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Republics between hegemony and empire:  
How ancient city-states built empires and the USA doesn't (anymore)

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Abstract: This paper discusses the concepts 'empire' and 'hegemony', provides a new model of the institutional structure of ancient 'citizen-city-state empires', and argues that the contemporary USA cannot be defined as an 'empire'.

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## 1. Problems of definition

Do Rome and the USA qualify as ‘imperial republics’? The question mark in the title of our conference prompts us to address the question of definitions: what is a republic, what is an empire, and – if either Rome or the USA fail to meet our criteria – what are the alternatives? While extended discussion of definition can be tedious and must never become an end in itself, the fuzzy rhetoric of ‘empire’, ‘imperialism’ and ‘hegemony’ that characterizes contemporary discourse underscores the need for conceptual clarity. In fact, if we cannot agree on a working definition of ‘empire’, comparative analysis becomes impossible, and there may be little to discuss.

### 1.1. Republic

On a minimalist view, republics are state-level political systems that are not hereditary monarchies. More commonly, however, and in keeping with the original meaning of *res publica*, republics tend to be regarded as states in which government entails some substantial involvement or the consent of the people governed. Popular rule per se or democracy (however defined) are not essential to this concept, while a clear notion of citizenship and the presence of deliberative and electoral bodies of citizens may reasonably be considered defining features of a republican regime (and also accommodate oligarchic forms of government).<sup>1</sup> Luckily for us, the republics were are concerned with – both ancient and modern – conform to both minimalist and more expansive definitions: the absence of monarchy, a clearly defined citizenry, and the existence of established institutions of popular political participation.

### 1.2. Empire

Empire, by contrast, is a more elusive concept. The principal difference is between explicitly political and therefore narrow definitions of empire and more sweeping metaphorical usage of this term. As we will see below (section 3), the latter is particularly prevalent in discussions of the contemporary United States and its foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Historical comparison, however, benefits from conceptual clarity and a universally applicable ‘core’ definition. From that perspective, empire is best defined as a state that is endowed with particular properties. The state, as opposed to bands, local groups or chiefdoms, may be defined following Michael Mann (drawing on Max Weber) as ‘a differentiated set of institutions and personnel, embodying centrality, in the sense that political relations radiate outwards from a center to a cover territorially demarcated area, over which it claims a monopoly of binding and permanent rule-making, backed up by physical violence’.<sup>3</sup>

Empires differ from generic states not so much in terms of size as in terms of diversity and internal political differentiation. It is true that ‘empire’ intuitively connotes large scale: however, given that scale is necessarily relative in the sense that it is contingent on historical context, it is impossible to

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<sup>1</sup> Socialist republics or fascist regimes are borderline cases but of no relevance in this context.

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the meaning of ‘empire’ has varied over time: Lieven 2000: 3-26 provides a useful survey. Cf. also briefly Pagden 1995: 12-14, and Folz 1969 and Duverger 1980 for more detailed discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Mann 1986: 37. Modern states may claim a monopoly on legitimate violence (Weber 1978: 56), but that can hardly be assumed for early states *pace* Sanderson 1999: 56.

set any absolute quantitative thresholds for imperial statehood.<sup>4</sup> Instead, recent definitions focus on the elements of hierarchy and heterogeneity. According to Michael Doyle, for instance, empire is ‘a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society’; ‘a system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy – the effective sovereignty – of the other, the subordinate periphery’.<sup>5</sup> This form of domination accommodates various forms of indirect rule, i.e., the exertion of political control through the elites of the subjugated peripheries, and does by no means presuppose the center’s direct control over the actual management of these peripheries. The imperial metropole or core does, however, in Paul Schroeder’s words, establish ‘final authority ... over the vital political decisions’ of the periphery.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on ‘final authority’ strikes me as particularly helpful as it clearly demarcates imperial rule (regardless of its practical mechanisms) from hegemonic power, which is usually considered to lack this vital feature (see below, section 1.3).

Related definitions of empire tend to stress diversity and alienation. For instance, empire might be seen as a state in which one or more regions have a living memory of being part of a different autonomous polity, which was at some point brought under the rule of the current imperial power. As this memory fades, a unitary state evolves.<sup>7</sup> However, this approach risks overprivileging political power over cultural difference, which might persist and thus divide an imperial entity well beyond any living memory of independence. More generally, diversity per se is of limited value in defining empire simply because all pre-nation states in history that were bigger than city-states tended to be heterogeneous in terms of language, religion and other cultural characteristics: if diversity were the critical variable, most pre-modern states would have to be subsumed within the category of empire.<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Howe’s definition makes an attempt to combine the defining qualities of political hierarchy and cultural diversity: ‘an empire is a large, composite, multi-ethnic or multinational political unit, usually created by conquest, and divided between a dominant center and subordinate, sometimes far distant, peripheries.’<sup>9</sup> The center-periphery dichotomy is the pivotal characteristic.<sup>10</sup> The culturally diverse character of the imperial whole, on the other hand, whilst often a logical and indeed ineluctable consequence of conquest, cannot properly be regarded as a *conditio sine qua non*: whereas modern European overseas imperialism invariably created diverse political entities, the case of the Athenian ‘empire’ – in which a dominant center endeavored to rule culturally closely related polities that hardly qualify as separate ‘national units’ – might be more difficult to accommodate within this template, and lends Howe’s definition a whiff of anachronism.

Overall, core-periphery-centered concepts of empire work well for any empires that are republics, because the citizenry of the dominant core will strive to preserve any privileges associated with its formal separation from the population of the dominated periphery, as well as for any modern colonial empires,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the core-periphery distinction employed in the following permits us to view both the dominion of hellenistic Rhodes in the second century BCE and that of the Roman state of the same period as imperial entities despite their vast differences in terms of scale and power.

<sup>5</sup> Doyle 1986: 45, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Schroeder 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Suggested by Jack Goldstone for Morris & Scheidel forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> The same is true with respect to the prevalence of indirect rule, which is likewise typical of traditional states.

<sup>9</sup> Howe 2002: 30.

<sup>10</sup> While it may well be true that modern definitions of empire that emphasize the domination and exploitation of a periphery by a dominant core owe much to the experience of modern colonial empires (as Lieven 2002: 25 points out), this does not limit the utility of such definitions to that particular context. It is hard to envision any kind of imperial expansion that is not sustained by a core or metropole (however diffuse, as in the case of the Mongol or Ottoman conquest empires) which claim certain entitlements. Conquest, by contrast, is not an essential ingredient: Motyl 2001: 32-3.

with their European or North American cores and geographically and culturally distant possessions.<sup>11</sup> In other words, it works well for the states that we have been asked to consider at this meeting. This distinction begins to break down in the case of very long-lived empires, such as the Roman empire under monarchy – a period in which the privileges of the core gradually declined to zero – and China after the Qin unification, with similar consequences for the ‘land within the passes’. In other cases, most notably Old Kingdom Egypt, core-periphery relationships disappeared much more rapidly and territorial states emerged. This problem underlines the need for a dynamic definition of empire that gives due considerations to two issues: that states we may not ordinarily think of as ‘empires’ often underwent an ‘imperial’ phase of core-periphery dominance and attendant diversity – say, France or Britain; and that even very large and initially highly heterogeneous empires may, over time, turn into states that retain some of their diversity but lose a distinctive core (such as the mature Roman empire or China). ‘Empire’, therefore, is best understood both as a particular type of political entity *and* as a stage or phase of state formation.

### 1.3. Hegemony

In this paper, as in much of the literature, the concept of ‘hegemony’ is employed as the principal alternative to ‘empire’ as a form of political dominance. Once again, current usage varies widely, from de facto conflation with ‘empire’ (see below, section 3) to narrow technical definitions such as that favored by Michael Doyle, who regards hegemony as a metropole’s control over ‘much or all of the external, but little or none of the internal, policy of other states’.<sup>12</sup> More generally, hegemony represents ‘clear, acknowledged leadership by one within a community of units not under a single authority’.<sup>13</sup> However, even within the framework of these definitions, the actual extent of hegemonic dominance, and its association with exploitation, provides ample room for debate.

Thus, a ‘weak’ or ‘benign’ version of hegemony might accommodate ‘autonomous, coordinate units enjoying juridical equality (status, sovereignty, rights, and international obligations) regardless of differences in power’.<sup>14</sup> This is the sense in which George Grote talked about the ostensible virtues of Athenian hegemony in the wake of the Persian invasions, as mere leadership of a coalition and as such sharply delineated from the concept and practice of empire.<sup>15</sup> Recent political theory generalizes from security benefits to more broadly defined ‘public goods’ conferred by the exercise of hegemonic power, which has been defined as ‘the persistent and consistent actions taken by a single dominant state, in pursuit of its own national self-interest, that also provides public goods or externalities for the international system as a whole. ... Under a hegemonic system, one paramount state supposedly maintains a semblance of order and uses power and persuasion to impose flexibly enforced rules upon an otherwise anarchic system of international relations’.<sup>16</sup>

A ‘stronger’ version of hegemony has long been envisioned by Immanuel Wallerstein, who most recently defined it as a situation in which ‘one state is able to impose its set of rules on the interstate system, and thereby creates temporarily a new political order’, and that state likewise enjoys ‘extra advantages for enterprises located within it or protected by it, advantages not accorded by the ‘market’ but obtained through political pressure’.<sup>17</sup> This ties in which definitions of hegemony that center on

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<sup>11</sup> This reduces our need to distinguish between core-wide empires (which control all former core polities) and colonial empires (in which a developed core controls an underdeveloped periphery: for this distinction, see Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: 209-10).

<sup>12</sup> Doyle 1986: 12.

<sup>13</sup> Schroeder 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Grote 1888: 380ff.

<sup>16</sup> O’Brien 2002: 3-4, drawing on Hegemonic Stability Theory.

<sup>17</sup> Wallerstein 2002: 357.

economic power: for instance, supremacy in the areas of productive technology, commerce and finance can be thought to confer hegemony.<sup>18</sup> Other approaches, most notably Antonio Gramsci's, emphasize the ideological dimension of hegemony as the exercise of consensual domination. In the most expansive view, hegemonic powers 'stand out qualitatively from their peers with a power that is decisively economic and cultural as well as political'.<sup>19</sup>

This range of opinion raises the question of whether these various non-political features, whilst undeniably common and often organically connected to political leadership, should be regarded as essential to any basic working definition of hegemony. For the purposes of this paper, I will employ the term restrictively as denoting one state's control over the foreign policy of autonomous polities. In as much as this relationship logically implies the hegemon's supremacy in military, economic or even (but by no means necessarily) cultural terms, this minimalist approach is readily compatible with more generalized notions of hegemony without, however, depending on the actual presence or extent of relationships of dominance beyond the sphere of foreign policy and military coordination.

## 2. Republican city-states and their empires

### 2.1. Pre-modern republics, city-states, and empire

Among state-level polities, republics were rare in pre-industrial history. Most empires were ruled by monarchical regimes in conjunction with aristocracies of varying autonomy and strength.<sup>20</sup> While republics with a strong element of popular involvement and consent might enjoy advantages in terms of military mobilization, monarchies can be expected to be more flexible in accommodating territorial expansion by coopting and incorporating foreign elites. Republics based on popular political participation are unable to extend the franchise beyond a certain point without eroding the unifying nature of citizenship (as in Rome) or encountering growing logistical problems unless they switch to federal or representative systems of government (as in parts of hellenistic Greece). If republican regimes are to be maintained, expansion entails ongoing growth of the disfranchised periphery relative to a stable core, whereas in monarchies, *ceteris paribus*, the formal preeminence of the core can more readily be reduced or the core itself expanded (as for instance in the Neo-Assyrian empire), and centripetal social mobility may occur with less friction. As a consequence, imperial republics, upon expanding their dominions, invariably construct increasingly complex patterns of status and governance aimed to reconcile two inherently divergent objectives: imperial growth *and* preservation of the republican regime and the preeminence of its core. 'Multi-layered' states result from this process.<sup>21</sup>

Republican Rome belongs to a very small set of imperial states which, to the best of my knowledge, has so far eluded proper definition or conceptualization. Pre-modern republics that built empires invariably began as city-states. This is unsurprising, given that under pre-modern conditions of transport and communication technology, state-level polities are unlikely to develop non-monarchical institutions unless they are unusually small, culturally homogeneous and socially cohesive. City-states are the subject of a recent global cross-cultural study organized by the Copenhagen Polis Center under the direction of Mogens Hansen.<sup>22</sup> This survey includes case-studies of 35 different city-state cultures from Sumer more than 5,000 years ago to various west African polities as recently as the nineteenth century. Despite their dispersion in space and time – across several continents and five millennia –, these city-states have much in common, notably the fact that they always occurred as part of larger city-state

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<sup>18</sup> Gamble 2002: 130.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor 2002: 286. Military supremacy is strangely missing from this lineup, a common flaw of O'Brien and Clesse 2002 also noted by Ferguson 2003.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Eisenstadt 1993; Kautsky 1997. Cf. most recently Motyl 2001: 12-38 for structural analysis.

<sup>21</sup> I elaborate on this in Scheidel forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Hansen 2000, 2002.

cultures: clusters of city-states that shared language, religion and other cultural features but were politically fragmented into a certain number of political units.

Hansen defines the city-state as ‘a highly institutionalized and highly centralized micro-state consisting of one town (often walled) with its immediate hinterland and settled with a stratified population, of whom some are citizens, some foreigners, and sometimes, slaves. Its territory is so small that the urban center can be reached in a day’s walk or less, and the politically privileged part of its population is so small that it does in fact constitute a face-to-face society. The population is ethnically affiliated with the population of neighboring city-states, but political identity is focused on the city-state itself and based on differentiation from other city-states. The city-state is a self-governing but not necessarily independent political unit.’<sup>23</sup> This is necessarily an ideal type, and not all features apply in equal measure to all specimens. Even so, in terms of general trends, city-states tend to be associated with a number of historically distinctive features, one of which is republicanism. While many city-states – indeed probably the majority – were monarchies, a number of them were not, or moved from monarchical to republican regimes, most of them oligarchies but sometimes democratic. Examples include ancient Greece, Etruria, Latium, medieval Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Mzab in Algeria, Swahili city-states on the coast of East Africa, Ibadan of the Yoruba, and Banda-Neira of the Malay.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, even in monarchical city-states, voting councils and deliberative assemblies are frequently attested, as in Sumer, Assyria, Phoenicia, the Viking city-states in Ireland, Swahili states, the Niger Delta, and Spring-and-Autumn China.<sup>25</sup>

As noted, such institutions are more likely to thrive in micro-states (all city-states necessarily start out as micro-states). They are also likely to be associated with strong concepts of citizenship and popular military mobilization.<sup>26</sup> All these features – political involvement, military commitments, and citizenship – are logically related, albeit to varying degrees: thus, for specific historical reasons, some city-states appear to have lacked a clear notion of citizenship or an element of popular governance, such as the Aztec city-states that built a huge empire. For present purposes, I focus more narrowly on a few cases that correspond most closely to the ideal or trend type of a conjuncture of republicanism, popular political and military mobilization, and citizen status. These entities may best be defined as ‘citizen-city-states’ in order to distinguish them from the more generic concept of ‘city-states’. While all or most early republican states appear to have been city-states, not all city-states were republics. Citizen-city-states represent a sub-set of all city-states in which the favorable preconditions for republicanism that were latently present in all city-states had in fact led to this particular outcome. Only a very few of these citizen-city-states acquired empires (which might rather clumsily be referred to as ‘citizen-city-state empires’): Athens, Carthage, Rome, Genoa and Venice (if we classify the mature dogate as a de facto oligarchy) are the principal cases. It is my contention that it is necessary to consider the imperial development of polities such as the Roman Republic in this highly specific context in order to appreciate the circumstances that accounted for their institutional structures.

Citizen-city-states that embark on empire-building enjoy one distinct advantage and face two major obstacles. They benefit from the fact that their polity already constitutes a coherent metropole whose resources are readily mobilized for war-making, most likely to the extent that they can challenge larger but less well organized opponents. At the same time, the fact that any particular city-state tends to be embedded in a larger city-state cluster imposes serious constraints on the expansive capacity of any such polity: aggression against one of its neighbors is likely to result in countervailing alliances among the other city-states, whose cumulative power will at least initially exceed that of any one member of their cluster. Under these circumstances, a gradual shift from defense-oriented hegemony by consent to

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<sup>23</sup> Hansen 2000: 19.

<sup>24</sup> Hansen 2000: 619 n. 81. Given the overall prevalence of monarchies among pre-modern states, the suggested proportion of 10 republics in a sample of 35 cases (some of which of unknown regime type) is extremely high by world historical standards.

<sup>25</sup> Hansen 2000: 619 n. 82.

<sup>26</sup> For the latter association, see Scheidel 2005.

imperial sovereignty is the most feasible path to empire. Fifth-century BCE Athens and (probably) Rome acquired hegemonic status (narrowly defined as military leadership) in response to external threats (i.e., the Persian empire and Volsci, Aequi and Gauls, respectively), and permitted them to coordinate and eventually dominate consensual interstate institutions of collective defense and predation. (Due to the lack of evidence, the process of Carthage's ascent to dominance over the other Phoenician settlements in North Africa is obscure but might conceivably have followed a similar trajectory, by coordinating resources against indigenous groups.)<sup>27</sup> The second obstacle to imperial growth arises once the native city-state cluster has been brought under the control of the dominant polity and has achieved the ability to concentrate and direct its resources for the purpose of expansionist warfare and conquest beyond that cluster. The scale of this problem is directly proportional to the scale of imperial expansion, and is created by the fact that republics with a significant element of popular governance are constrained from adopting the standard model of state formation, in which initially foreign and now subjugated elites are gradually amalgamated into an empire-wide ruling class that controls laterally insulated subject communities.<sup>28</sup> The stronger the entitlements of citizenship at the dominant republican core, the more difficult this process will be. As noted above, imperial citizen-city-states tend to respond to this challenge by devising complex layers of subordination and privilege that are mirrored by distinctive layers of governance and designed to preserve the integrity of the republican metropole whilst facilitating the control and exploitation of subjugated populations.

## 2.2. Citizen-city-state empires in the ancient Mediterranean<sup>29</sup>

### 2.2.1. Carthage

At its peak in the third century BCE, imperial Carthage provides the clearest example of this principle.<sup>30</sup> The city-state of Carthage formed the political core, run by a government of 2 suffetes and a senate of 300 checked by the Court of the 104. An assembly of citizens (*kyrioi Karchedonioi* in Greek parlance) provided an element of popular participation: it enjoyed freedom of speech and the ability to banish officials. Mass conscription of citizens is attested for the period of intermittent war against the Sicilian Greeks (410-306 BCE). In the first war with Rome (264-241 BCE), civic manpower may have been deployed primarily in the navy, while subsequent arrangements are less clear.

The periphery was gradated into four layers of dominated populations. The innermost layer was made up of the Punic city-states of North Africa (*hyparchoi*) which were entitled to self-government in exchange for the provision of tribute and troops. The second layer consisted of the African subjects of the Carthaginian state (*hypekooi*): organized in *pagi*, they enjoyed local autonomy but faced more demanding tribute obligations (conventionally one-quarter of output) and likewise provided military forces. By the third century BCE, they appear to have been brought under the more direct control of a territorial *strategos*. Overseas territories under direct Carthaginian control can be defined as the third layer of imperial dominion: they include Sardinia (with unknown administrative arrangements), western Sicily (possibly – though maybe not – organized as an *epikrateia*, yet in any case under the control of a *strategos*), and, following the loss of the Sicilian possessions, coastal Iberia (likewise under a *strategos*). Local communities were governed by local leaders and owed tribute and military manpower. The fourth layer was formed by a penumbra of assorted 'allies' of varying status (contingent on Carthaginian strength) in North Africa and Iberia: they were politically autonomous but presumably constrained in their foreign relations, and were expected to offer hostages and mercenaries. In terms of supreme governance, these various layers were held together by 2 or 3 key officials, the *strategoï*, with their staffs, who

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<sup>27</sup> The cases of Genoa and Venice require more detailed investigation than is possible here.

<sup>28</sup> Gellner 1983: 9.

<sup>29</sup> For detailed discussion of these three cases, see Scheidel forthcoming.

<sup>30</sup> Ameling 1993 is by far the best analysis of the Carthaginian state.

directed military affairs in both core and periphery and functioned as the top executives of Carthaginian military control in the various layers of the empire.

In formal political terms, this arrangement permitted Carthage to remain a citizen-city-state – a city-sized republic with a clearly defined citizen body and corresponding institutions of oligarchic governance and popular participation, as well as military mass mobilization – while it expanded vastly beyond that core and the original city-state cluster. The whole imperial edifice existed for the sole purpose of rent-taking and war-making. It is striking to observe that when all these peripheral layers were removed after Carthage's decisive defeat in 202 BCE, the citizen-city-state survived intact and continued to function as a state until its physical annihilation in 146 BCE. This suggests that the layering of the imperial period was not merely an ideological mirage: even as the capital of a growing empire, Carthage survived as a substantially separate political unit for several centuries. This was the result of what we might call institutional bifurcation, defined as the development and co-existence of one set of offices for the core and another one for the periphery, only loosely held together at the very top. Strict political segmentation successfully coincided with imperial growth and attendant economic integration.

### 2.2.2. Athens

Compared to the Carthaginian empire, the institutional arrangements of the Athenian *arche* in the fifth century BCE were simplified by the fact that the Greek city-state culture was so large and intensely fragmented – the largest cluster of city-states in history in terms of the sheer number of political units<sup>31</sup> – that empire-formation barely transcended this sphere. Athens' possible attempt to create an additional layer of control beyond the city-state zone through its operations in Egypt and the Levant in the 450s BCE met with failure, and the Sicilian invasion in the 410s was once again confined to the Greek city-state cluster. By the mid-fifth century, the Athenian dominion had come to consist of a core of Athenian citizens, an inner periphery of resident aliens (*metics*) in Attica, and a much larger main periphery of dominated city-states which owed tribute in cash and manpower (although only rarely and increasingly less so in the form of warships, which formed the backbone of Athenian power). A much more fluid outer layer of non-*polis* allies complemented this structure. The citizen core was governed by a set of democratic institutions which made decisions that could apply to the periphery as well. The main periphery, composed of a large number of self-governing city-states, was linked to the core by Athenian officers (the *700 archai*), who represented the interests of the core, and by the top military leaders, the *10 strategoi*.

These arrangements make it possible to define the Athenian *arche* as a hybrid of hegemony and empire. The original format, of a defensive-predatory alliance under Athenian military leadership and a *synodos* of member states that convened on Delos (down to the 450s or 440s BCE), can only be described as a hegemony in the narrow, military sense of the term (see above, section 1.3). However, while the member states retained their governments and were not formally incorporated into the Athenian *polis*, they descended to the status of tribute-paying subjects who were increasingly subject to Athenian intervention in their internal affairs (such as provisions to have certain cases tried in Athens or the imposition of Athenian currency).<sup>32</sup> Our notions of hegemony cannot readily be reconciled with these measures, and we must speak of an emerging empire, in which key decisions were made in the core and the constituent elements of the periphery conceived of as themselves as separate and subjugated (as in a 'young' empire) rather than merely guided in foreign affairs (as in a military hegemony) or fully incorporated into a unified state. Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War interrupted this process of state formation.

From a comparative perspective, the question is how far or how smoothly Athens could have hoped to progress on this trajectory even in the event of military victory. The city-state character of the

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<sup>31</sup> Hansen & Nielsen 2004 offers a massive inventory.

<sup>32</sup> For the mechanisms of rule and interference, see Schuller 1974 and Morris 2005.

Greek *poleis* was not necessarily a handicap for empire-building. In my view, regime type rather than state type was the key issue. As a participatory democracy whose imperialist project was underwritten by massive popular commitments, Athens had a powerful incentive to retain its system of governance and, therefore, to preserve its institutions even as it increased its control over its subject city-states or expanded beyond this cluster. In this context, the creation of a unified Aegean state was not a plausible outcome.<sup>33</sup> Successful state-formation beyond the creation of a multi-layered imperial entity in which the core remained sharply demarcated from its peripheries would have required a representative system, oligarchy, or tyranny, all of them rendered unlikely by any decisive victory achieved by the democratic core.<sup>34</sup> The most likely outcome was a complex construct centered on a democratic citizen-core surrounded by a periphery of thoroughly dominated city-states and, presumably, a growing outer periphery beyond the city-state zone.

### 2.2.3. Rome

Rome started out as a city-state at the margins of the Latin city-state culture and in close proximity to the adjacent Etruscan cluster of city-states. An aristocratic republic with institutionalized popular participation, the Roman state initially grew by absorbing minor neighboring communities, as did other major Latin polities such as Tibur and Praeneste. Its ascent to hegemony appears to have conformed to the model outlined above (section 2.1), by coordinating the military activities of its native city-state cluster against external challengers for much of the fifth century BCE. Rome presumably assumed this role thanks to its relatively large size, an initial starting advantage that it shared with fifth-century BCE Athens.<sup>35</sup> Its position of dominance within the Latin group was enhanced by the acquisition of extraneous resources through the defeat and territorial absorption of the nearest Etruscan city-state of Veii at the beginning of the fourth century BCE. This increased the size of Rome's territory to some 1,600 km<sup>2</sup>, about two-thirds the size of Attica. Comparative evidence suggests that direct control of a much larger territory organized as a city-state (i.e., as a unified citizenry run from a single urban center) would have been difficult to ensure.<sup>36</sup> These size constraints led Rome to expand by establishing a mixed periphery comprised partly of formally autonomous allied communities that lacked an independent foreign policy and provided troops led by their own officers to operate under Roman paramount leadership (a classic hegemonic arrangement), and partly of coopted or conquered communities and territories which – whilst formally under the direct control of the Roman government – enjoyed local governance and whose population was summarily converted into Roman citizens (with or without suffrage) and taxed in the form of military labor. These flexible arrangements, which were geared toward the coordination of collective defense and (increasingly) predation under Roman leadership, permitted Rome to extend formal or informal control over the entire Italian peninsula and harness its demographic resources for overseas plunder and conquest.

In some ways, the resultant multi-layered imperial-hegemonic complex took the familiar shape of a citizen core surrounded by a graduated periphery. At the same time, the Roman case deviates notably from this ideal type. What we might call the 'inner core', which comprised the city of Rome and its hinterland, housed and was directly governed by a whole set of political bodies and office-holders. Its citizen population was physically able to attend electoral, plebiscitary and consultative assemblies, to participate in the various civic rituals that were concentrated in the capital, such as sacrifices, games, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Contra* Morris 2005.

<sup>34</sup> The fusion with Samos after defeat in the Peloponnesian War provides an instructive counterpoint.

<sup>35</sup> Cornell 2000: 216 for an illuminating chart. Pre-fifth century BCE developments (pre-Republican monarchy?) may be relevant here.

<sup>36</sup> In the fifteenth century, when Florence and Siena grew from 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> to 12,000 km<sup>2</sup> and from 1,500 km<sup>2</sup> to 6,000 km<sup>2</sup>, respectively, they turned from republican city-states into territorial macro-states that were eventually combined into the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, with a different regime and different mechanisms of administration.

triumphs, and to benefit from the expanding metropolitan infrastructural amenities and, eventually, welfare provisions. The citizenry of this ‘inner core’ was politically, sociologically, economically and culturally participant in the metropole, at least in the minimalist sense that they enjoyed this potential. The formal extension of citizenship far beyond the original city-state core undermined the traditional convergence of city-state and citizenry that characterizes the citizen-city-state. Formally, the inhabitants of the newly enfranchised communities qualified as Roman citizens and were thus under the direct control of the Roman officials and assemblies. However, physically remote from the capital, they appear to have enjoyed considerable autonomy in local government (although the details are obscure),<sup>37</sup> and could be quite distinct from the population of the ‘inner core’ in terms of language and culture: in what is perhaps the most extreme case, the enfranchisement of the Praetutii on the far side of the Appennines in 290 BCE did not result in any noticeable culture change for an extended period of time, and even basic knowledge of Latin must long have remained very limited.<sup>38</sup> Separated from the institutions and amenities of the city state core, these citizens represented the majority of all Romans from the late fourth century BCE onwards.<sup>39</sup> Life-cycle military service in the Roman legions constituted their principal or perhaps only link to the Roman state. Overall, their status defies straightforward classification: they might be said to belong to the core as well as to the periphery depending on which criteria we apply. If we define core membership via citizenship status, they belonged to the metropole; yet if we consider their potential for involvement in the political, social and cultural activities of the core, they found themselves in a distinctly peripheral position. Centripetal migration was the main conduit of social integration. Except in technical terms, their condition may have differed little from that of the Italian allies.

This partial and growing divergence of city-state and citizenship suggests that Roman citizen status may have been of relatively low value by the standards of other citizen-city-states. This assumption is consistent with the fact that Romans who received land allotments in most state-sponsored colonies lost their citizen status; that many of the ‘peripheral’ citizens were either incorporated by conquest rather than by treaty or resided in polities of comparatively low complexity, and that enfranchisement may in part have been a strategy of incorporating enemies or the less civilized who were less susceptible to hegemony; and that formally manumitted slaves of Roman owners automatically gained citizen status. Nothing like this can be observed in Athens, Carthage, or Venice, for example. It is likewise consistent with the fact that owing to migration, manumission and attendant demographic growth, even citizen residents of the physical city-state core were increasingly less likely to be formally involved in the political process, or even many of the principal civic rituals.<sup>40</sup>

Additional layers of rule were created by expansion beyond the confines of Italy, with the formal imposition of direct rule in the provinces (in reality, an imbalanced mix of Roman governors and their tiny staffs and largely autonomous local self-government), the exercise of indirect rule via client kings, and the accretion of various ‘allied’ and ‘friendly’ polities (from Greek city-states tied by treaty to geographically marginal kingdoms and chiefdoms which retained full independence except in foreign policy). This means that imperial rule and hegemony were interspersed: the citizenry territory in central Italy was surrounded by some 200 nominally autonomous allied polities in peninsular Italy under the hegemony of the Roman state, which were in turn surrounded by a ring of Mediterranean provinces ruled by Roman governors which were surrounded by outer layers of client states and independent allies. Thus,

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<sup>37</sup> Humbert 1978, with criticism in Mouritsen forthcoming.

<sup>38</sup> Guidobaldi 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Scheidel in press. Since the 330s BCE, approximately two-thirds of all citizens resided outside the core. In the 80s BCE, their share rose to perhaps four-fifths of the total. These shares were higher still if the Roman citizenry was more numerous than commonly assumed.

<sup>40</sup> Mouritsen 2001. Against this background, it might be tempting to re-classify Rome (at least after the fourth century BCE) more generically as a ‘city-state’ rather than as a ‘citizen-city-state’. This, of course, would jar with the (mostly late Republican) rhetorical emphasis on citizenship and *res publica*. One possible solution would be to view this preoccupation as an elite (and essentially broadly oligarchic) feature that did not much extend beyond the aristocratic leadership and metropolitan citizens of the first census class. Existing pessimistic assessments of Roman republicanism may still be too generous.

Rome exercised hegemony both within the imperial heartland and at the outer fringes of the empire, whereas direct rule was both concentrated at the center and spread out over the coastal regions of the Mediterranean.

Once again, these layers were held together by a set of military officers functionally equivalent to the *stratego*i of Carthage and Athens and their subordinates, foremost the two annually elected consuls who – though technically the supreme government officials – for much of the imperial Republican period (down to the 80s BCE) spent little time at the core and, accompanied by their consular quaestors and military tribunes, were primarily engaged in war-making. Other military officials (praetors), whose number grew from 2 in 228 BCE to 8 by 81 BCE in keeping with the extension of formal rule, represented the Roman state in the various provinces. In functional terms, only the ‘inner core’ of the capital and its hinterland was endowed with what may be described as a Roman civilian government and administration, comprised of the praetor urbanus, the praetor peregrinus, the plebeian and curule aedils, the quaestors, and the tribunes of the people. The majority of the tribal voting districts but only a minority of the citizenry were located in this zone.

As in other city-state empires, formal consolidation of this fragmented realm was a protracted process. The anomaly of an ‘inner periphery’ of nominally autonomous polities within peninsular Italy was finally removed in the 80s BCE<sup>41</sup> while the outer client states and friendly regimes were progressively brought under provincial rule, thereby precipitating the cooptation and ensuing hegemonic domination of yet more distant allies. Needless to say, the enfranchisement of the Italian allies further exacerbated the mismatch between the republican core and citizenship, which was now completely dissociated from (non-military) participation in the metropole. This imbalance was gradually redressed under the monarchy (from 30 BCE onward), a regime type that facilitated the extension of citizen status into the provincial periphery (starting, unsurprisingly, with local elites and the military class) (cf. above, section 2.1), ultimately to the extent that it lost its meaning, and later still the erosion of the privileges of the unified Italian core vis-à-vis the empire as a whole (most notably in the sphere of taxation).

#### 2.2.4. A different kind of empire?

The evidence outlined in the preceding sections is broadly consistent with the ideal type of an ancient Mediterranean citizen-city-state empire endowed with a republican core or metropole defined by size constraints, citizenship entitlements, and high rates of popular participation.<sup>42</sup> Rome somewhat deviated from this ideal type by extending citizenship and weakening the nexus between city-state core and citizen status, thereby causing a de facto political and sociological segmentation of the nominal citizenry.

For these imperial republics, rule entailed careful calibration of collective status and privilege. Control grew out of hegemonic supremacy over related city-states and was only very slowly, if at all, transformed into direct rule within the original city-state cluster. By contrast, the incorporation of territories beyond these zones was dealt with in a more straightforward fashion, by superimposing direct rule on local management. Even so, the persistence of republican institutions at the core interfered with the cooptation of subjugated elites and impeded the maturation of state formation. The peripheral layers of imperial rule and hegemonic control were organized in the first instance for the purpose of war-making,

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<sup>41</sup> On Italy’s fragmentation prior to the 80s BCE, see Mouritsen 1998.

<sup>42</sup> The Venetian empire also largely conforms to this model (Lane 1973): while political control came to be wielded by a small number of noble families, full citizenship was confined to native-born *cittadini originari* of the *comune* of Venice and awarded to immigrants only after prolonged trial periods (10 years of residence for semi-citizenship, *de intus*, and 25 years for a lower-status form of citizenship, *de extra*). Most metropolitan residents were non-citizen immigrants. The cooptation of outsiders into the Venetian ruling class was extremely rare. Subject territories in Italy and overseas were ruled by Venetian governors and managed by local elites who were excluded from Venetian citizenship.

supplemented by rent-taking for the primary or sole benefit of the republican core. In this respect, these systems differed from more conventional empires which tend to be characterized by the gradual formation of an imperial ruling class, the erosion of difference between core and periphery, rent-seeking by courts, bureaucrats and soldiers rather than citizen collectives, and often – and perhaps not coincidentally – the gradual abatement of military fervor.<sup>43</sup> Roman historians are in the unique position to be able to observe both conditions in the same imperial entity.

### 3. The USA: an ‘imperial republic’?

Is the USA currently an empire? The most cursory glance at a growing pile of books with titles that combine ‘America(n)’ and ‘empire’ might well create the impression that this is a foregone conclusion.<sup>44</sup> This impression, however, would owe much the indiscriminate use of the term ‘empire’ which is now habitually employed as the synonym of ‘interventionist great power’, as for instance – to start on one side of the political spectrum – in Pat Buchanan’s critique of pretty much all of US foreign policy in the twentieth century in his book *A republic, not an empire*. At the other end of the spectrum, Noam Chomsky’s contribution to the ‘American Empire Project’ freely conflates imperialism and hegemony. In Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, by contrast, ‘empire’ is represented by a global web of socio-political forces that transcends even big countries such as the United States.<sup>45</sup> Whilst less prone to sweeping applications of this label, professional historians are not entirely averse to overly inclusivist perspectives: Niall Ferguson’s recent plea for ‘a broader and more sophisticated definition of empire’ that would allow us to dispense with the term ‘hegemony’ altogether and subsume any form of ‘indirect rule’ or even less pervasive influence within the concept of ‘empire’ is probably the best known example.<sup>46</sup> According to Ferguson, empire does not merely consist of ‘direct rule over foreign territories without any political representation of their inhabitants’ but is likewise created by the following bundle of activities – the provision of peace, freedom of the seas and the skies for trade; ‘intervention against some bellicose regimes and in some civil wars’; ‘a distinctive form of “conversion” usually called Americanization, which is carried out less by old-style Christian missionaries than by the exporters of American consumer goods and entertainments’; and ‘informal rule’ that relies ‘heavily on nongovernmental organizations and corporations and, in some cases, local elites’.<sup>47</sup> This does indeed stray far from conventional academic definitions of ‘empire’ – as final political authority over other polities is not even an issue worth considering, and ‘informal rule’ remains undefined – but hardly provides a ‘more sophisticated’ concept that would facilitate comparative historical analysis: more than anything else, it hampers attempts to distinguish meaningfully between vastly different forms of interstate control and influence.<sup>48</sup> In any case, ‘empire’s’ suggested conceptual synonymity with, and semantic superiority over, ‘hegemony’ remains wholly unsupported.

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<sup>43</sup> This comparison needs to be developed in far greater detail. I will address this and related issues in Scheidel in progress.

<sup>44</sup> For a brief survey of the increasing frequency of the notion of an ‘American empire’, see Ferguson 2004: 4-5. Relevant hits on amazon.com and google.com reinforce this general impression.

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan 1999; Chomsky 2004; www.americanempireproject.com; Hardt & Negri 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson 2004: 10-12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 10, 13. I should stress that this is a complete list.

<sup>48</sup> Its main value may well lie in the increased likelihood of sales of a book that brandishes the loaded term ‘empire’ – redolent of *The Grandeur That Was Rome*, *Queen Victoria*, *Reagan’s Evil Empire*, and *Darth Vader* – than the less tactile concept of ‘hegemony’. As Ferguson 2003 himself points out, O’Brien and Clesse’s 2002 comparative study of British and US hegemony, entitled *Two Hegemonies*, ‘has not received the attention it deserves’. Ferguson’s concept of ‘indirect rule’ appears to be even more sweeping, comprising as it does both the British Raj and the powerful influence of the merchant banks of the City of London on the fiscal and monetary policy of nineteenth-century Argentina (10). By this definition, several countries are currently ‘ruled’ by the IMF. Ferguson 2003

A particularly incoherent indictment of American ‘empire’ and imperialism has been offered by Michael Mann in *Incoherent Empire*, a lengthy survey meant to demonstrate that compared to earlier successful imperial powers, the US is poorly equipped to establish an ‘empire’. Regarding the four principal sources of social power – military, economic, political and ideological – that were marshalled to create the early empires so compellingly analyzed by the same author twenty years ago, the contemporary US is found wanting in three of them, and therefore – plausibly – pronounced unfit to be a proper imperialist. Yet America’s intention to build an empire comparable to any earlier historical specimens is never established and at one point even explicitly denied by Mann, which leaves the reader wondering about the point of the whole exercise: a feasibility study of a phantom project does little to establish the alleged imperialist efforts of the current US or advance our understanding of the nature of its dominance.<sup>49</sup>

In what sense might the USA qualify as an empire? In principle, the USA – as a state – might either ‘be’ an empire, or control an extraneous imperial periphery. The USA itself, in the sense of the 50 states and DC, cannot reasonably be classified as an empire. It lacks a distinctive core or periphery and is characterized by a fair measure of national unity and cultural homogeneity: if its abiding diversity were to be taken as an ‘imperial’ feature, many other countries (say, Spain) would automatically fall in the same category, thereby rendering the concept of ‘empire’ completely meaningless. Does the USA own an empire beyond its national borders, narrowly defined? Its only incorporated possession is the scenic Palmyra Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, which is uninhabited except for birds and large crabs. Unincorporated possessions with actual residents comprise Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands, with a total population of 4½ million, mostly in Puerto Rico, roughly equivalent to 1½% of the population of the USA. From this perspective, the answer is clearly negative: the USA is not an empire, nor does it own anything like an empire beyond its republican core.<sup>50</sup> In these technical terms, it is not an ‘imperial republic’.

But perhaps the question is misconceived. Our conference, after all, looks at the USA as such, and not merely at the country today. As I pointed out above (section 1.2), ‘empire’ is as much a *phase* as it is an *entity*. In the past, was the USA ever an empire or an ‘imperial republic’? When Alexander Hamilton, in 1787, proclaimed the USA to be ‘an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world’, this was perhaps not yet quite true.<sup>51</sup> Soon after independence, however, the Indian Wars generated territory outside the established republican states, although its inhabitants tended to be killed or deported rather than ruled and exploited in a subjugated periphery. The Louisiana Purchase in effect created a huge continental empire, especially as the Louisiana Government Bill of 1804 provided for direct military rule that was only gradually supplanted by autonomous territories and eventual statehood. Thus, the beginning of the nineteenth century might arguably qualify as the most ‘imperial’ moment of the expanding American republic. It deserves attention, however, that even the process of incorporating the lands west of the Thirteen Colonies involved a process of extension of hegemonic control rather than outright empire-building: as the peripheral territories were progressively cleared of the indigenous population, land was allocated to American or European immigrant settlers who organized themselves into ‘territories’ over which the federal government exercised political influence but not formal control. Hence, ‘in effect, territorial status involved a form of hegemonic control – local autonomy without the freedom to pursue an independent foreign policy’.<sup>52</sup> The only anomaly occurred with the Reconstruction

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undermines his own argument by enumerating the dramatic differences between the British Empire and today’s putative US ‘empire’.

<sup>49</sup> Mann 2003, esp. 13. (The closing paragraph of the book asks the reader to vote President Bush out of office in the 2004 election.) For the IEMP model applied to ancient empires, see Mann 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Gowan’s 2004 claim that the USA has achieved political control over its European and Japanese allies to the extent that it can be said to have established a ‘core-wide empire’ (for this term, see Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: 210) cannot be substantiated: see Boswell 2004. See also below, for the current weakening of US political hegemony.

<sup>51</sup> *The Federalist* No. 1, opening paragraph.

<sup>52</sup> Johansson 2002: 341.

Acts of 1867 which imposed direct military rule on a substantial part of the republic, albeit only for a brief transitional period.

Conversely, formal imperial occupation was mostly limited to a series of acquisitions in 1898 including Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. This aversion to territorial expansion beyond the mainland has coincided with a strong and enduring tradition of foreign military intervention dating back to the blockade of Tripoli in 1801.<sup>53</sup> From that perspective, the label of ‘aggressively interventionist republic’ may be applied without hesitation. But can we go a step further and define the US as a ‘hegemonic republic’?

Several of the authors of a recent comparative assessment of British and US hegemony come to the conclusion that while the British Empire never enjoyed truly hegemonic status (or at best perhaps only in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars), the USA has, since World War II, more solidly qualified as a hegemonic power of global stature that manifests itself in a variety of ways including economic predominance, the shaping of the framework for world trade, the hegemony of the dollar, and in various others areas.<sup>54</sup> In more narrowly military terms, the Cold War put the USA in a position of unchallenged leadership among western countries.<sup>55</sup>

Recent military statistics certainly point to an enduring position of preeminence which, in conjunction with formal interstate agreements, can be considered to ensure hegemonic status.<sup>56</sup> According to the *Base Structure Report* for 2005 of the Department of Defense, the USA currently owns or leases 770 military installations in 39 different countries not including Afghanistan and Iraq. According to the DoD’s *Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country* for 2005, the USA last year deployed over 300,000 military personnel in a total of 145 countries, or three quarters of all countries in the world, although only 29 countries housed contingents in excess of 100 soldiers. In 2003, US military spending totaled \$414.4bn, exactly one and a half times as much as military spending in all of western Europe, Japan and Australia combined. In nominal dollar terms, it accounts for not much less than half of all military spending worldwide. Also in nominal dollar terms, current US military spending is roughly equivalent to the GDP of India, which contains one-sixth of the world’s population, or to the aggregate GDP of the entire African continent.

The scale of US military preeminence has been boosted by the free-rider strategy of its main allies which permits them to hold down defense spending under the umbrella of American protection.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union has arguably begun to weaken the political influence associated with US military hegemony: as security threats have receded (and the euro has begun to provide an alternative to the dollar), ‘what remains is an overpowered military that leaves the U.S. in a position of world leadership, but the hegemony has declined’.<sup>58</sup> This has even begun to be true in the narrow sphere of military cooperation – i.e., the ‘core’ area of hegemony as defined in section 1.3 –, with widespread European refusal to participate in the occupation of Iraq.

The pattern of US military spending since World War II is consistent with the notion that moderate increases in expenditure (of usually no more than 1/3 of baseline spending) are a function of periodic military interventions (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan/Iraq) or strategic build-ups (under the Reagan administration), whereas persistently high baseline levels of spending were a product of the Cold War that are now being carried over into the post-Cold War period to sustain military hegemony. At the same time, the likelihood of a shift to imperial expansion as defined in section 1.2 (or even to some form of tribute-taking without territorial occupation) appears exceedingly slim. In the most fundamental terms, the capitalist world system is not conducive to archaic flavors of territorial conquest, and it is hard to

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<sup>53</sup> See Gaddis 2004: 16-33 for a concise outline of the practice of unilateral ‘preemptive’ foreign intervention in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>54</sup> O’Brien and Clesse 2002, esp. O’Brien 2002 and Hobson 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Hemispheric hegemony in the Americas predates this development by a wide margin (e.g., Gaddis 2004: 29-30).

<sup>56</sup> The goals set out in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review are consistent with this interpretation.

<sup>57</sup> Kagan 2003 offers a blunt assessment of this process. See Hobson 2002: 318 table 2 for the numbers.

<sup>58</sup> Boswell 2004: 522.

conceive of any realistic scenario that would make long-term violations of this principle appear both desirable and feasible.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore most unlikely that the US will ever become an ‘imperial republic’ in the traditional sense, and that it will follow in the footsteps of ancient city-states that transformed their hegemonies into empires. This might earn the Soviet Union the dubious honor of having been the last ‘imperial republic’ in history. But if we choose to disqualify it on the grounds that it fails to meet republican standards in terms of popular consent, and if we likewise dispose of Nazi Germany for the same reasons, the title may in fact go to the United States *circa* 1803 or even 1898. For sustained republican imperialism, however, we would have to go back to the Netherlands, Venice, the Roman Republic. Imperial republics are rare creatures.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Schumpeter 1919 already made this point a long time ago, as did Wallerstein 1974. Extremist revolution or state collapse on the Arabian peninsula might be the only credible scenario for open-ended occupation.

<sup>60</sup> Even the most cursory comparative consideration of the causes and mechanisms of ‘imperialism’ – the actions and attitudes that create or uphold empires (Howe 2002: 30) – would require a much longer paper.

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