

What price an American Empire? Part Three

Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire by Niall Ferguson, Penguin Press, 2004, ISBN 0-713-99615-3

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PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE

This is the conclusion of a three-part review

The Will to Power

It is rare to be able to use the words “Oxford don” in the same sentence as “sex, violence and power,” but Professor Niall Ferguson, who is a Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford, gives us that opportunity.

In Ferguson’s opinion sex, violence and power are the primary historical determinants and not economics. It is a theory he put forward in his book *The Cash Nexus: Money and Power in the Modern World, 1700-2000*. The guiding assumption of this book is “that these conflicting impulses—call them for the sake of simplicity sex, violence and power—are individually or together capable of over-riding money, the economic motive.”

The central conclusion of the *Cash Nexus* is that “money does not make the world go round... Rather, it has been political events—above all, wars—that have shaped the institutions of modern life.”

Ferguson’s main target is obviously Marxism, but very few historical schools have managed to analyse the modern period without reference to economics and even pragmatic economic determinists like Paul Kennedy come in for a kicking. As the author of *The World’s Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild*, we might expect Ferguson to attribute some importance to finance capital, since the Rothschilds were the major dealers in government bonds for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But his view of the role of finance capital is extremely limited. He envisages finance capital as entirely dominated by political factors and never operating as a determinant except in a secondary way. For anyone who has lived at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and seen the power of finance capital, Ferguson’s view is entirely at odds with experience.

There is a Peanuts comic strip in which Peppermint Patty sits at her desk answering the question, “What were the causes of the First World War? Use both sides of paper if necessary.” If she had studied Professor Ferguson, she would not have needed to use even one side of paper. She could have written the answer on the back of a postage stamp—sex, violence and power. Ferguson has no place for complexity in his view of causality when he discusses the major events of the modern world. He gives Fritz Fischer’s seminal work on the German archives, which traces the long-term tendencies within German society that led to the First World War, short shrift.

To be fair, Ferguson is aware that sex, violence and power will not explain every twist and turn of events or every nuance of historical development and thoughtfully provides the reader with a secondary causative factor—the bond market. Why did France lose the Napoleonic War? An underdeveloped bond market. Why did Germany lose the First World War? An underdeveloped bond market. Why did Germany lose the

Second World War? An underdeveloped bond market. Why did American lose the Vietnam War? ...No, it simply won’t work.

But Professor Ferguson has another causative factor to hand, of even greater import and more central to his own world view—the theory of insufficient ruthlessness. Why did Britain lose its American colonies? Because it was insufficiently ruthless. Why did Britain lose its empire? Because it was insufficiently ruthless. Why did America lose the Vietnam War? Because it was insufficiently ruthless. This is history made simple indeed.

History, for Ferguson, is essentially undetermined. As he explains in *Virtual History*, history is a series of “chaotic and unpredictable events that could have turned out differently.”

The First World War, an event which many contemporaries, and most historians since, have thought of as inevitable, was an entirely contingent event in Ferguson’s view. “Neither militarism, imperialism, nor secret diplomacy made war inevitable,” he contends. “Everywhere in Europe in 1914 anti-militarism was in the political ascendant. Businessmen—even the ‘merchants of death’ like Krupp—had no interest in a major European war. Diplomacy, secret or otherwise, was successful in resolving imperial conflicts between the powers: both on colonial and even naval questions, Britain and Germany were able to settle their differences.”

This is a familiar argument, resembling the theory of ultra-imperialism put forward by Karl Kautsky, the leader of the German Social Democratic Party, at the beginning of the war when he suggested that contending great powers might agree to exploit the world collaboratively. Four years of slaughter in the trenches made such arguments less credible. The sheer scale and duration of the conflict and the fact that the same conflict was to emerge within a generation testify to some deep historical forces at work.

The First World War, Ferguson suggests, could have been avoided or at least limited in scale. Britain did not need to intervene and in so doing make it into a world war. Had Britain stood aside, he argues, it could have kept its global empire while a European Union emerged on the continent under German leadership. This argument overlooks the obvious fact that no government since the Hundred Years War had ever allowed a potentially hostile power to occupy the other side of the English Channel. The guiding principle of British foreign policy throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that the balance of power should be maintained in Europe and that no single state should be powerful enough to dominate the whole continent. In modified form the balance of power remains the guiding principle of US policy toward Europe today. But such long-term historical continuities have no place in Ferguson’s analysis since all historical events, even of the magnitude of a world war, or the loss of an empire, come down to a matter of will in the end.

The Nietzschean undertones of Ferguson’s obsession with will, sex, violence and power would be unmistakable, even if he had not made his philosophical debt explicit in the *Cash Nexus*. Nietzsche may seem an odd

choice for any historian seeking philosophical inspiration since he himself despised history, which he thought suppressed instinct. Nietzsche felt himself in an age that was corrupted by and supersaturated with history and particularly “the monstrous influence of the philosophy of Hegel.” History as Hegel conceived it—history as a scientific system—was to be condemned because it destroyed illusion, without which, Nietzsche thought, great things never succeeded, since “All living things need an atmosphere around them, a secret circle of darkness.”

Men were not capable of achieving anything, Nietzsche thought, “without previously having gone into that misty patch of the unhistorical”. Nietzsche wanted to convert history into mythmaking. History, he argued, had to turn itself into an artwork because only in that way could it arouse the instincts. [Nietzsche: *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*]

Nietzsche’s “misty patch of the unhistorical” is not a promising starting point for the historian, but to read Nietzsche and Ferguson side by side is to be struck by a consonance of ideas. One of Ferguson’s earliest books was a study of alternative historical scenarios under the title *Virtual History*. At a time of seismic historical changes there is nothing more natural than that historians should consider “What might have been” in a way that they would not think of doing in a period when history moves in well established channels and it seems possible to understand the direction of events and their causes. Periods like the one we are living through challenge accepted notions and demand that received historical opinion is reassessed. But Ferguson’s counterfactual history is not that kind of re-evaluation. There is a certain sameness about all the “What if?” scenarios which Ferguson entertains that amount to “What if there had been no revolutions?” No English Revolution, no American Revolution, no French Revolution and of course, no Russian Revolution.

Ferguson’s counterfactual history is not a serious study of causation, but a form of Nietzschean myth-making that attempts to expunge the memory of revolution. It is Nietzsche’s revolt against “the blind force of the real.”

Real history certainly gives Professor Ferguson problems. He can tell us why the First World War should not have happened, but not why it did happen and he is perplexed by the results of the recent US election. Having backed Kerry to win, he was as appalled and disoriented by Bush’s victory as any European liberal. In an article in the *Independent* shortly afterwards he complained that although not a natural Democrat, “I have found it increasingly hard to stomach the Republican Party’s increasingly strident intolerance on social questions from social marriage to stem cell research.”

Bush, Ferguson writes, is, “fundamentally ‘a messianic American Calvinist’, someone for whom all setbacks are merely a divine test to which a ‘faith-based’ president can only react with obstinate resolve.”

The problem for Ferguson is that “too many Americans share that religious sensibility.” In an interview on *Book TV*, Ferguson described himself as a liberal fundamentalist. By this it must be understood that he is a liberal in the sense that he supports the free market rather than advocating welfare reforms. Unlike the Republican neoconservatives, he takes his free market liberalism to the point that he believes that every individual should be able to pursue their own interests in their social life as well as their economic activities. In this, despite his defence of stem cell research and gay marriage, he is far to the right of even the present administration.

Ferguson is thrown into despair by the US election result because his historical theories have no bearing on reality and cannot explain the rise of the religious right in America. Sex, violence and power, while everywhere prevalent in history, offer no coherent explanation of the course of events and have no predictive capacity. History necessarily seems chaotic to him because he denies himself the rational means to understand it. The irrational cannot explain the irrational.

As a result there is a tremendous intellectual vacuity in Ferguson’s thick tomes. That vacuity is initially masked by the mass of anecdote and a style

that is as easy on the mind as any best selling airport novel. But the system of thought, if it can be called that, which underlies all his books consists of a limited number of superficial concepts that are so poorly articulated as to be incoherent. Not only are the arguments reactionary, they are banal. When a man rises to a position of academic eminence and media celebrity on the basis of ideas like this, however, it is an indication of a more general intellectual decline in a ruling elite that does not want a rational analysis of the world in which it lives. Mythmaking is substituted for rational thought. Nothing could be more intellectually bankrupt than this.

Ferguson may not be able to offer us an explanation of what is happening in the modern world, but his philosophy of history is nonetheless entirely appropriate to it. Nietzsche is the perfect choice of philosopher for someone who, like Ferguson, wants to rehabilitate the concept of empire. Nietzsche is the philosopher of imperialism par excellence. This may seem anomalous since he wrote most of his works before modern imperialism emerged, but the philosopher was also a gifted musician and had the musician’s sixth sense for the imaginative anticipation of the intellectual currents of a future age. As Lukacs explained in *The Destruction of Reason*, Nietzsche’s philosophy expresses in a mythologized form the ideological impulses of the imperialist epoch. The very lack of intellectual definition in his ideas has allowed them to be endlessly reinterpreted so that he has remained as influential in the post-World War II period as he was for the Nazis.

In the final analysis, for Ferguson, causality in history comes down to “what Nietzsche called the will to power: the satisfaction that comes from dominating over other weaker groups.”

Without this will to power an empire must inevitably fail and give way before its more aggressive rivals. It is a theory that, while in no way explanatory, meets the ideological needs of the current US ruling elite. Everything comes down in the end, for Ferguson, to the will of the powerful to dominate over the weak and nowhere is that better expressed than in the White House.

Since history is not ultimately determined by economics, according to Ferguson, it is possible for an economically inferior power, that is to say one like the US that is mired in two crippling deficits, to win a war. “What war makes clear,” he writes in the *Cash Nexus*, “is that power is not exclusively economic, especially over the short run ... the ability to destroy counts for more than the ability to produce.”

This statement suggests that Ferguson’s hand wringing about liberal social policies is entirely hypocritical. Here is a supposedly well-educated, cultured and civilised man putting forward what amounts to a programme for looting and pillaging the world, so long as he and others like him who fly first class on flat beds across the Atlantic can retain the freedoms of their privileged life style. There is something grotesque as well as reactionary about this, but Ferguson’s ideas are the historically determined reflection in an academic milieu of the standpoint and driving impulses of the clique around Bush that has decided to plunder as much of the world’s wealth as possible while the US has a military advantage. As he explains to us in several of his books, there can be no empire without hypocrisy.

Ferguson has some qualms about the way that Bush’s social policies may impact on the privileged social layers of which he is a part, but he has no concern for their impact on the majority of the population. Empires, he argues, are not brought down by overstretch. They are ruined by understretch—not spending enough on their military. The costs of war are not a problem “in a non-democratic regime” he argues, since, “...the aggregate and long run costs of a war may be irrelevant. Provided the immediate benefits of war flow to the ruling elites and the costs are borne by the unenfranchised masses, war can be a perfectly rational policy option.”

Concluded

See Also:

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Part One

[7 December 2004]

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Part Two

[8 December 2004]



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