Closed Fist, Empty Hand, or Open Hand?  
Discussing Historical Analogies

By Markus Kornprobst

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.  
Marcus Tullius Cicero, Orator xxxiv [120]

History constitutes our identity, helps us to make sense of the world, and plays a critical role in persuading people of a particular course of action. Much of the power of history in present and future is exerted through historical analogies. We need them to make the world intelligible to ourselves. Scholars frequently approach international relations through the prism of historical analogies. International relations theorists, ranging from classical Realists (Morgenthau 1978; Kissinger 1964), to the English School (Wight 1977; Bull 1995) and Constructivists (Hall and Kratochwil 1993; Sikkink 1998), inquire into the dynamics of world politics by drawing from historical analogies. More policy-orientated studies use historical analogies to understand issues such as humanitarian interventions (Weiss 2001) and democratization processes (Youngs 1993). Likewise, political practitioners frequently employ historical analogies to comprehend a situation. The Munich analogy, for example, serves as an important guidance for decisions of war and peace in world politics.

Historical analogies, however, can be very misleading. Few analogies illustrate this problem better than the Munich analogy. This analogy is a powerful tool to rally a nation around its flag but it usually distorts the situation it is supposed to illuminate in serious ways. George W. Bush’s and Tony Blair’s warning that not to take military action against Saddam Hussein would amount to Chamberlain’s mistake of appeasing Hitler at the Munich Conference was highly misleading. Hussein tyrannized his own people but he did not have serious plans of world domination and he certainly did not have the means to do so. The intensity of the international threat posed by Hussein was a far cry from the one Hitler posed in the 1930s.

This paper is a study on methodology. What procedures are there to help us use historical analogies in a leading rather than in a misleading way? My argument embraces rhetoric – in Zeno’s metaphorical words the open hand – to deal with historical analogies. Doubting and discussing historical analogies, as opposed to taking them for granted, provides leads to make the world more intelligible. I propose a twofold Sophist move for this discussion: First, I develop guiding questions for discussing the history invoked in the historical analogy, the similarities and differences between the invoked history and the phenomenon to be illuminated by the analogy, and the novel insights that the analogy generates for this phenomenon. Second, I apply the idea of dissoi logoi to the discussion of historical analogies. There is always more than one perspective on a particular issue. Juxtaposing opposing perspectives provides more insights than relying on only one perspective because it allows for exploring different angles. Applied to the issue of historical analogies, this means that the discussion of a particular analogy should not exclusively focus on this analogy but should also include a counter-analogy.
This article is organized into three parts: First, I discuss three meta-theoretical perspectives on analogies. I label them, borrowing from Zeno, closed fist, empty hand and open hand. Second, I endorse the rhetorician’s open hand and introduce the Sophist move for the discussion of historical analogies. Third, I discuss two historical analogies of globalization that conceptualize the hierarchical dimension of global order as empire but conceive of empire very differently: the benign empire as celebrated by the proponents of the Pax Americana and the exploitative Empire as coined by Hardt and Negri.

**Closed Fist or Open Hand?**

Tracing them back to Zeno, the founder of the Stoa, Marcus Tullius Cicero (1994:II [VI] 17) discusses two diametrically opposed metaphors for describing the process of making sense of the world: closed fist and open hand. The closed fist stands for logic. Rigorous methods of reasoning – for the most part the syllogism in its various forms – are assumed to constitute a hermetically sealed microcosm of accurate reasoning. As convincing as logic may be, however, some aspects of reality elude the methodological repertoire of logic. They cannot be forced into the closed fist. The open hand stands for rhetoric. Some things cannot be understood within the confines of stringent logic but only by an open discussion and the exchange of arguments.¹

The ancient Greeks and Romans frequently used historical analogies to make sense of the world. Isocrates (1992a), for instance, appealed to his fellow Greeks to learn the lessons of the past amidst the threat that the Persians posed to Hellas. The Greeks would have to end their infighting, which had seriously weakened them, return to the Pan-Hellenic ideals of their ancestors and unite. It is not a coincidence that Isocrates – one of the most celebrated scholars of rhetoric of his time – used many historical analogies in his arguments. In ancient Greece and Rome, the historical analogy was classified under the metaphor of the open hand and not the closed fist because both analogy and history were considered to belong to the realm of rhetoric.

Even the most stringent supporters of logic left room for discussing analogies with an open hand. In his Prior Analytics and Posterior Analytics, Aristotle (1989; 1994) praises logic. He contends that the syllogism, consisting of a major premise formulating a general principle (all men are mortal), a minor premise containing a specific statement (Socrates is a man), and the conclusion deduced from the two premises (Socrates is mortal) is the ideal mode of reasoning. From a logical point of view, an analogy is always imperfect. Seeing something in light of something else requires thinking about the differences as well as the similarities of the two somethings. Yet syllogisms cannot provide guidance for figuring out the aspects in which the two things being compared differ. To put it into stark terms, forcing an analogy into a syllogism could result in something like the following: All sharks are mortal. My goldfish is mortal. Therefore, my goldfish is a shark. This does not mean, however, that Aristotle dismissed analogies. He (1982) applauded the use of analogies but identified them as a means of rhetoric and not of logic.

Greco-Roman historiography put history also squarely into the realm of rhetoric. Cicero (1948:1 [II]5) made explicit what was obvious at the time: History is “a branch of literature (…) that is closer to oratory than any other.” History was considered rhetoric

¹ For the juxtaposition of rhetoric and science see also Isocrates (1992:261-269).
because someone who tells history has to persuade him- or herself and the audience of what the true course of events was. Aristotle makes the need for persuasion clear: Someone who tells history has to invent missing pieces of the puzzle. While not ruling out the possibility of determining the truth of certain historical events, Aristotle was skeptical about the possibility to uncover the truth about the sequence of these events. He asserted that it is possible to think of compelling ways of how events are connected but he doubted that there could be perfectly reliable means – comparable to logic – to ensure that this connection is true (Aristotle 1994a; Fornara, 1983: 94).²

**Closed Fist or Empty Hand?**

Current uses of historical analogies in international studies challenge the ancient persuasion. Rhetoric, for the most part, is dismissed as antithesis of scholarly work. Instead, there is a divide between positivist scholars striving for scientific criteria to explain and predict based on historical analogies (closed fist) and students who shy away from the use of historical analogies for meta-theoretical reasons (empty hand).

The positivist variants of the closed fist are united by the assumption that, provided the correct methods are used, we can discover the truth about the past and this discovery helps us explain the present and predict the future in an equally truthful manner. This assumption gives rise to two positivist attempts to make historical analogies: First, past, present and future are presumed to be united by the same nomothetic laws. The defining moments in history repeat themselves over and over again, almost with the precision of a clockwork. Long-cycle theory (Modelski 1978; Organski and Kugler 1980; Dunn and Anderson 2005) may be the best-known research program underpinned by this assumption. Theorists working within this paradigm postulate that the basic patterns of world politics are always the same. International politics is the struggle for hegemony. Hegemons and their rivals rise and fall. A cycle in world politics lasts about 100 years. It starts with a power establishing hegemony through a hegemonic war and ends with a challenge against this hegemony in another hegemonic war.

Second, many positivists inquire into particular events and series of events in the past in order to explain the present and predict the future. The war-to-peace literature, for example, relies on this lessons-learnt approach. When the government and the rebels in Mozambique embarked on a war to peace transition in 1992, the literature, aiming to predict the outcome of the peace process, relied on the Angolan analogy. The predictions were grim. The peace process in Mozambique was expected to collapse in the same manner as it had done in Angola a few months earlier. Fortunately, these predictions did not materialize. The literature explained this with a higher level of international commitment in the Mozambican case. Soon after the Mozambican peace process was successfully concluded, Angola embarked on a new attempt of peaceful conflict resolution as well. Then, based on the Mozambican analogy, the literature predicted peace in Angola because there was even more international commitment for the implementation of a new peace agreement (Pycroft 1994; Malaquias 1998; Hampson: 1996:125).

² Even Thucydides, an outlier of Greco-Roman historiography, compromised on his quest for accuracy and self-conscious use of stringent methodologies by borrowing heuristic and stylistic devices from the field of rhetoric (Bietenholz 1994:31).
The Angolan and Mozambican analogies show that there is good reason to be sceptical about historical analogies. Predictions based on historical analogies often fail to materialise. No peace ensued in Angola when the international community stepped up its involvement. The civil war only came to an end when the government forces succeeded to kill Jonas Savimbi, the rebel leader, after a three-decade long man-hunt. Likewise, interpreting the present merely as yet another round of the indicator on a clock is troublesome. Long cycle theories twist and turn history in order to tease out cycles. Hence, the Thirty Years War becomes the equivalent of the post-Cold War era. According to many long-cycle theorists, the Thirty Years War was not a hegemonic war but an interlude between hegemonic wars. So is the post-Cold War era. It is not mere nuances that claims such as these miss about the dynamics of world politics. It is the entire picture.

Many scholars are very cautious in making truth claims for either history or analogous reasoning. Over a hundred years have gone by since Leopold von Ranke claimed that the goal of history as a science is to deliver a carbon copy of what actually happened. Ranke (1874) was convinced that the closed fist – the use of rigorous methods – would ensure that historians discover the truth about the past. Nowadays historians are much more sceptical. There is more and more agreement among historians that historical facts are interpretations by those who tell and write about these facts (Novick 1988; Jenkins 1991). As Michael Oakeshott (1933:86-168) argued, the authors of history make history. History, as Edmund Jacobitti (1998:ix) puts it, “is not a ‘settled’ record of the dead past, but a poetic or imaginative creation”, which changes according to the circumstances of the present and attempts, rooted in these circumstances, to understand the past. In a similar vein, critical historians (Zinn 1970; Davies 2006) warn of the perils of understanding history is something carved into stone. And even scholars who try to uphold the traditional methodological canon caution that not even the most sophisticated methods are guarantees for getting at the truth (McCullagh 1998).

Analogies do not fare better than history. An interesting potpourri of scholars ranging from positivist historians in von Ranke’s tradition, to positivist constructivists and poststructuralists in the field of international relations questions truth claims that are tied to analogies. They identify two problems: First, poststructuralists embrace the use of analogies for unmasking what at first glance seems self-evident. Yet, emphasising that the use of analogies belongs to the realm of poetry and not sciences, they reject to associate analogies with truth-claims (Walker 1993:97-98). Second, even historians who continue to hold von Ranke’s ideals in high esteem warn against the use of analogies to explain and predict. Geoffrey Elton (1991:6), for instance, denies that knowing the past means to know the future. Historians “cannot claim powers of prediction because the secret of their success as historians lies in hindsight and argument backwards.” Alexander Wendt (2001) makes a similar point from the perspective of a student of international relations. He cautions that knowing the past means “driving with a rearview mirror”. You know what is behind you but not what is ahead.

These arguments against truth claims pertaining to history and to analogous reasoning make a convincing case against the closed fist. Not even the most sophisticated logical tools can push away the problems of historical interpretation and the imaginative leap of seeing the present in light of the past. Yet these arguments leave us empty-handed. They warn us against the shortcomings of historical analogies but they do not
provide us with clues for how to use them in an intelligible way. Is there really no such thing as using a historical analogy in a manner that provides leads for the phenomenon to be understood?

**Returning to the Open-Hand: A Sophist Move**

In our times, rhetoric has gained a bad reputation. The word rhetoric is often used as a short-hand for misleading an audience by the lure of words for selfish reasons. If this were all there is to rhetoric, it would be certainly of no use for discussing the usefulness of historical analogies. But does rhetoric really deserve its bad reputation?

It is interesting to take another look at rhetoric in the ancient world to answer this question. Of course, rhetoric was used to twist particular events and situations for personal gain in ancient Greece and Rome. Gaius Iulius Caesar’s *Gaelic War*, for example, is not at all aimed at telling history in an impartial or accurate manner. Instead, it uses rhetorical tools to persuade the audience – with considerable success to this very day – of the supposed greatness of the author. Yet there were also two other strands of rhetoric, which are too often overlooked: First, there were those orators who understood themselves as the guardians of the good polis (Greece) and the good republic (Rome). Orators such as Isocrates (1992) and Cicero (1967) used rhetoric not for determining what the good is – this seemed far too obvious to them as that it would have to be debated – but they used rhetoric as a means to safeguard the good. Second, there were the Sophists. Vilified in many ways since Plato’s and Aristotle’s sharp criticisms against them (Plato 1971; Aristotle 1918), Sophist thought on rhetoric remains thought-provoking. Orators such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Antiphon went a step beyond Isocrates and Cicero. Sophists denied that human beings have the ability to crawl outside of Plato’s cave and see the sun. Sophists encourage us to be sceptical about truth claims, including the good of the polis. Instead of developing a straightforward argument for or against something, they invited their audience to see the matter in question from different perspectives. By looking at the same issue in different ways, Sophists invited the audience to reflect upon the taken-for-granted, to create new insights and to find plausible – not truthful in an Aristotelian or Platonian sense – explanations (Tindale 2004:37-55).

Sophists, therefore, even more than other orators in ancient Greece and Rome proposed to approach the world with an open hand: to make sense of the world but remain open to different perspectives and to question orthodoxies instead of accepting them as objective truth. This philosophical outlook on studying reality is remarkably similar to modern pragmatism in general and the thought of Richard Rorty (1979:176) in particular. Truth is working truth, established through dialogue: It is “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying.” Yet our curiosity should not end with a particular working truth. We should continue to question the taken-for-granted and one means of doing so is the discussion of metaphors and analogies. They capture our imagination and help us see something in a new light.³

³ The quest for novelty is strongest in Hippias, as quoted by Xenophon in his *Memorabilia* (in Sprague 1972:99. Sophists were routinely criticised for what appeared to their critics as excessive uses of analogies. See, for example, the criticism against Thrasymachos and Gorgias in Athanasius’s *Introduction to Hermogenes* (in Sprague 1972:48).
From a Sophist point of view, the purpose of the use of historical analogies is to shake old orthodoxies and discuss new intelligibility from different perspectives. There are two methodological clues to accomplish this task: First, the discussion is structured by doubt. Fleshing the Sophist notion of doubt out for the purpose at hand means to put all components of historical analogies – especially those that seem most obvious – under scrutiny. A historical analogy consists of a tenor, a vehicle and the link of tenor and vehicle. The vehicle is an interpretation of a historical event, series of events or era. The tenor is the phenomenon that we want to make intelligible to ourselves. The analogy equates, in more or less qualified manner, tenor and vehicle. In this way, the tenor becomes intelligible in light of the vehicle (Richards 1996). This translates into three important questions: (1) How is the vehicle interpreted? (2) How are tenor and vehicle connected? (3) What novel insights into the tenor do we get? The second methodological clue is the discussion of multiple perspectives. Gorgias and Protagoras make a strong case for debating at least two contrary positions about a particular issue (Kennedy 1963:31). \(^4\) In the case of historical analogies, these are historical analogies that are used in discourse to make sense of the same or a similar phenomenon but that see this phenomenon in a radically different light.

Structured by this twofold Sophist move, the remainder of this article discusses two metaphors of globalization that deal with a similar aspect of globalization but capture it in contrary ways. They concur that dramatically unequal power distributions rather than the legal equality of states constitutes the key feature of world politics. In order to make sense of this aspect of globalization, they use various historical empires as analogies to make sense of globalization. However, they interpret empire, and with it globalization, radically differently. To the proponents of the American Empire or the *Pax Americana* (henceforth empire) imperialism is a source of national pride. In the words of Jim Garrison (2004), “America should acknowledge – even celebrate – its transition to empire and the acquisition of global mastery.” According to this perspective, the United States rules the world in order to make it a better place. Authors such as Max Boot (2002; 2003), Thomas Donnelly (2002), Michael Ignatieff (2003), John Ikenberry (2001), Robert Kaplan (2003) and Charles Krauthammer (2003) disagree on a number of issues but they fully agree that imperial practice ought to mean to diffuse the American values of freedom and democracy, or in the words of Max Boot (2001) “a liberal and humanitarian imperialism.”

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000; 2004), by contrast, are not only critical of empire but also conceptualise it very differently. They define Empire (capitalised in order to distinguish it from traditional understandings of empire) as a form of sovereignty that is not contained by borders and that lacks a centre capable of dominating the global polity. We are entering a world in which sovereignty is no longer a phenomenon that constitutes the nation-state. The new sovereignty transcends the nation-state and constitutes Empire. The smooth space that sovereignty creates by being re-scaled from the national to the global level is distinctly Janus-faced: On the one hand, smooth space globalises capitalist mechanisms of hierarchies and control. Those privileged within the new polity, such as powerful corporations and governments, gain new avenues for exploitation. On the other hand, however, smooth space provides the opportunity for the

\(^4\) See also the anonymous treatise *Dissoi Logoi* (in Sprague 1972:279-293).
exploited – Hardt and Negri refer to them as multitude – to communicate, to discover commonality through communication, and to act against Empire.

**Pax Romana, Pax Britannica, Pax Americana?**

*Pax Americana* and *Pax Britannica* are the vehicles that make the tenor of *Pax Americana* intelligible. How do proponents of empire interpret these vehicles? Both are seen in a distinctly positive light. Robert Kaplan (2001), for instance, likens U.S. commanders in the Middle East, Europe, the Pacific and the Americas to Roman proconsuls and contends that U.S. soldiers ought to emulate the Roman and Greek type of warrior in order to keep the empire intact. The *Pax Britannica* is even more widely endorsed. In many ways, Niall Ferguson’s comparisons between the British and the American empires set the tone of the debate. Ferguson’s romantic notion of the British empire emphasises its military and economic successes as well as its ability to export its values to the colonies (Ferguson 2002). The alleged success story of the British empire is echoed in the work of a number of writers. They usually do not elaborate on the vehicle. They merely use it as a taken-for-granted short-hand to make sense of the current world order.\(^5\)

The short-hand is misleading because it is cleared of the dark sides of empire. Humanitarian catastrophes were as much a defining part of the Roman and British imperial experiences as their effective rule. There may be talk about the victory of the warriors that Kaplan glorifies in the Punic Wars but there is silence on the fate of Carthage. While the British empire was in many ways less cruel than the Roman empire, neglect killed millions of people. In India alone, 30-40 million people starved to death in the latter half of the 19\(^{th}\) century and famines continued in British India in the 20\(^{th}\) century (Bhatia 1985).\(^6\) Yet there was not only neglect. The Aborigines of Tasmania were exterminated in a campaign that started with a drunken Lieutenant and his wish “to see the Niggers run” (quoted in Cocker 1998). The ruthlessness with which Britain put down rebellions against its rule, such as the Indian Rebellion in 1857 and the Jamaica Uprising in 1865, or acts of cruelty that appear to having been void of any political purpose, such as the Amritsar Massacre in 1919, were inherent characteristics of British imperialism as were slavery and forced labour, random killings and sexual abuse. Yet when these crimes were committed, the missionary zeal loomed too large to even imagine any major wrongdoing. Given its supposed racial and civilisational supremacy, Britain had to, in the infamous words of Rudyard Kipling (1903) “[t]ake up the White Man’s burden” to enlighten the “new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child.”

The protagonists of the American Empire see Rome and Britain as shining examples. But, in their view, the *Pax Americana* shines even much brighter. The analogy is qualified in two ways: First, the American Empire is more benign than any previous empire. Ignatieff (2003:16) and Ikenberry (2001:192) are especially adamant in stressing that the American empire is an “empire lite”. Due to its history, the authors assert, the United States is a benevolent imperialist power. The war of independence and the cherished value of liberty that underpinned it are ingrained in the identity narrative. The United States defines itself as a state that promotes liberty, human rights, and democracy.

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\(^5\) Max Boot (2001) carries this analogy furthest.

\(^6\) Maria Misra (2002) estimates that between 10 and 33 million lives could have been saved by adequate British policies.
The United States is the guardian of liberty and has the duty to make liberty spread around the world. Alluding to Kipling, Donnelly contends that the United States has to shoulder the “Free Man’s Burden” to liberate the rest of the world. Second, most protagonists of the American empire assert that American power is unmatched by any other historical empires. Donnelly (2004) even claims that, due to the enormous capabilities of the United States, the correct question to ask is no longer what is in Washington’s power but what is not in its power. He (2002: 165) uses a comparison to make his point: “Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing. The Pax Britannica was run on the cheap.”

These two demarcations from previous empires are too stark to make for a useful analogy. In light of how the authors themselves describe the Pax Americana, the claim that it is a benign order to be sharply contrasted with past empires is implausible. For Ignatieff (2003:16), acting in the American interest makes for a benign empire: to craft international arrangements that further this interest; to violate these arrangements when they contradict the American interest. Ferguson (2002) echoes this persuasion. Since America is a freedom-loving nation and a reluctant imperial power, pursuing its interest is automatically a benign enterprise. Kaplan (2001:45) makes the military dimension of such an enterprise explicit. The benign empire ought to be able to fight wars as a continuation of politics with other means and seek to legitimise this after the fact: “In the 21st century, as in the 19th, we will initiate hostilities (...) whenever it is absolutely necessary and we see a clear advantage in doing so, and we will justify it morally after the fact.” Suddenly the postulated Pax Americana looks far less different from the Pax Britannica than the authors admit. The rulers have good intentions. They are more benevolent than many others. Their impetus for rule contains a strong missionary element. Believing in their benevolence, they find it incomprehensible if someone opposes their rule. They are fully prepared to punish and even kill those who they believe threaten their rule. And large-scale humanitarian disasters in the distant provinces remain largely unnoticed. No matter whether it is HIV/AIDS, malaria, starvation or genocide in Africa today or starvation, cholera, malaria and violent inter-ethnic clashes in British India, the metropolis looks the other way.

But is the United States really an imperial metropolis, able to shoulder such responsibilities? This is much more doubtful than the supporters of the American Empire acknowledge. Again, the difference between the Pax Americana and previous empires is more ambiguous than the authors put it. They focus almost exclusively on military might. Yet this is only one dimension of power. Michael Mann (2003), for example, distinguishes between military, economic, political and ideological power. This yields a much more nuanced discussion of U.S. power: Militarily, the United States is comparable to previous empires. It has superior military capabilities but far less manpower at its disposal. Economically, the United States is not more powerful than previous empires. Critical decisions need to be taken multilaterally, especially with Europe and East Asia. Politically, the US is not mightier than previous empires. International organisations prescribe multilateral decision-making procedures and allies sometimes push the United States into taking a particular stance instead of vice versa. Finally, U.S. ideological power is constantly jeopardised by Washington’s use of military power. American values such

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7 Yet some voices within this literature set caution that the United States is weaker than previous world empires: See Krauthammer (2003) and Ferguson (2002:286).
as liberty and democracy resonate on a global level and constitute a power resource for the United States as long as its military enterprises do not violate them.

So far, my critique against the literature on the benign American empire has been twofold: First, the lack of reflection upon the orthodox interpretations of the selected vehicles leads to the omission of the abominable aspects of empire. Second, the qualification of the equation is over-pronounced. Yet there is also a third problem, which is related to these two weaknesses. It is highly dubious whether this analogy to the Roman and the British empires sheds new light on the evolving global polity. Instead of opening space for reflection and debate, it closes it. Its one-sided interpretation of the Pax Romana and the Pax Britannica, along with its over-statement of differences between these historical empires and the American empire, filter out the worrisome aspects about the latter. The purpose of the literature is to legitimise US hegemony instead of questioning it and providing an intelligible account of it. In this way, it is part of a long tradition of imperialist literature that aims to justify and glorify the allegedly noble role of the metropolis (Lugard 1922; Sarraut 1923; Ryckmans 1948; Gann and Duignan 1967).

The next section uses the same three guiding questions to discuss Hardt and Negri’s concept of Empire.

**Via Mala Europa, Via Melia Roma et America, Via Optima Futura**

Hardt and Negri use three main historical reference points: the Roman Empire, Europe in the age of the nation-state, and the United States since 1776. In contrast to the literature on American empire, none of the vehicles is seen as a shining example to be emulated. Nevertheless, there is a clear juxtaposition. Hardt and Negri see the Roman Empire and the United States in a much more positive light than the European nation-state. They distinguish these polities based on two interrelated criteria: inclusiveness and expansionism. Focusing on constitutional practice in the era of nationalism, Hardt and Negri (2000:376) chastise the sovereign of the European nation-state as exclusive. Sovereignty in Europe is a transcendent sovereignty. It is lordship that holds sway over the masses. When the nation-state expands beyond its borders it extends this sway to the newly conquered lands.

Sovereignty in ancient Rome and in the United States, however, is different. Hardt and Negri (2000:165) contend that in these cases sovereignty is not imposed on the masses but it is produced by them. Thus, as the authors put it, the masses have the “power to construct [their] own political institutions and constitute society.” This power is organised into networks. There is not a single overarching power but various nodes of power. This power configuration allows for democratic processes but also gives rise to tensions that are inherent in these processes. In order to curb these conflicts from escalating, the sovereign power relies on control. Expansion to the outside distracts the polity from reflecting on the contradiction between control and the democratic ideal. In contrast to the practices of the European nation-state, this expansion does not destroy the outside. In line with the democratic ideal, it is inclusive. The metropolis opens itself to the newly incorporated periphery. A new node of power is added to the network. Comparing Rome and the United States, the authors (2000: 166) claim: “It is striking how strongly this American experiment resembles the ancient constitutional experience, and specifically the political theory inspired by imperial Rome!”
Yet this sharp juxtaposition of the vehicles – the European nation-state on the one hand, and Rome and America on the other – is misleading. At closer scrutiny, the difference is not one of kind but at best one of degree. Hardt and Negri’s account of constitutional theory in Rome relies on only one writer: Polybios. Independently of the question whether Polybios really provides a reliable account of Roman constitutional theory, it is highly questionable whether he is a supportive witness for the notion of inclusive sovereignty. Polybios contended that the three forms of desirable rule – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – are inherently unstable, giving way to the abuse of power in tyranny, oligarchy, and ochlocracy (dictatorship of the mob). The only stable type of rule is the mixture of the three desirable forms, which, according to Polybios (1978:VI), republican Rome had accomplished. In Hardt and Negri’s interpretation, this three-tier model conceptualises sovereign power not as situated above but within society. The authors overlook, however, that Polybios’s argument fully endorsed large scale exclusions. He was fully supportive of the clear-cut distinctions between patricians, plebeians, and slaves. At the time of Polybios’ writing, the plebeians were banned from seeking public office or intermarrying with patricians. Slaves, of course, were at the very bottom of the societal hierarchy. A more inclusive rule would have been an ochlocracy – i.e. an abomination – for Polybios.

As far as the United States is concerned, Hardt and Negri’s emphasis is on constitutional theory and practice. Throughout their discussion, they rely on the representation of the United States by Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville and Abraham Lincoln. Sovereignty is not situated above but embedded in the masses. Sovereign power is distributed across various nodes. There is a network of power weaved into the societal fabric as opposed to a unitary power from above holding sway over the society (Hardt and Negri 2000:167-172). It is highly doubtful, however, whether an account relying on a handful of statesmen and scholars of previous centuries provides a useful account of constitutional practice through the centuries. The slaughter of indigenous populations, slavery and legally sanctioned racial segregation simply cannot be reconciled with the notion of inclusive sovereignty. Without any question, the United States today is much more inclusionary than it used to be (and than many other polities in the world continue to be). But even today, it is far from certain to what extent nodes of power are distributed across a society in which the wealthiest five percent of households possesses almost 60 percent of the country’s wealth and the bottom 40 percent are left with 0.3 percent (Wolff 2004). These data are not particularly supportive of the notion that power is not above the people – at least large segments of them.

Europe fully deserves some of Hardt and Negri’s criticism. The criteria of inclusive sovereignty and expansion help to make sense of past catastrophes and persistent failures. Yet the authors overlook that today’s Europe is in some ways very different from the Europe that they criticise. European integration actually created something that the term network power captures well. Brussels is precisely not ancient Rome. Brussels’ bureaucracy is merely a node in a network that encompasses an array of state governments, legislatures, corporations, trade unions, pressure groups, social movements and so on. Furthermore, the European Union expands, in sharp contrast to Rome and many other expanding polities in history, in a peaceful and democratic manner.
How do Hardt and Negri qualify their comparisons? The authors contend that Empire is something new. Thus, much of their work is concerned with differentiating Empire from other polities. Four distinctions feature prominently: First, Empire puts an end to territoriality. Sovereignty is no longer contained in nation-state containers or comparable political entities. There is only one sovereign power in the world. A global network of power replaces the former patchwork of sovereignties. This creates a smooth space on a global level. Second, Empire suffers from a serious democratic deficit. Using Polybios’ typology as a benchmark, Hardt and Negri (2000:110) maintain that Empire is monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic at the same time. Yet monarchical and aristocratic actors such as the Pentagon, World Bank and IMF (monarchical), and certain groupings of nation-states and trans-national corporations (aristocratic) are privileged. Thus, the democratic aspect “is largely illusory”. Third, the capacities for control have changed. Disciplinary power has been increasingly replaced with biopower. Power no longer merely prescribes but is deeply internalised in people’s backgrounds. The grip of biopower, therefore, is much firmer than the one of disciplinary power. Biopower permeates “entirely the consciousness and bodies of individuals” (Hardt and Negri 2000:24). Fourth, the exploited masses have the opportunity to rid themselves of their yoke. Hardt and Negri (2004:xiii-xiv) refer to the masses in this context as multitude, defined as “the set of all the exploited and the subjugated.” Under the condition of smooth space and the shared experience of exploitation, the diverse multitude has the opportunity to produce more and more commonality, which enables it to deliberate and to democratically act in concert.

These four differences are over-pronounced. It is questionable whether Empire has re-invented territoriality to the extent the authors claim. Global space is far less smooth than the authors maintain. International travel and migration patterns make this all too obvious. To a privileged few with, say, an American or European passport, travel and even migration have become a simple thing. To an African, however, the world looks very different (Dunn 2004). Furthermore, the state and the nation still constitute borders that matter well beyond geographical mobility. European nations tend to draw an all too clear line between the allegedly authentic nation and immigrant populations. And even allied nations such as France and the United States resort to a discourse of national pride and prejudice against one another if they cannot agree on a course of action. The borders of the state and the nation, if altering under the global condition, are still with us, even if we want to wish them away.

The authors’ argument that Empire is less democratic than the polities that Roman and American constitutional theory postulated is built on highly questionable historical interpretations. As important as their critique of Empire’s democratic deficit is, using Polybios as a benchmark does not make for a compelling argument. Polybios fully supported the undemocratic features of the Roman polity. He fully endorsed the exclusion of the masses from the political process. Anything else, in Polybios’ view, would have been an appalling rule of the mob.

The shift from disciplinary power to biopower is not as decisive as Hardt and Negri suggest. Disciplinary power remains an important aspect under the condition of globalisation as international terrorism as well as the doctrine of regime change and its application in Afghanistan and Iraq show. In this regard, previous epochs are much more similar to the current international order than Hardt and Negri (2000:22-41) make them
seem to be. Their account of biopower is also problematic because biopower appears to be a unique feature of Empire. Their discussion of other political formations does not address biopower. Foucault (1976:99-173), however, coined the concept with the nation-state in mind. Biopower, in his view, was a prerequisite for the emergence of the nation-state. It made it possible for the state to control entire populations. And even Foucault’s account may be too limited. What, for instance, made it possible for the Roman Empire not to be threatened by a slave population on the Italian peninsula of 3 million if the overall population (including the slaves) was only 7.5 million? Disciplinary power alone is not sufficient to uphold order under such circumstances. Power relations need to be deeply internalised.

The stark differences that Hardt and Negri postulate between the current Empire and past Empires also undermine their argument on the emancipatory potential for the multitude. It is not clear how Empire, in contrast to previous polities, can offer the multitude the opportunity to break free if biopower is a defining characteristic of this Empire. The grip of biopower is much firmer than the one of disciplinary power prevalent in previous polities. It is also unclear why Empire has a greater potential for emancipation than, say, the nation-state. Within a nation-state setting, the multitude – or at least major segments of it – has a stock of shared beliefs that enables it to make sense of the world through a process of collective reasoning. Many of these beliefs are ingrained in the identity narrative of a nation. The multitude on the global level, by contrast, has to start almost from scratch. They inhabit different life-worlds and it is unclear how they can generate a shared life-world, which makes it possible to communicate, deliberate, and make decisions in a democratic manner.

In some ways, therefore, the analogies made by Hardt and Negri resemble the analogies made by the supporters of an American empire. The repertoire of historical interpretations from which Hardt and Negri draw is very limited, the authors shun away from critically reflecting on the interpretation of the historical facts they select, and they over-emphasise the differences between the vehicles and the tenor. It is no coincidence that a major criticism levelled against Hardt and Negri is the view that the authors propose empty concepts (Buchanan and Pahuja 2004). The conceptual problems stem partly from the problematic historical analogies that the authors make. In an important aspect, however, Empire is much more helpful than empire. Empire is a novel concept that sheds new light on globalisation. It provokes us to re-think the nature of borders, power, sovereignty and democracy in an evolving global polity. It opens up space to reflect and debate rather than closing it.

**Conclusion**

What insights does this discussion of historical analogies provide about globalization? In what ways was it a leading research enterprise, albeit empire and Empire are rather misleading analogies in various respects? The discussion provided three leads: First, debating empire and Empire highlights key aspects of globalization about which the still predominant Westphalian perspective remains silent. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia may be useful to understand some of the de jure principles of global order but it greatly distracts, if understood as a de facto condition of international politics, from the radical inequalities in the world and the power processes that generate these inequalities. The

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8 These figures pertain to the Roman Empire under Augustus (Christ 1988:31).
discussion of historical empires such as the Roman and the British ones are helpful in this context because they remind us of the dynamics between rulers and ruled as well as the fundamentally different distribution of possibilities and opportunities that these dynamics create for people in the metropolis and the periphery.

Second, discussing Empire opens up thinking space to understand these processes. It provokes questions such as the following: Who are the rulers? Washington is not what Rome and London used to be. Since globalization is such a multifaceted phenomenon, it has become more difficult – but certainly no less important – to specify where the metropolis is and who its agents are. How are global hierarchies maintained? The status quo is upheld by a variety of forms of power. A sole focus on military power is insufficient. Hardt and Negri as well as some proponents of empire concur in this important aspect. How do global hierarchies come undone and what replaces them? There are many possible avenues of change (shift or evolution, from above or from below, peaceful or violent etc.) and directions of change (tyrannical or emancipatory). The emphases of Empire on revolutionary change by the multitude and of empire on a mere replacement of the imperial centre are only two possibilities.

Third, the discussion of empire cautions against the blinding power of historical analogies. Similarly to Rudyard Kipling’s ideological carte blanche for British imperialism, the strong and taken-for-granted beliefs in Washington’s liberal-democratic values make it inconceivable to the proponents of empire that the United States could do seriously wrong on the global stage. Historical analogies, as important as they are for us to make sense of the world, never mirror the world. We ought to accept that they help us to establish a working truth but we ought to carefully reflect upon the analogies before they come to constitute a working truth for us and even then we ought not to be too complacent about them.

Discussions of historical analogies, therefore, enrich our understanding of the world. They provide us with leads to make the world more intelligible to ourselves. Uncritically accepting a particular historical analogy as the truth, however, involves risks. The more influential an analogy is, the greater the risks are. The Munich analogy, for instance, informs decisions to go to war. The benign empire analogy inspires a whole set of foreign policies, including the re-engineering of entire world regions such as the Middle East. Since so much is at stake we should withstand the lure of the cognitive and argumentative shortcut. We should doubt these analogies and, in the process of doubting them, make the world more intelligible to ourselves.

Yet students of international relations are currently not very well equipped to replace the shortcut with doubt. Two problems need to be overcome: First, most authors are very reluctant about the open hand. For the most part, they embrace the closed fist. The closed fist carries with it the assumption that it is feasible to discover the objective truth if the researcher follows the correct scientific methods. The closed fist, therefore, curbs doubt if the results of research are based on what is regarded as sound methods. Second, international relations research is very reluctant to engage with history. History and historical analogies spark and illustrate entire theoretical frameworks – be they Realist, Liberal, or Constructivist in their various forms – but this is hardly engaging with history. As Beatrice Heuser and Anja Hartmann (2001:2) observe: “To bolster their theoretical position, these theorists frequently quarry history for examples to illustrate their position” without inquiring into the slice of history that they select in much depth.
References


