political culture as part of politics. But let us look at the simultaneity of different things that are going on in the nineteenth century. Yes, in the latter half of the nineteenth century you have the extension of British and French power over Africa and incorporation of colonies. There was much discussion of this, filled with arguments about race, arguments about the extent of difference and about how different Africans are. At the same time, you have the Habsburg empire dealing with difference in its various ways. You have the dual monarchy of 1867, for example, and the politics that falls out of that. If one wants to say that there is an “epoch of colonialism” or that one political culture in history became dominant, you have to consider the range of phenomena that are happening at the same time,

to include the powers that are interacting with one another and people who are reading the same texts at the same time. These people are talking about politics in terms that were hardly identical and they knew each other's terms. How does one rethink a phenomenon like difference in the late nineteenth century when there were simultaneously various politics going on around difference? We do not want to have one kind of politics stand for the "epoch of colonialism" or to contribute to the "epochal fallacy" that you have a singular nineteenth century that one can characterize in a few phrases. We have some important passages in the text that consider questions of race and empire and but we do not subscribe to an argument that says that you have a one-to-one correspondence between a certain time and a certain kind of empire and a certain view of race. All of these are much more interactive and much more contested than meets the eye. There were arguments about scientific racism. There was never a consensus among scientists about what the science of race was. We do not want to let the notion of scientific racism stand in for a much more complex kind of politics.

JB: Let us take other powers in the nineteenth century in an attempt to blast this epochal fallacy. The United States was expanding in the nineteenth century. I think yesterday was the anniversary of Custer's "last stand,"¹² when his army got wiped out while trying to defeat one group of Indians. Actually, there were two groups of Indians, allied and doing their own kind of confederate policies in trying to defeat the Americans. The Americans were taking in a great deal of territory, treating the native peoples on this territory according to the American kind of politics of difference, which was an exclusionist one. There was in this sense in the last half of the nineteenth century, still another story about how to deal with difference – not just in Africa and Asia, but with peoples on the American continent. This was a very exclusionary story directed not just at immigrants and people of a different color, but against the Native Americans. And, again in the United States, you have a deep politics of race, a politics of slavery on national, not "colonial," soil. If you want to talk about the nineteenth century and race you have to think about the Civil War that almost destroyed the American Empire. It could have broken at least into two over the issue of slavery. And one can switch to South America and think about the emancipation movements that continued through the nineteenth century. So we are not talking about a nineteenth-century world dominated by European colonial imaginary.

¹² The episode from the history of westward expansion of the United States on the American continent when the allied forces of native Americans (Lakota and Northern Cheyenne) defeated the U.S. 7th Cavalry division. This battle took place on June 24 and 25, 1876.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): We would very much like to return to what has just been said and unpack the place of the book in the context of historiographic debates about colonialism. But I would like at this moment to ask a question about empire as an analytical category and category of political practice. I would say that the category of nation has been denaturalized thanks to theoretical literature on the theory of nationalism. Scholars of nationalism talk about nation-building without assuming that the nation-building actually results in a nation, but rather seeing it as an epistemic and political claim. Somehow that did not happen to the category of empire. There is much less theoretical discussion of empire as a category of analysis that necessarily stands in relationship not only to the analytical work of history writing but also to various types of past and present political practices, some of which were related to history writing. Would you have an explanation for the situation that empire somehow does not require the same deconstructivist approach that almost every student of nationalism is conscious about.

JB: Just to start on this point. We are not using empire just as the formal name that people give to their polity. Rome was an empire when it was a republic. But to us this does not matter because we are looking at political formation. We also are not using empire as an insult or a normative judgment. One reason we are using the category of empire is to be inclusive about what we might call the second world. One of the big errors of colonial studies was to focus on the first and the third world. As if there had been no Communist colonialism, no Eastern Europe problem. Colonial studies focused on capitalist and West European powers and bourgeois societies and overseas empires and left out the rest of the world. Using the category of empire allowed us to come up with a term that is distinguished from nation and a term that can be used to talk about complex polities. This is really the point we were trying to make. But a book with the title “Complex Polities in World History” is probably not going to attract the attention of publishers.

AI (Marina Mogilner): But you are not using the category of identity in the same way.

FC: The question you are raising is a very important one and it may be the central one in the discussion of our book. I think one can validly object to the term “empire” using the same kinds of arguments that Rogers Brubaker and I did in writing about identity or that I use in the chapter on modernity in *Colonialism in Question*.¹³ This is a very legitimate question

¹³ Rogers Brubaker, Frederick Cooper. *Za predelami identichnosti // Ab Imperio*. 2002. No. 3. Pp. 62-115; Cooper. *Colonialism in Question*. Pp. 113-149.

to pose. The issue then is does the word “empire” do useful work and does it do sufficiently useful work to overcome the kinds of objections that are similar to those that have been raised about other key concepts. If somebody can make an argument against the use of the word “empire” that is convincing I would accept it. To my mind, the word “empire” does useful work. It will continue to do so as long as there is a combination in the world of both difference and ambition to power. That does not mean that the word “empire” is a nice little box into which everything fits. What it means is that an imperial form of polity for the historical past and into the present has been a real possibility, a possibility around which people actually act. It does not mean that every polity falls into this category. What’s more interesting is to analyze how the temptation to empire – and the existence of similar ambitions elsewhere the world – shapes the kinds of politics that people practice. So in some ways the edges of the concept of empire become the most interesting places to work with. We think the concept can be used in a nonreified way. But it does require a certain kind of history writing. And that is why our strategy of writing this book is heavily based on narrative. We think that working with this concept we can write a story that makes sense. If somebody can write a story that makes more sense using a different set of concepts, then, we should go over to that way of framing history. There are analytical problems with the term “empire.” Is it going to be too inclusive or exclusive, so that everything becomes empire? In practice we think that telling the story diminishes the force of that kind of objection. In most periods of history there would be many people and many types of polities that aspired to act like empires and only a few were able to do so – in part because there were other empires around that shaped the conditions of possibility. One can say a city-state aspired to be an empire. Take Venice as example. Certainly, with Venice you have the tension between the city-state and empire and Venice used its status as city-state to trade advantageously with people. Venice also set out on conquest with various degrees of success. The question of possibility of empire for Venice was set out in conditions of possibility framed by other empires such as the Ottomans. This brought constraints on Venice’s imperial possibilities. Without this setting can one understand Venice? This question can be asked about the whole variety of polities. These polities may not fit as neatly into the category of empire as such. But what we do not want to do is have a narrow definition of what empire is and then have a few places that ultimately fit this definition. Then we won’t understand the dynamics shaped by the possibility of empire.

JB: The subtitle of our book is: “Power and the Politics of Difference.” Let us think what could be a substitute for empires in the title. Let us say: “great powers in world history.” Everybody would agree. Great powers were important in world history. But we are saying that the great powers each had a particular politics of difference; that they had to incorporate different peoples in different ways were important in world history. That is an underlying conviction of the book that we think we can prove with the narrative. “Empire” is a word that is very much related to the dynamics of possibility of building power, building powerful polities and the necessity of incorporating different peoples into these polities in order to be grand and to be able to shape world history.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): If you were to have a German translation, what would the title be?

JB: We would probably use Latin.

FC: The translation of the title, probably, would start with “Das Reich.” But the Germans think there were only three of them.

AI (Marina Mogilner): I thought about the situation of becoming and not becoming empire in terms of situation. The editors of *Ab Imperio* not so long ago suggested the concept of “imperial situation,” building on research in the field of redefining Russian history and the rising popularity of the concept of empire. This concept could, perhaps, capture the temporal dynamics of the processes that you have just described. It is still possible to say that empire is overwhelmed with all kinds of political connotations that are difficult to avoid.

JB: We have no problem with politics. This book is about politics and political formations. At the same time history is full of failed political projects or partial ones.

AI (Marina Mogilner): But you can have a perfect case of nation-state political framework and still have a different social and cultural dynamics of difference, inequality, asymmetry, which could be captured in the notion of the imperial situation.

FC: I think both terms have their uses and both terms put the emphasis in different places. Maybe the solution is to use them next to each other. One case that will be interesting to think through in these terms is the concept of “imperialism of free trade” introduced by Robinson and Gallagher in 1953.¹⁴

¹⁴ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson. *The Imperialism of Free Trade // Economic History Review*. New Series. 1953. Vol. VI. No. 1. Pp. 1-15.

Now, why would one call free trade an imperial situation, to use your phrase? I think there are perfectly legitimate reasons to do so. But I also think the reason why it actually works is that Britain was the British empire. It actually was not called the British empire at that time, but it really was acting like an empire. One could act imperially on the limits of sovereignty. This is Robinson and Gallagher's point. But what made the "imperialism of free trade" imperialism and not just asymmetrical free trade, of which we have many situations, is the possibility that it could become empire. It could become empire in the formal sense of the term, which in fact it did. With respect to Latin America in the early nineteenth century (and Robinson and Gallagher did have this material in mind), where a lot of countries were recently separated from the formal military and administrative power of Spain, Britain acted in certain ways that involved the exercise of power. But it did not involve an incorporation into any kind of status of British sovereignty. Yet, in Africa, a little bit later, in the nineteenth century you see Britain playing a politics of informal empire in conditions that led to further incursions and in some cases invasions by the British state and the incorporation of places like the Gold Coast and Nigeria into a formal empire. What makes the term "imperial" actually work in the argument by Robinson and Gallagher is the potential to empire. In other words, there is a power that has the potential to exercise state functions over some place and that's what makes some situations, say the British bombardment of Rio de Janeiro in 1850, an act of imperialism and not something else. Around the same time in 1851 there is a similar act of British bombardment of Lagos, in what is now Nigeria, which had quite different consequences. In your terms, you are seeing two imperial situations, but what makes them imperial is the relationship of them to the state. Now, we have run into problems by trying to play with our categories. Let me cite one of them, the Dutch East India Company, the VOC. It starts operations as what today we will call a limited liability corporation, a joint-stock company. It is a corporation that is out there to make money and to trade. But how does it do this? I think it would be wrong to write the history of VOC as if it were an empire from day one or as if it were creating an empire from day one. But eventually it does create its own empire. It does so by the particular way it does commerce and the particular way it acts in some (not all) places. In some places the corporation establishes its power and exercises governmental functions. It exercises these functions as a corporate entity, but this corporate entity does the things that states do. This is the case of the first century of history of the British East India Company.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): Do you mean 1857?

FC: I mean the 1780s after which it became less of a private corporation and more and more like a semi-government operation. 1857 is the coup de grâce. One can say that between 1780 and 1857 there was a creeping empire creation or creeping colonization of India. This is true about the relationship between the state and the corporation and it is also true about the relations of power exercised on the ground in India. There was much more government or state control. Here we are dealing with an enormously complex situation of sovereignty. We are trying to see sovereignty as a question, as a process, not as an either-or phenomenon neatly classified as a sovereign entity on the one hand and nonsovereign, business entity, on the other. Back to the case of VOC: it does not work to say that this is an empire from day one. But by the time the VOC goes bankrupt at the end of the eighteenth century the VOC has been acting pretty much like empire for a long time and it has gotten exceedingly rich and it has brought an exceedingly large amount of wealth to a rather strange but quite complex polity known as the Netherlands. One has to take into account the unusual relationship between the governing directors of the VOC and the people who basically run the Netherlands, which is essentially a state with a very weak monarch and a very strong commercial elite in different cities. There are all these phenomena of extreme complexity, but we want to say that the histories of these phenomena are shaped not from the very beginning, but from shortly thereafter as questions of government and sovereignty. The usefulness of such concepts as imperial situation or imperial formation should be judged in relationship to the complex question of sovereignty, and part of the complexity of the question of sovereignty is frequently its relationship to a defined polity for which the term “empire” is the most appropriate.

AI (Marina Mogilner): How does one see the concept of imperial society if one takes the approach of political history and seeing empire as a political formation?

FC: This question has come up among scholars of the British Empire. There was an argument at the end of the nineteenth century for a Greater Britain.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): By John Robert Seeley.

FC: The notion of Greater Britain was for a society that very much derived from the formal empire structure. If you did not have the queen the whole thing did not make a lot of sense. It was also very much about the propagation of a certain kind of social order. But it was very much a social

order of white people. The Greater Britain project was for people who were thinking about New Zealand or Australia. They did not have a lot to say about Africa or India. In that sense, the notion of there being an imperial society stood in no simple relationship to the actual social structures that existed in the empire itself. It was an imagined empire that existed in relationship to an actual system of governing people and territory. So what was this British imperial society? It was in many ways a virtual society. The actual governing apparatus distanced itself from people who were advocating Greater Britain, who were talking as if they were spokespeople for the British empire. Had the government followed the notion being advocated by Seeley and friends, what would they do about Africa, India, and the Caribbean? Rulers had to think in other terms about empire as a polity. Ultimately, their job was to hold together this kind of Britain and not the imagined British society that these advocates were pushing for.

JB: But your question brings up the problem of the construct of society. This is a really problematic term. One can take it apart in so many ways. For more than thirty years we have been worrying about civil society. There is room in Russian historiography for someone to take on the phenomenon of society and the uses of *obshchestvo*, without starting with Habermas. But so far scholars proceed from only a particular community considered a “society,” or they take “educated society” and they forget about the 80 percent of the people who are members of society but not analyzed as such.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): We observe an interesting situation in history writing on the Russian Empire. In the 1990s, historians who employed the concept of empire, even those who were criticizing the teleological narratives of national history, did not feel compelled to include in their introductions a specific note to the effect that writing on empire does not amount to an apology for empire. Writing on empire now in the context of the present-day Russian situation and addressing the intellectual and scholarly circles in the post-Soviet space, one has to make it clear that a revisionist account of the history of empire does not amount to an apology for empire.

FC: There was a change in the climate as we were writing this book. In 2003 with the American invasion of Iraq there was an argument by people on the left using empire as an epithet. The worst word they could use for Bush was that he was making the United States act like empire. And there were publications slightly earlier, such as Ferguson’s (a very nostalgic book),¹⁵

¹⁵ Niall Ferguson. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York, 2003.

which ends up – no matter that it contradicts what the book actually says – with an advocacy of empire saying that since Britain is no longer capable of acting like empire the United States should. Here you have arguments on opposite sides using the word “empire” in a normative way, both of them doing a great deal of violence to the analytical content that the concept of empire might have.

AI (Alexander Semyonov): That is right. You have described two ways of open politicization of history writing on empire. But I still would like to ask a question about nonacademic circuits and readings of your book. In your book you try to de-center the story from the teleology of nationalism. In a somewhat similar way there is a tide of writing on transnational history that, some people argue, is presenting a politically correct version of complex history and stripping it of violence. This critical move has a public resonance, but this move is not openly politicized. I am asking a question about this kind of relevance that goes beyond the opposite ends of apologetic treatment of the history of empire and using the category of empire in a similarly instrumental way that delegitimizes certain kinds of polities in political rhetoric. In short, how do you see your book as a critical reading for a concerned citizen of the world? Do you think it is a relevant question for the discussion of your book?

FC: It is a fair question. Let me start with the reference you’ve made with regard to violence and empire, especially to German historiography and the German empire. I think the British and French were just as bad as the Germans. I do not think that our argument about empire can be used for any particular national blaming. How does one think about the acts of violence that were committed in the late nineteenth century in the course of the conquest of Africa, with the Germans with regard to the Herero, with the British and French invasions and campaign of terrorizing the populations and killing people quite wantonly. It is one way to say that this violence is an inherent characteristic of a certain kind of political form. Or as some people have argued that this is essentially the violence of modernity – that this is the violence of a particular conception of the world in racial terms and this is the fundamental condition of modern world and of nineteenth century Europe. This argument seems to say that the responsibility for violence lies with an abstraction – modernity or colonialism. Our argument would be that the responsibility for violence lies with people who promote and organize violence. And the people who did commit acts of violence should be judged accordingly. Saying that the responsibility for this violence lies

with an abstraction seems to me to be a position that evades the question of responsibility rather than answering it.

JB: Or for another take on this, consider that in many imperial situations, not only in the nineteenth century, there were people advocating nonviolence. So we cannot paint a whole society with the singular and easy label of a violent society because it is colonial or imperial.

AI (Ilya Gerasimov): Empire does not have a monopoly on violence. We know cases where the nation-state can be as violent as some of the historic empires. One can take the example of South Africa.

FC: Or the United States.

JB: If we consider it a nation-state! One can say the exclusive connection of violence with the imperial situations very much ignores the association of violence with nation-state ideology and nation-state projects. In these projects violence can be a specific goal of state makers. The most conspicuous examples of violence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been about ethnic homogeneity where terrible bloodshed is a direct result of nation-state making or attempts at nation-state making. Not so long ago we gave a presentation of our book in France and a woman asked at the end of the discussion: "Is Israel an empire?" At that time I evaded the question. But now I am not going to evade the question. I think what we see in this case is a politics of nation-state, the extremes of a state based on a single racial and religious claim to homogeneity. Again this is not to paint every Israeli as going along with violence. But the project of the homogeneous nation-state is a huge cause of bloodshed.

This goes back to the question of how citizens of the world should read the book. Citizens of the world should be able to see that this book is not pro empire or against the nation-state. This book is lessons about complex sovereignty. The message of the book is that there are more choices available to people, politically acting and politically responsible people, than a simple dichotomy between imperial domination or a nation-state's homogenizing project. A major theme of this book is the variety of imperial pathways: empires were not all governed in the same way; they were governed in very different ways; they changed their repertoires over time. We hope to open people's ideas about possible future sovereignties. But we do not offer any answers.

FC: And we would not say that these possibilities include empire. One of the points in the definition of empire is that it is hierarchical. So the question then is can one have polities that recognize difference as one

of the component parts of the polity, which do not force homogenization upon it, but which nonetheless can still have a coherent and democratic form of government? Such polities can go under the name of federations or confederations. That does not mean that federations are necessarily democratic. But it does mean that there are possible ways of rethinking political forms. You have the imperial form, where differences are articulated and reproduced within a polity that claims to be inclusive in both the violent sense and the sense of belonging. The question is, can one think of ways of transforming such polities into others that do not go to the extreme of enforcing a singular political imaginary shared by every member of it, and that do not reproduce the hierarchy that is intrinsic to empire. Are those things we should be thinking about? The civic lesson of this book is not that anyone has a historical momentum behind them, but that the actual forms that politics takes are varied and we should not assume that the choices are dichotomous ones. They are not between the argument that says one people, one state, one government and the other extreme that says domination by outsiders over the people.

SUMMARY

Методологическую рубрику номера открывает интервью, которое редакторы *Ab Imperio* взяли у историка Российской империи Джейн Бурбанк и историка французской колониальной империи и колониальной и постколониальной Африки Фредерика Купера – авторов недавно вышедшей фундаментальной работы “Империи в мировой истории: власть и политика разнообразия”. Взятое в июле 2010 года, интервью продолжает серию *Ab Imperio* “Беседы с авторами”, представляющую читателям журнала значимые публикации в области истории империи и методологии истории и социальных наук. Интервью посвящено “Империям в мировой истории” как попытке новаторского переосмысления опыта всемирной истории через категорию империи. При этом исторический опыт евразийских и Российской империй представлен в книге в общем ряду с более конвенциональными в подобных обобщающих трудах западными колониальными империями, что делает книгу еще интереснее для специалистов по истории России/СССР.

Бурбанк и Купер рассказывают о том, как зародился замысел книги в процессе преподавания в университете Мичигана и Нью-Йоркском университете. Своим главным достижением они считают попытку

осмыслить империю как политическую формацию, основанную на политике разнообразия. В книге описаны имперский политический репертуар и роль разнообразных имперских “посредников”, предложен новый взгляд на мировую историю, основанный на том, что большинство населения мира в различные периоды истории проживало в империях и находилось под влиянием обстоятельств империи и/или культуры империи. Соответственно, Бурбанк и Купер стремились поколебать устойчивые представления о естественности и неизбывности нации и национального государства, а также принятые в историографии деления на домодерные (архаические; классические) и современные империи. Авторы новой книги подчеркивают, что особую ценность в их работе представляет не сама по себе теоретическая модель, но созданный на основе инновационной структуры нарратив, в котором опыт отдельных имперских политических формаций перемежается с изучением наследия архетипических (для отдельных исторических регионов) империй и взаимодействия двух или более империй между собой. Бурбанк и Купер отвечают на целый ряд вопросов редакторов *AI*, касающихся подходов и оценок, высказанных в книге.