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European Union as Empire?

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The EU is on its way to becoming an empire, although it is not yet aware of that destiny, and in spite of the fact that most Europeans are currently not interested in empire. But empires do not always emerge with intention of becoming such. Colonial empires, for example, often emerged more out of need to deny access of a competing power to a territory, trade route, or suspected raw materials. An empire is typically a term we use to describe an overarching sociopolitical system that controls diverse populations; is geographically large; driven by a built-in expansionist tendency; and whose behavior in the world is substantially informed by struggles against other empires. As they expand, empires tend to collide with each other, for which the 20th century offers no shortage of examples, just as do previous centuries.

In a traditional sense, an empire has no natural boundaries and tends to think of the whole world as its potential domain, until it hits a limit beyond which it cannot proceed. But once they emerge and become stable enough, empires tend to be associated with a civilizational mission on whose behalf they justify themselves in the world. The mission is typically so designed as to



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facilitate further world expansion. The pre-Soviet Russian empire, for example, claimed the right to protect the Christians of Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and actively pursued that claim through wars, treaties, and territorial expansion. The Soviet and US empires both claimed universal values during the Cold War, values that justified countless interventions, coups, invasions, and worldwide propaganda.

Empires do not dissolve themselves when they have exhausted their expressed mission in the world (for example, to fight a Cold War, after whose conclusion the empires that had fought it should have demilitarized). This resistance to dissolution after the completion of a specific mission that had justified empire, may be rooted in a perspective that regards power that had accumulated during the mission to have become an accomplishment in its right. Which means that once the expressed mission is exhausted and empire is no longer needed, an empire will tend to generate new missions, including ones that the world does not need or could live without. At that point, empires may become irrational, notably when they operate entirely out of a drive for perpetual expansion whose benefit is no longer clear, in spite of its known high cost. The invasions of Iraq and Ukraine are clear examples of imperialist acts that were unnecessary, poorly justified, arrogantly planned, and disastrous for two imperial powers of our times.

New empires may measure themselves in various ways after old empires, since old empires tend to generate memories or historical perspectives after their dissolution. As such, the memory of old empires often serves as a source for critiquing a post-imperial contemporaneity; or for generating nostalgia for transnational life; or serve as a negative lesson about forms of politics beyond which we have thankfully moved; or as lessons on how to build a more lasting and morally justifiable empire in our times.

While the EU itself does not appear to think of the world as its potential domain, limiting itself to the borders of its member states, all of its members have a substantial experience with empire: its major member states were all colonial empires, and its smaller member states have been parts of other European empires. Nevertheless, the EU is understood broadly as having overcome the legacies of the imperialism that unleashed two world wars. While the EU may appear today to be a solution to historical problems of European imperialism, it is a solution that is confined to the continent. We only need to turn attention to Gaza today to witness the brutal aftereffects of European empires. The genesis of the carnage in Gaza today is traceable to two European imperial projects: British and German imperialisms, whose inheritors today look at the

genocide in Gaza as if they had nothing to do with it, no part in its genesis and no responsibility for its end.

Of course, it is not atypical of nationalist post-imperial histories to disavow responsibility for the crimes of their empires, with the exception of those crimes that stand in the way of current politics. Previous crimes of empire that tend to receive serious acknowledgement today are only those committed in Europe, against other Europeans, or otherwise have bearing on a European project today. Today's Gaza offers the bleakest reminder of this disavowal of criminal responsibility: a territory that continues to languish in the aftereffects of imperial projects for which the EU, a new institution with no imperial history of its own, serves among other things as a way of forgetting of the colonial legacy which is our world today--a legacy largely created by its main member states.

When we assess the status of the EU as an empire today, we need to keep the following points in mind:

1. The EU was not designed as an empire, nor do we see such intentions in its founding documents. But as a large continental body, it is forced to come to terms with other empires. The Ukraine war, the specter of US isolationism, the sense of a dangerous world at its other borders to the south, the race for critical raw materials, all encourage the EU to feel need to become a self-standing great power—at least for the sake of its own protection.
2. In the EU, a civilizational mission is already in view, although it is still in an experimental phase. One of the elements of that mission that is currently visible is the “values” which are the theme of this network. But such values are not specifically European. Thus, we encounter other sets of values that are claimed to be distinctly European—as we see in the identitarian movement; or in posing Christianity as a fundamental core of Europe's identity; or any other logic that would distinguish the EU's mission in the world from that of other empires.
3. Global empires house diverse populations; thus, they must confront the problem of governing diversity. The solutions may range from universal citizenship; to rule by a transnational aristocracy; to apartheid systems that place populations in separate compartments; to pogroms against minorities. For the time being, governing diversity in the EU consists of acknowledging it as a source of strength and indeed as a core

European value. But this posture collides with powerful racist sentiments that regards diversity to be a threat to the social cohesion that is assumed to define the cultural core of a nation or, in this case, an empire in the making. In fact, that European nationalism and European empire are not contradictory principles is evident in how anti-diversity political forces coordinate across the EU and across national borders.

4. Empires cause opposition to them to grow in proportion to their claims on population and resources, claims that increase in proportion to the increase in the capacity of empire. Opposition within can be fierce: for example, farmers protests across many EU countries are examples of how the confident high priests of empire are caught off-guard by the oppositional energy of their population. Even more significant now is the rise of populism across the continent, largely propelled by a felt need amongst significant populations to cut to size the power of what appears to be a large, unaccountable power structure far away from them.
5. Wealthy empires act as gravitational pull to surrounding poor populations. The migration “crisis” along both EU and USA borders today are in this respect not so much “crises” but perfectly normal population movement that is to be expected in a world that is otherwise both interlinked and substantially unequal. The choice to see this reality as “crisis” is a matter of perspective; after all, the EU had in the past incorporated poor countries and regions within Europe, thereby showing capacity to expand and incorporate such populations. This peaceful incorporation of poverty is an alternative to conquest-- and also to apartheid.
6. The collision we see in Ukraine for the past four years, especially as seen from a Russian perspective, may be regarded as the first installment of a collision between two large sociopolitical bodies. The EU is obviously the major other party to this conflict, even though for now much of its role is conducted in the name of NATO or something else called “Western civilization.”
7. In comparison to the US or Russia, the EU seems far from reaching similar points of irrationality. That is because its central mission in the world (to be distinguished from its mission within Europe) is not yet clearly defined or final, and also because it still lacks the traditional coercive instruments of empire. Thus, until now, the EU can only ponder

the virtues of “soft power,” which established empires regard only as a compliment to their coercive muscle, but never as their only source of power.

8. While empires generate new missions as they expand, this dynamic does not yet apply to the EU, whose mission is still young, and which, unlike typical empires, has a right of secession, of which one country thus far has made use. Thus, in theory, the EU has a built-in mechanism of self-dissolution—at least for the time being. And we know that populist politicians frequently make secessionist threats, but are unlikely to act on those to the extent that they continue to see more benefits than pain from being in this “empire,” than on being on its outside.
9. To the extent that they abandon their original particular identity (e.g. as acting on behalf of a “nation” or “tribe”) and adopt a more universal posture, empires last to the extent that they become universally inclusive. That is because inclusivity is not simply a laudable ethical posture, but because it is an effective way of minimizing opposition. Inclusivity in the EU is an ongoing experiment, hampered as in the US by historical prejudices, culturalist understandings of Europe, and an educational and public sphere identitarian frame that expunges colonialism and its *living* consequences from European imagination. Thus like all imperial projects, the inclusivity of the EU project is argued against the backdrop of borders and the “barbarians” outside the gates who (like the people of Gaza) are dispensable.