

Telling the Truth About Empire? A Word on Methodology

APRIL R. BICCUM 

School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University

Empire/imperialism are terms that re-emerge with patterned frequency. Claims that the Australia United Kingdom and United States agreement is imperial, that an Australian empire exists, or that coloniality continues after the end of formal colonialism are all made without connecting colonialism, settler-colonialism, coloniality, or sub-imperialism to the larger whole of which it is a part — empire. At the same time, political science has begun to make claims about empire as a particular type of politics and comparative historical literature has also emerged. This paper argues that empire should be a site of inquiry for any decolonial project and elaborates what would be involved methodologically. It engages the question of methodology by comparing different approaches to the study of empire. My argument is that the interpretivist approach is the more methodologically robust principally because it raises a series of unresolvable methodological problems. I argue that study of empire, as a particular form of politics, is not just a social scientific question, it is an ethical normative question. I argue that it is politically necessary for the decolonisation of knowledge to broach the question of empire and its methodological problems. Only when we know the truth about empire, can we confidently contribute to a politics that would be post-imperial.

The words “Empire” and “imperialism” re-emerge with patterned frequency every time there is a shift in geostrategic relations through more assertive foreign policy.¹ A spate of articles from across the political spectrum call the AUKUS agreement, in which Australia pivoted from a security alliance with France to a security alliance with Britain and the United States, either imperialist (in the Marxist–Leninist sense) or a resuscitation of late Nineteenth-Century Anglo unionist project.² Very little of this journalism definitively references Australia’s place in the British empire or recognises in AUKUS common imperial patterns.

¹ Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Ruby Wawn, “AUKUS and ‘National Sovereignty’: Why Australia’s Rulers Back the US,” 2021, <https://solidarity.net.au/australian-imperialism/aukus-and-national-sovereignty-why-australias-rulers-back-the-us/>; Charles Fredericks, “AUKUS: Empire and Decline—or Survival?,” *L.A. Progressive*, 26 September 2021, <https://www.laprogressive.com/asia/aukus-empire>; Noam Chomsky, “Noam Chomsky on the Cruelty of American Imperialism,” *The Economist*, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/09/24/noam-chomsky-on-the-cruelty-of-american-imperialism>

The same is true of the scholarship on settler colonialism,³ Australian sub-imperialism,⁴ and the vast scholarship that seeks to decolonise disciplines.⁵ They tend isolate colonialism or settler colonialism as a form of politics from the larger whole of which it is a part and tend to focus on only European, usually only the British and Spanish empires.⁶ The scholars that have done the most to advance our understanding of Australian empire, Cait Storr and Anthony Anghie, equivocate over whether this can be characterised as “sub-imperialism” or empire owing to what Anghie calls “an autonomous drive for Australian expansion that far exceeded anything that Britain was prepared to engage in” and a “history of overlapping imperialisms”.⁷ Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson criticises post-colonial theory for its focus on migration and hybridity as well as the literature the codes Australia as “post-colonial”. She points out that from the perspective of Indigenous people in Australia, it is not post-colonial. But Robertson, like Storr and Angie, equivocates over how therefore to code Australia, she opts for the term “post-colonising”.⁸ This paper is not a contribution to this literature on Australian empire, rather the paper seeks to point out that this indeterminacy in nomenclature: sub-imperial, imperial, post-colonising, arise as a result of the fact that they are made without recourse to consideration of empire itself as a particular type of politics.

Thus, calls to decolonise Australian IR from within the framework of decolonial theory confront a double-sided problem in the area of truth and method. On the one hand, the decolonial school rightly claims that the monoculture of western scientific epistemology is the handmaiden of European empires.⁹ On the other hand, the decolonial school makes these claims, quite rightly, resting on universal truth claims about the violence of European colonialism. It does not address the larger, recurrent political formation of which colonialism is a part. This paper’s contribution is to address the problem: how do we tell the truth about empire in a way that does not reproduce scientific monoculture?

My contribution to this special issue argues that decolonising any discipline means telling the truth about empire(s) because colonialism is part of a larger recurrent political formation and Europe does not hold the monopoly on empire. This means telling the truth not just about racism, not just about capitalism, not just about colonialism and not just about Europe, it means telling the truth about empire(s). In the Australian context this

³ Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2017); L. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Cait Storr, “Imperium in Imperio: Sub-Imperialism and the Formation of Australia as a Subject of International Law,” *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, Vol 19, 1 (2017), pp. 335–68; A. Anthony Anghie, “Race, Self-Determination and Australian Empire,” *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, Vol 19, 2 (2018), pp. 423–61.

⁴ Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia* (Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2004, 4th ed.).

⁵ Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nisancioglu, eds, *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed., *Decolonising International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonising Politics: An Introduction* (London: Wiley, 2021).

⁶ The more recent Routledge volume on Settler Colonialism takes a more global comparative approach, including cases of ancient empires, but still takes settler colonialism as a distinct type of domination which it claims is interconnected with colonialism but remains unconnected to empire. Empire does not even appear in the index.

⁷ Anghie, “Race, Self-Determination,” pp. 443, 447.

⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁹ David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, “International Relations in the Prison of Colonial Modernity,” *International Relations*, Vol 31, 1 (2017), pp. 71–5.

would mean recognition that Australia's pattern of settler colonisation and its annexation of territories in the Pacific is common of global imperial patterns¹⁰ or formations as Anne Laura Stoler calls them¹¹ and is not unique or exceptional. There is a widespread world historical pattern of what I call imperial filiation — empires give birth to new empires. Examples include, among many others, the United States, Kievan Rus, the Mughals, the Carolingians, the British, and failed attempts, such as the Khedive of Egypt.¹² A relatively new comparative empire scholarship observes other patterns such as expansion and consolidation,¹³ Balkanisation¹⁴ or attrition, and reformation¹⁵ which means that empires exhibit cycles of loss and recovery.¹⁶ Without an analytical focus on empire as a form of politics within a comparative framework, the possibility that Australia may be exhibiting common imperial patterns remains occluded. Indigenous peoples in Australia have been indefatigable in their resistance to imperial rule.¹⁷ I nevertheless contend that without a robust focus on empire as a repetitive and recurring type of politics, a genuinely post-imperial politics cannot be imagined.

In this paper, I make a case for shifting the analytical focus to empire and I take up the methodological question. If “we” want to “tell the truth” about empire (not just colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, or racism), *how* do we study it? The immediate response to this proposition for some will be that the decolonial scholarship and disciplinary histories are already doing this work.¹⁸ This is an important field of work much of which I draw upon in this paper. I respectfully submit that this work has not directly addressed the question of empire as post-colonial anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler describes it, as a particular type of political “formation”.¹⁹ I make this claim with recourse to a comparative literature which has,²⁰ some of which make universal claims about empire with no intention of decolonising anything, in some cases with propositions for how to do empire better.²¹

¹⁰ J. Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Considerations on Imperial Comparisons,” in Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber and Alexander Semyonov, eds, *Empire Speaks Out* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 33–58.

¹² Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Abacus, 1991).

¹³ Herfried Munkler, *Empires* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Alexander Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Rein Taagepera, “Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol 41 (1997), pp. 475–504.

¹⁷ Gary Foley, Andrew Schapp, and Edwina Howell, eds., *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁸ Jessica Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Vineet Thakur, Alexander E. Davis and Peter Vale, “Imperial Mission, ‘Scientific’ Method: An Alternative Account of the Origins of IR,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol 46, 1 (2017), pp. 2–23.

¹⁹ Stoler, “Considerations,” p. 35; Ann L. Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter Perdue, eds, *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: The School for Advanced Research, Library of Congress, 2007).

²⁰ Burbank and Cooper, “Empires”; Leo Blanken, *Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire Since 1405* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²¹ Blanken, “Rational Empires,” 2012.

Not all of the comparative scholarship on empires share the epistemological assumptions of mainstream political science. In some of this scholarship there is evidence of impact from methodological and epistemological challenges made by post-colonial, decolonial, and critical interpretivist scholarship. This scholarship does not seek to make context independent universal claims, but instead emphasises that the study of empire is beset by methodological problems. I therefore propose that the solution to the double problem of truth and method in respect of empires are partially addressed by Interpretivist methodologies.²² Interpretivism has been gaining ground in political science and International Relations (IR) in the last few decades and is an approach to inquiry which is not inconsistent with the decolonial school. Methodological problems in the study of empire are only observable as methodological problems from within the interpretivist mode of inquiry. For this reason, I argue that interpretivism is the more robust approach.

I address the research question by using a reflexive second order observation (the observation of the observation),²³ to compare, on methodological grounds, literatures which make empire explicitly their site of inquiry. Readers will appreciate that the cross-disciplinary scholarship on empires, imperialism, and colonialism is vast. I am basing my selection on representative examples of particular approaches, including naturalism, methodological nationalism, structuralism, comparative, and interpretive. I begin with an account of the interpretivist mode of inquiry, indicating its advantages for the study of empire. I then compare the different approaches according to four foci: referent object (ontology); social theory (philosophy of history); research design (modes of reasoning); and definition (conceptualisation). I point out that the scholarship which uses the methodological trappings of political science makes universal inferences without addressing methodology beyond definition, while the interpretivist approach makes methodological problems legible. Regardless of how contingent any inference must be, I argue that claims for the existence of imperial politics and/or contributions to a post-imperial politics require as robust an understanding of empire as is possible informed by the methodological challenges in its study.

A Word on Methodology

My argument in this paper is that any decolonial project needs to have empire as its site of investigation and that interpretivist methodology offers the most robust approach. Interpretivist scholarship can be characterised by:

- foregrounding assumptions about social ontology rooted in a philosophy of language that carries over into research design;
- a (self) reflexive approach to knowledge production and research design;
- a comparative use of social theory that underpins a fourfold approach to reasoning (deductive, inductive, abductive, and retroductive);
- a rejection of social naturalism²⁴ and that the methodologies of the natural sciences can be imported into the social sciences; and
- the building of power/knowledge into research design.²⁵

²² Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds, *Interpretation and Method* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

²³ Niklas Luhmann, "Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing." *New Literary History*, Vol 24, 4 (1993), pp. 763–82.

²⁴ Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

As I delineate the interpretivist approach, I also suggest its suitability to the study of empire and point out its consistencies with a decolonial approach.

The first principle of the interpretivist mode of inquiry is that human societies are constructed out of the human capacity for language and meaning and cannot therefore be studied using the same assumptions and methods of the natural sciences.²⁶ To language and meaning I add communication, including communications technology (each of these terms intersect but need to remain analytically distinct). Part of the reason for adding communications technology to the canon of concepts delineating social ontology is that Mass Communications as a field of study was founded initially on interpretivist assumptions, namely that information communication technologies (ICTs) are not a neutral window upon which to observe the world but rather socially, politically, and economically constitutive.²⁷ The Canadian Political Economist credited with its founding did so with a book called *Empire and Communication* (1951) which argues that communications technologies have a constitutive role to play in the capacity for governance of large territories at a distance. Central to Innis' argument is that a change in communications technology will have a corresponding change to the organisation of empire. Along with language and meaning, the inclusion of communications technology as materially and ideationally constitutive provides an avenue for inquiry into how empires (and indeed all societies) change.

As a starting point for inquiry, the only universal this assumes is that all human societies are built up out of language use, meaning, and communication (hereafter LMC) which are the conditions of possibility for collective action, social cohesion and stratification, resistance, adaptation, knowledge sharing or monopolisation, social and economic differentiation, knowledge transfer, and institutionalisation. As a starting point for inquiry, it has diversity, adaptability, and change built in and is consistent with the concept of "pleuriversity". As elaborated by Walter Mignolo, control over language is central to epistemic power.²⁸ It is also a refusal of ontological atomism because it adheres to a philosophy of language that insists upon the holistic and relational nature of meaning making. In meaning-holism parts are always related to wholes.²⁹ Continuing to see colonialism as separate from the larger whole of which it is a part, risks importing the kind of ontological atomism from which decolonial scholarship seeks to depart.

Building inquiry out of these assumptions gives rise to a different series of methodological choices. Investigators are autopoietic beings engaged in the inquiry of other autopoietic beings. Rather than presuming that social categories or structures are naturally occurring or that biases can be controlled, interpretivists begin with the assumption that the capacity for language is the ambivalent hinge between what is natural and what is social and that the ethical and scientific³⁰ integrity of inquiry is achieved through (self)reflexivity which demands self-awareness of the situated observer and builds in transparency and accountability. This is consistent with decolonial methodology and mitigates against any attempt to offer one socially, politically constructed web of meanings as the measure for the study of others which then becomes a rationale for empire.

²⁶ Bevir and Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science*.

²⁷ Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007).

²⁸ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 20–80.

²⁹ Bevir and Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science*.

³⁰ Interpretivist debate the use of the word "scientific"; Dvora Yanow, "Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods," *Qualitative Methods*, Fall (2003), pp. 9–13. I use the term recognising that the Euro-Atlantic tradition does not have a monopoly on science or what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Recognition of the socially constitutive nature of LMC gives rise to three reflexive manoeuvres: (1) self-reflexivity for the positionality of the researcher vis a vis her site of inquiry; (2) reflexivity around the socially embedded assumptions that underpin the theories and concepts informing research design which can be the same or different from the theories and concepts that are constitutive in our site of inquiry; and (3) reflexivity around the socially constitutive role of knowledge production, where knowledge as a mode of production is foregrounded in inquiry. The first requires attention to the positionality of the researcher in relation to their site of inquiry; the second requires attention to concepts and theories both informing research and active in our research sites; and the third requires an analytical orientation to power/knowledge. All of which precludes the investigator from assuming an Archimedean position — the “god trick” identified by Sandra Harding, by which she means that there is no extra-social position from which to investigate.³¹ Interpretivists are forthright about the elements of our own lived experiences that give rise to research questions in the first place and which aspects facilitate or limit access to our sites of inquiry.³²

Interpretive inquiry therefore begins with self-reflexivity. I am, as most of us are in one way or another, a child of empire. I am an Anglo-Canadian cis-het female from an underclass socio-economic background. As a result of personal experience and family heritage (a grandmother born in Essex, ancestors among the earliest English settlers in Canada), I have had a lifelong awareness of Canada’s historical relationship with the British empire, and a lifelong preoccupation with social and political injustice (especially poverty, exploitation, and racism) which has motivated my career long interest in the connections between development and empire.³³ I do not claim to be speaking for any disadvantaged or exploited group in spite of the fact that my ethical normative orientation is rooted in personal experience. My ethical normative opposition to empire stems from inferences drawn from both experience and research, that empires are hierarchical, violent, genocidal, and exploitative form of politics that govern people differentially. They have caused and continue to cause substantive harm and should be studied unapologetically critically. It is necessary to study empire to facilitate its recognition, inform the robustness of research laying claim to its existence, track its changes and to contribute to a politics that would be post-imperial. My biography and scholarly trajectory through areas of the “white possessive”³⁴ from Canada, to Britain as a graduate student, to Australia as faculty is enabled by historical and continuing imperial connections and the privileges of Anglo identity.³⁵ I am not unique in this or uniquely situated to be asking these questions. I simply think that the question of empire is one of the most overlooked and the most politically important in the social sciences and of our times.

³¹ Sandra Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 35.

³² Timothy Pachirat, “The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor,” in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed., Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 143–61; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 1999).

³³ April Biccum, “Development and the ‘New’ Imperialism: A Reinvention of Colonial Discourse in DFID Promotional Literature,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 26, 6 (2005), pp. 1005–20.

³⁴ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

³⁵ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

The second reflexive manoeuvre recognises that as social scientists we use concepts and theories that are derived from and/or are constitutive of social ontology — we use concepts like *states*, *rights*, *democracy* for research which are also used by those we research. James Sartori's solution to this conceptual doubling is a “ladder of abstraction” in which he offers a systematic process for ensuring that social science concepts are distilled to essential attributes so that they correspond accurately to the phenomenon of interest and can travel to cover as many cases as possible.³⁶ Once rendered definitionally precise, concepts — like *family*, *class*, *nation*, and *state* — are abstract containers to be filled with empirical content which protect against conceptual overstretch.

The interpretivist approach, by contrast, recognises that research concepts are derived from and constitute the worlds we study, they are contested, their meanings change, and changes in the meaning of socially constitutive concepts (like *family*, *state*, *sovereignty*) do political work. Social ontology is itself something we conceptualise and social practices are conceptually constituted — like *voting* or *protesting*. The interpretivist approach works methodologically with, not against, the facts of language (fluid, indeterminate, socially constitutive, productive, and multi-valent) and builds that into inquiry. For example, conceptual historian Reinhardt Koselleck defines a concept as, by its very nature, contestable carriers of signification with multiple meanings.³⁷ Fred Schaffer foregrounds conceptual doubling (researchers use socially constitutive concepts) and proposes a methodology of elucidating concepts, *grounding* them in their use, *locating* how they change over time, and *exposing* their relationships of power.³⁸ Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar warn against conceptual reification (neglecting holistic nature of meaning making as embodied in concepts), essentialism (stripping concepts of their historical specificity), and linguistic instrumentalism (the failure to observe that concepts are constitutive and the propensity to code researcher worldview into concepts).³⁹ There are always attempts to fix meaning as an integral part of political power, but it is a fact of language that meaning can always become unstuck or repurposed in ways that cannot be foreseen. Several conceptual histories of the words “empire” and “imperialism” have shown that the words origins are politically constitutive (*imperium*) and they travel, change, and do political work.⁴⁰

The interpretivist approach to concepts is connected to the way that interpretivists use theory, a scaffolding of concepts (instead of the operationalisation of variables) derived through abstraction from the inductive observation of situated researchers. Concepts enable observation and analysis (such as *double consciousness*, the *white possessive*, or *biopolitics*). Interpretivist scholarship builds on reflexivity through a comparative

³⁶ Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol 64, 4 (1970), pp. 1033–53.

³⁷ Reinhardt Koselleck, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol 67, 2 (2006), pp. 357–400.

³⁸ Frederic C. Schaffer, *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

³⁹ Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar, “Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol 6, 3 (2008), pp. 503–17.

⁴⁰ Richard Kroebner and Helmut. D. Schmidt, *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Richard Folz, *The Concept of Empire in Western Europe from the 5th to the 14th Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969); James Muldoon, *Empire and Order* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999); Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Kathleen D. Morrison, “Sources, Approaches, Definitions,” in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds, Susan E. Alcock, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1–9.

contextualised use of social theory.⁴¹ This approach to social theory not only enables the excavation of the culturally embedded assumptions that inform us as researchers (such as philosophies of history or assumptions about human nature), it also enables us to situate the origins and implications of these assumptions historically and the work they do politically. Comparative use of social theory enables both reflexive critique and increases observation by including a broader range of perspectives.⁴² It also informs the interpretivist approach to reasoning and theory building which are broadened to include the self-conscious and systematic cultivation of abductive and retroductive reasoning.

Systematic development of all four modes of reasoning combines self-reflexivity with broad theoretical literacy and the historical contextualisation of thought. The cultivation of abductive and retroductive reasoning requires a recursive and iterative tacking back and forth between inductive observation, the theories that inform these observations and the surprises found within a field site. Tavory and Timmermans describe this process as revisiting data or field-site, defamiliarization, and alternative casing through different theoretical lenses.⁴³ Sometimes equated, abduction arises from a reaction to data that do not fit with assumptions used to design inquiry, and retroduction is the process of producing new theories or concepts which attempt to account for data that do not fit. The systematic cultivation of all modes of reasoning is part of interpretivist reflexivity and is a rejection of the claim that *only* hypothetico-deductive inference and falsification lead to robust knowledge. It is also generative of novelty because it insists upon diversity of perspectives, discourages wearing theory as an observational strait-jacket and/or hypothesis testing on the same narrow band of social theory, such as Rational Choice or Game Theory.

Below I will provide examples of the abduction which occurs when analytical focus on empire forces a rethinking of dominant social theories (Hegelian, Marxian, and Weberian). Several times in the literature I examine, social theories which contain a philosophy of history which posit an historically contingent set of social relations as the outcome of historical progress become untenable when the referent object is empire, because these assumptions contain, as Shilliam points out, an imperial logic.

The final moment of reflexivity is to recognise the constitutive relationship between LMC and knowledge, the co-constitutive relationship between knowledge and societies, and to see knowledge as a social mode of production which can itself be a site of investigation. Societies are built-up through socially constitutive and “unevenly distributed knowledges”.⁴⁴ It is the reification of historically contingent meanings into institutions which gives them their appearance of permanence, enables their transfer to new generations, their uneven dispersal through the social order, our apprehension of them as natural or eternal and creates knowledge monopolies which empower, disenfranchise, and in some cases annihilate.⁴⁵ Because of the socially constitutive

⁴¹ M. Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans, *Abductive Analysis: Theorising Qualitative Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁴² Shilliam, *Decolonising Politics*; Sandra Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁴³ Tavory and Timmermans, *Abductive Analysis*.

⁴⁴ Peter T. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, Penguin Books, 1966).

⁴⁵ Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the “Other” and the myth of modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Ramon Grosfoguel, “Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial World System,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Centre)*, Vol 25, 3 (2002), pp. 203–24.

nature of knowledge and because not all research sites are accessible, Interpretivists build “knowledge/power” into research design. Recent disciplinary histories of political science and international relations, which show their connections to state power, foreign policy, race science, comparative methodology, and plans to reconstitute the British empire, are therefore methodologically interpretivist.⁴⁶

Telling the Truth? Four Methodological Problems

In my title, I purposely evoke Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob’s classic historiographical text *Telling the Truth about History* as a way of foregrounding the self-reflexive work that has been done across disciplines which excavate the link between knowledge production and political power.⁴⁷ One of the central claims of this text is that, far from being an autonomous science, the discipline of history is implicated in Nineteenth-Century nation building and in making the nation state its object of inquiry through its inflection by the philosophy of history that sees the “rational state” as the telos in the overcoming of “irrational empire”. Reflexivity in the discipline of history is part of what has given rise to historical scholarship which seeks to overcome methodological nationalism and eurocentrism. The result has been a new field of global history, such as Maxine Berg’s (2013) *Writing the history of the Global*, Anthony Hopkins (2002) *Globalisation in World History*, John Darwin (2016) *The Prospect of Global History*, as well as a recent turn to world historical comparative work on empires, such as John Darwin’s (2007) *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*, Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper’s (2010) *Empires in World History: Power and the politics of Difference*, Susan Alcock et al.’s (2001) *Empires: perspectives from archaeology and history*, and Karen Barkey’s (2008) *Empire of Difference: The Ottoman’s in comparative perspective*. Overcoming methodological nationalism and eurocentrism in history has been done by expanding historical inquiry to the global, making empire a comparative site of investigation and making thereby a profound challenge to History’s traditional object of study. Much, not all, of this scholarship is interpretivist (according to the description given above).

The turns to global and historical IR and to empire have also tried to overcome Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism and is informed by some of the scholarship referenced above.⁴⁸ Attempts to reconceptualise IR’s referent object — the international system — include “layered sovereignty”, network metaphors or continuums between anarchy and hierarchy.⁴⁹ Despite various attempts to reconstruct a more suitable object of inquiry, for IR only the scholarship on the more paradigmatic end of political

⁴⁶ Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science*; Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Vineet Thakur, *South Africa, Race and the Emergence of International Relations* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

⁴⁷ Joyce Appleby, Lynne Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994).

⁴⁸ Andrew Phillips, “Global IR Meets Global History: Sovereignty, Modernity and the International System’s Expansion in the Indian Ocean Region,” *International Studies Review*, Vol 18, 1 (2016), pp. 62–77; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “World History and the Development of Non-Western International Relations Theory,” in *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, eds, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 197–220.

⁴⁹ Phillips, “Global IR”; Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol 101, 2 (2007), pp. 253–71; D. David Lake, “Anarchy, Hierarchy and the Variety of International Relations,” *International Organization*, Vol 50, 1 (1996), pp. 1–33.

science has directly addressed the question of empire, making claims for universally applicable theory.

Making Empire a Site of Investigation? The Question of Ontology

All scholarship has ontological assumptions baked into its mode of inquiry. There are different approaches to this ontological question when it comes to empires. Some scholarship is methodologically nationalist. That is, it presumes an unquestioned ontological status for the state. Empire is either not a state,⁵⁰ is a relationship between two states,⁵¹ or arises out of a centrally organised and economically differentiated state.⁵² Efforts to distinguish empire from state (a bounded territory where populations are treated equally before the law),⁵³ falter empirically because their definition of the state is seldom the norm owing to the very politics of differentiation left over from the imperial politics out of which most states are formed.⁵⁴ The problem with defining empire in distinction to state is that: (1) the state is also a conceptual variable that political science has historically had trouble defining,⁵⁵ and (2) most states are the rumps of former imperial metropolises or colonies. David Lake also begins with the ontological certainty of the state and characterises hierarchy between two states occurring on a continuum between alliance through to empire. Lake's ontological certainty for the state contains dispositional assumptions. The state can be understood as a unitary rational actor because the "selectorate" (which ever class holds the balance of power) possess single peaked preferences (drawing on median voter theorem). The state has intrinsic behavioural properties (producing security through aggregating capabilities) and its transition into empire is determined by a calculative formula between the costs of opportunistic defection from the contract against the cost of governing compliance. Empire is inevitable and natural because it exhibits the instrumental rationality of the firm, the firm is the organisational expression of human nature. Other class based dispositional theories include Joseph Schumpeter who, while not necessarily a methodological nationalist, sees imperialism arising from the dispositional war-like characteristics of aristocratic classes.⁵⁶

Methodological nationalism in the work of Michael Doyle also aims to offer a universally applicable context independent theory. He tries to overcome the limits of preceding approaches such as metrocentric (usually classical Marxist), pericentric (usually works of history) and systemic (denoting World Systems and Realist). For Doyle, these approaches need to be combined in a three-dimensional, multi-scalar model which takes account of the composition of the domestic politics of the metropole (differentiated), and the periphery (only either patrimonial or tribal), and the composition of the international system which puts pressure on states to secure their survival. The combination of these factors give rise to empire which Doyle defines as control by a metropole of both the domestic and foreign policy of its periphery. This definition presumes the pre-given nature of political units — metropole and periphery

⁵⁰ Munkler, *Empires*.

⁵¹ Lake, "Anarchy, Hierarchy."

⁵² Doyle, *Empires*.

⁵³ Munkler, *Empires*.

⁵⁴ Thomas J. Barfield, "The shadow empires: imperial state formation along the Chinese-Nomad frontier," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds, Susan E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 10–41.

⁵⁵ Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol 85, 1 (1991), pp. 77–96.

⁵⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (New York: A.M. Kelly, 1951).

as distinctly bounded territories. Empires can only arise from states with an economy differentiated enough to produce surplus transnational forces to penetrate peripheries. If the rise of empires is rooted in structural conditions of the international system of competitors and the availability of peripheries to imperialise, imperialism itself as rooted in the essential modern and developed characteristics endogenous to the metropole. The metropole is always a state with inherent properties and political unity. He is little troubled by exceptions to this rule, such as the Mongols,⁵⁷ or the fact that many of the “patrimonial entities” colonised by Europeans were also empires (such as the Aztecs) and he devotes a scant four pages to Islamic empires.⁵⁸

Another dominant approach is to posit a consistent unchanging structure. One of the earliest structuralist accounts comes from Johan Galtung for whom imperialism is a structural division both within and between metropolises and peripheries, between “collectivities” of the elites of the metropole and the elites of the periphery. This account is nuanced by several other elements like knowledge transfer, communication benefits, skills and education, social structure, and psychological effects. Galtung is influenced by critiques of development from the 1960s and 1970s and has a clear ethical normative opposition to imperialism but he nevertheless uses naturalist concepts like “species” and “genus” and he still presumes that these collectivities are unitary social classes with “harmonies of interests” acting as one and that empire is a fixed structure.⁵⁹ Nexon and Wright offer a more elaborate structural metaphor — the network — drawn from communications theory and define empires as differential bargains between elites which creates a cross sectional structure in which the metropole engages in multi-vocal signalling.⁶⁰ Like Munkler and Galtung, for Nexon and Wright this characteristic structure is key to the identification of empire, it represents an ideal type in the Weberian mode which enables comparison across case variation. Their ideal type is aggregated from European maritime non-contiguous empires, not a comparison across empire types. The other common structural metaphor is the wheel with a hub and spokes with now outer rim which is marshalled also by Marxist scholars.⁶¹

Whether state, disposition, or structure, what this scholarship has in common is an ontology of empire as a fixed decontextualized entity that can be identified either by its characteristic structure, conceptualised metaphorically, or by intrinsic behavioural characteristics (divide and conquer, multivocal signalling, or instrumental rationality of means ends calculations). Some even offer pictograms with lines and circles to help us visualise this structure.⁶² Behavioural properties are understood as endogenous to the unit/structure itself and they tend to be posited as rational, natural, or inevitable. Whether statist or structuralist this scholarship transfers the ontological stability political science presumes of the state and rational actor onto empire. Moreover, they make universal context independent inferences derived from European empires that the comparative historical literature has shown to be world historically new.⁶³ They do not specify that their diagrams and metaphors are heuristic tools designed to aid in the conceptualisation of a large and enduring political structure that cannot in fact be observed in toto.

⁵⁷ Doyle, *Empires*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 105–208.

⁵⁹ Johann Galtung, “A Structural Theory of Imperialism,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 8, 2 (1971), pp. 81–117.

⁶⁰ Nexon and Wright, “What’s at Stake.”

⁶¹ Munkler, *Empires*; Alejandro Colas, *Empire* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

⁶² Nexon and Wright, “What’s at Stake,” p. 257; Galtung, “A Structural Theory,” p. 84.

⁶³ Darwin, *After Tamerlane*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*.

The interpretivist scholarship by contrast, ontologise empires by their strategies of governance and repertoires of rule. Divide and conquer is not a fixed structure, it is by nature a flexible strategy of rule that makes of empire a durable kind of political arrangement. Empire builders have context dependent strategies and repertoires of rule that are in most cases adopted and adapted from previous entities and/or learned from competitors who innovate. Empires are “polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people”⁶⁴ where distinctions are not predicated on enduring pre-existing entities but part of the repertoires of imperial rule which categorise those subject to governance, what Mahmood Mamdani calls “define and rule”.⁶⁵ Ann Laura Stoler insists on an approach to ontology to capture not what empires *are* in any fixed sense, but what as “formations” they *do* as “polities of dislocation, processes of dispersion, appropriation, and displacement” that are “dependent on moving categories and populations”.⁶⁶ The durability of empires is explained by focussing on practices of rule that perpetually change the relations between different social groups as empires expand. Incorporated populations are thus not neatly segmented into succinct territorial units but within and across layered sovereignties of differential governance.

The many instances in which populations are dispossessed of their life and land (what Michael Doyle forensically calls “depopulation”) also require discourses of differentiation.⁶⁷ Diversity management strategies are required to enslave, disenfranchise, dispossess of land, slaughter, racialize, or mutilate people to restrict them to a subservient class. Practices of differential governance require negotiation with elites that are informed by systems of belief, the codification of law, institutionalised meaning making, and collective memory. Strategies of assimilation, differentiation, and dispossession perpetually change as empires expand. Only an interpretivist methodological grounding in LMC enables such an observation.

Comparative interpretive scholarship emphasises patterns of change over fixity of disposition or structure. These entities expand, fragment, and reconfigure for centuries in the same regions. Empires overlap, learn their strategies of rule from being at the periphery of previous entities, fragment according to administrative units that are required for governance of large territories and fragmentation tends to give birth to new imperial arrangements. To understand these repertoires of rule, empires have to be studied in their geographical and historical context. Moreover, the historical memory of empire builders is principle in imperial reconstruction. Alcock et al. point out that Rome is an archetypal empire whose importance lay not just in its scope, size, and impact aftermath, but its impact on politics of collective memory as various subsequent entities tried to recreate it (such as Charlemagne, Byzantium, Suliman the Great, the Russian Tsars, and the British). What is important therefore in the study of empire is not just how the memory of empire has been constituted in the mind of scholars in various traditions of recounting the past, but the ways that the memory of empire has been constitutive for empire builders themselves. Thus, the interpretivist approach pays attention to localised and contingent practices of governance and meaning making and provides a way of

⁶⁴ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁶⁶ Stoler, “Considerations,” p. 40.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Canny, “The Ideology of English Colonisation: From Ireland to America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol 30, 4 (1973), pp. 575–98.

accounting for the perpetual reconstitution of empire which does not foreclose on the diversity of human social and political organisation or make of instrumental hierarchy a *fait accompli*.

Social Theory

Much of the scholarship on empire and imperialism in the twentieth century tends to draw from modernist social theory predicated upon a teleological philosophy of history (Marx, Kant, Weber, and Hegel) or from economics. For example, David Lake draws on relational contracting from economics.⁶⁸ It posits that all social relations, even the most coercive, can be coded as a contract. This naturalises the behaviour of the firm without contextualising it historically in the limited liability, joint stock companies created by the Dutch, British, and French for the purposes of colonising before any of those states had the capability.⁶⁹

Most of the statist or structuralist approaches tend to operationalise economic metaphors: contract, bargain, the firm, harmony/disharmony of interests in accordance with the primacy political science awards to the assumptions of economics which they then naturalise. In addition, they tend to focus exclusively on intermediary arrangements with elites. This precludes observation of other important cross case factors, such as the perpetual incorporation of diverse populations, territorial and political dispossession, genocide, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation. Some form of enslavement — such as serfs, eunuchs, or chattel — is present in enough cases to warrant its inclusion in accounts claiming to be generalisable. *It is completely absent from all of the accounts using the methodological trappings of political science.* The chattel slavery that Europeans used legally coded people as property. It is difficult to conceive this most coercive of relationships as a contract.

The scholarship that is framed by teleological social theory, Hegel, Marx, or Weber, creates for itself something of an endogeneity problem. For example, Doyle's modernist commitment to the centralised, economically differentiated state as the condition for an imperialising metropole leads him to exclude almost entirely the empires of East Asia, multiple Islamic Empires and the pre-conquest empires of Latin America, not coded as imperial because Doyle codes them as "traditional". Recent work on company states and comparative work on empires shows that strong, developed, differentiated states did not exist in Europe prior to the colonial project which was a private affair to start, owing to the weakness of European states.⁷⁰ This literature also problematises the aggregation of an ideal type base on the European experience. The consensus from world historical comparison is that European empires are not at all typical, they are a world historical innovation.⁷¹ Central to this innovation according to Cain and Hopkins and Burbank and Cooper was the centralisation of finance, itself an adaptation from the Dutch and Venetians.

⁶⁸ Lake, "Anarchy, Hierarchy."

⁶⁹ Jason C. Sharman, *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Darwin, *After Tamerlane*; Peter J. Cain and Anthony G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (London: Longman, 2001); Muldoon, *Empire and Order*.

⁷⁰ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*; Darwin, *After Tamerlane*; Muldoon, *Empire and Order*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

For many, the long tradition of Marxist scholarship has dealt well with the question of imperialism. In fact, empire has perpetually posed a problem for the Marxist tradition, being the source of most of the debate and revision that occurs there.⁷² Empire poses a problem for the Marxist account of capital because it shares bounded territorial assumptions with classical political economy understood as endogenous to the nation state and expanding outward.⁷³ The problem is, Marxists provide an explanation for the expansion of European capital, but they do not provide an explanation for the expansion of other non-European (non-Capitalist by Marx's definition) empires (such as the Mongols or the Ottomans). This incongruence is overcome when empire becomes the referent object and it is recognised that capital is a subset of empire and not the other way around. In other words, the facts arrange themselves luminously when empire is the concept framing inquiry — abduction.

There are several instances when making empire the category of analysis creates an abductive moment — the theory does not fit. For example, S. N Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires* (1963) is a study which puzzles over why the Weberian narrative of modernity rooted in the European state form did not materialise in what he refers to as “historical bureaucratic empires” despite the presence in those places of some of Weber's most important characteristics of modernity — social differentiation and bureaucracy.⁷⁴ What Eisenstadt finds prompts him to call into question the social theory informing his inquiry, principally, that not all change leads to differentiation, and that institutional developments that seem similar may lead in different directions. In other words, it is by taking back and forth reflexively between theory and case that Eisenstadt concludes that there is no developmental logic in any political formation and that there are elements of what Weber classifies as “modern” in the political formations (both bureaucratic and tribal empires) which the teleological narrative designates as “pre-modern” or “traditional” because, it must be emphasised, of its racism and Eurocentrism.⁷⁵ Is it the abductive moment which occurs when Eisenstadt realises that Weberian sociological theory does not allow him to account for differentiation and bureaucracy in empires and leads him to reject modernist theory. It is the retroductive moment which prompts a *reconceptualization* of history as containing “multiple modernities”.⁷⁶

The abductive/retroductive moment is demonstrated well in Burbank and Cooper's *Empires in World History* (2010) and Kathleen Morrison et al.'s (2001) *Empires in Archaeology and History*. These volumes arise out of conferences working across two disciplines by a whole community of scholars, and they draw together consensus which dispense with the teleological myths of social theory. First, that there is an inevitable historical progression from empire to state; second, the organising

⁷² Schlomo Avineri, ed., *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization: His Dispatches and Other Writings on China, India, Mexico, the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969); Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, Cultural Margins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Logics of Power: A Conversation with David Harvey,” *Historical Materialism*, Vol 14, 4 (2006), pp. 9–34; David Harvey, “Commentary on Commentaries,” *Historical Materialism*, Vol 14, 4 (2006), pp. 157–66; James Parisot, “What Is, and What Is Not, a Capitalist Empire,” *International Critical Thought*, Vol 6, 1 (2016), pp. 29–45.

⁷³ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷⁴ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (London: Collier MacMillan, 1963).

⁷⁵ Shilliam, *Decolonising Politics*.

⁷⁶ Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

conceptual designation of modern and premodern; and finally, a focus on Europe as uniquely powerful agents of change. In other words, all of the Eurocentric assumptions of social theory fall away when empire is the site of inquiry. Second, both volumes demonstrate that there is no endogeneity of structure or unit out of which empires arise. Empires can occur out of tribal hierarchies (such as the Mongols), city states (such as the Romans and Byzantines), federations (such as the Dutch), monarchies (as in the case of the Portuguese and early French), religious institutions (Byzantines, Abbasids, Umayyids, and Russians), corporations (such as the company states). Rather than reducing complexity through the structural metaphor to compare what are presumed (according to political science's preferred ontological assumptions) succinct, autonomous wholes, comparative study of empire in the interpretive mode of inquiry demonstrates perpetual interaction, filiation, adaptation, and *evolution* in the forms that empire takes.

Comparative use of social theory in the interpretive mode would necessitate an historical contextualisation which mitigates against using theory rooted in imperial assumptions. Tacking back and forth reflexively between object of inquiry and conceptual framework produces abductive/retroductive moments which expose the limits of Euro-Atlantic social theory. Moreover, a broad comparative approach to social theory allows the observation of elements of imperial politics invisible to other modes of inquiry. Engagement with theorists like Aileen Moreton-Robinson, W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, Sylvia Winter, and others provide different perspectives on imperial rule, increasing thereby the number and types of observation and ensuring that we do not study empire from the perspective of imperialists.

Research Design

Most of the literature making universal inferences about empire proceeds by comparison. Indeed, comparative historical work is a growing field.⁷⁷ For much of the scholarship, the reduction of complexity and diversity to a fixed ontology provides for like for like comparison. Michael Doyle compares using governance type (centralised differentiated vs. patrimonial and tribal), Alexander Motyl uses the concept of parabola and compares empires according to their patterns of attrition.⁷⁸ Interpretivist scholarship by contrast emphasises that the complexity of absorbing a territory and social configurations into a broader expansive tent means that empires are better conceptualised as a “kaleidoscope”. As Russianist Dominic Lieven points out, kaleidoscopes are not easy to compare.⁷⁹ Stoler, Thakur, Davis and Vale demonstrate how the comparative approach is itself rooted in empire building, and thus comparing empires has to be thought through very carefully on epistemological and methodological grounds.⁸⁰ Once again, we encounter a methodological problem which is only observable as a methodological problem from within the interpretivist mode of inquiry. As in the case of social theory, using a research method with origins and assumptions rooted in empire itself creates an endogeneity problem.

Building power/knowledge into research design also enables scholars to contend with the availability of data which interpretivists recognise is always historically and politically contingent. For example, the study of ancient empires must of necessity

⁷⁷ Barkey, *Empire of Difference*; Stoler, “Considerations”; Krishnan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁷⁸ Doyle, *Empires*; Motyl, *Imperial Ends*.

⁷⁹ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸⁰ Stoler, “Considerations”; Thakur, Davis and Vale, “Imperial Mission.”

draw upon diverse resources many of which are not even considered data by political science, such as archaeological remains (settlements, monuments, artefacts of material culture, evidence of landscape modification), literature, art, and architecture and contending also with entities that left no written records. The specialised linguistic and hermeneutic knowledge required to analyse these artefacts means that the study of empires requires interdisciplinary collaboration.⁸¹ Scholars have to contend not just with what data are available but *why the data are available*, such what happens accidentally to be left over with the passage of time, all of the data that might be missing and what is actively curated through the agency of antiquarians, historians and museums or destroyed by time, wars, and departing colonial administrators.⁸² This means that historiography (both the history of historical writing and more foundational philosophical question like what is history and how can we know it) needs also to be central to inquiry, as does the politics of writing history.⁸³ For example, the Incan empire can only be known through archaeological remains and the texts of the Spanish empire, where in the case of various South Asian empires textual data exist but they are conventionalised in different ways and require a far more complex hermeneutics to decipher.⁸⁴ Artefacts may vary in the degree to which they represent elite viewpoints and perspectives of different groups within an empire. Text-based analysis is also dependent on spatial, temporal, and social scale of texts themselves (such as those carved into stone) as well as work on locating, transcribing, and making texts available through digital reproduction, archives, and libraries. One cannot falsify against a limited pool of data whose very existence is often owed to political choices in the first place.

Definition Versus Conceptualisation

The only methodological problem identified by scholars offering universal context independent theories is alighting on a definition that is broad enough to include all variation but not so imprecise as to give way to conceptual overstretch.⁸⁵ The various ways of dealing with this methodological problem are all rooted in the positivist approach to concepts as containers for phenomenon of interest and they are consistent with what Schaffer and Bevir and Blakely identify as conceptual reconstruction which is one-sided, universalist, and reified. There are roughly three approaches to the definitional problem. One is to reduce variation through generalisation into an “ideal typical” model,⁸⁶ which universalises one historically specific and contingent iteration (maritime non-contiguous). The second is to define empire through hard distinction between empire and state based on the difference in territorial boundaries (fixed for states and unfixed for empires) and differential approaches to populations (integrated and equal for states, differentiating for empires).⁸⁷ The third is to taxonomize by type: maritime non-contiguous, land-based contiguous, modern, ancient, world, and great empires, as is done by Herfried Munkler.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Morrison, “Sources, Approaches, Definitions.”

⁸² Shohei Sato, “‘Operation Legacy’: Britain’s Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol 45, 4 (2017), pp. 697–719.

⁸³ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, “Telling the Truth.”

⁸⁴ Morrison, “Sources, Approaches, Definitions.”

⁸⁵ Hendrick Spruyt, “‘American Empire’ As an Analytic Question or a Rhetorical Move?” *International Studies Perspectives*, No 9 (2008), pp. 290–99.

⁸⁶ Nexon and Wright, “What’s at Stake.”

⁸⁷ Mark Shirk, “‘Bringing the State Back In’ to the Empire Turn: Piracy and the Layered Sovereignty of the Eighteenth Century Atlantic,” *International Studies Review*, No 19 (2017), pp. 143–65; Motyl, *Imperial Ends*; Munkler, *Empires*.

⁸⁸ Munkler, *Empires*.

The interpretivist approach by contrast recognises that empire, like the state, is a socially constitutive concept, by definition a carrier of signification with multiple meanings that does political work. The one-sided, reified, and universalised response to the definition problem is not capable of recognising that empire is a conceptual double — it originates as a politically constitutive concept that has come to be used as an analytical concept. The concept *imperium* originally described the arbitrary powers of the king, travelled to designate the arbitrary powers of the generals conquering new territory and returned to the metropole to reconfigure relationships at the periphery and the centralisation of power on Augustus First Princeps, *imperium* comes to designate the whole of the Roman territory. Conceptual elucidation draws our attention to this etymological puzzle: how did a politically constitutive concept — *imperium* — come to be associated with the whole of the expansive, incorporative hierarchical polity which recurs? Again, a methodological problem only observable from within the interpretivist mode of inquiry.

Conceptual histories tell this dialectical story of a travelling concept whose institutionalisation is part of empire's repetition and reconstitution.⁸⁹ Thus, according to Burbank and Cooper, the Romans thought a lot about the meaning of this term and put it to use politically.⁹⁰ Other conceptual histories show a perpetual revival of the concept to solve problems of rule, particularly for entities aiming to revive to Roman project.⁹¹ Thus, it is the variability of the meaning of concepts that allows them to travel and be used metaphorically in new settings to do different kinds of political work. Conceptual histories show that several periods of revival enable elites to reconceptualise empire which informs the construction of new kinds of political arrangements.

Thus, Empire, like the state, needs elucidating, not defining, and like the state its boundaries (such as those between metropole and periphery) are produced internally, through technologies of governance which include both discursive and spatial arrangements.⁹² Empires need to be conceptualised, not defined, because their size, scale, and longevity means they cannot be observed, only theorised.

Conclusion: So Now Can We Talk About Empire?

Claims are often made about what is or is not empire or imperial without systematic interrogation of the question and its methodological problems. For example, the decolonial school uses the concept of “coloniality” to account for the continuance of colonial power without considering that colonialism is part of larger political formation which has incredible durability and a propensity to regroup after losses. Political scientists will claim the United States is not an empire because it does not possess colonies without considering that empires have a variety of governance techniques at their disposal (both direct and indirect) which are changed by communications technology. Scholarship on Australia has difficulty determining if it is imperial, sub-imperial, post-colonial, or post-colonising. In this paper, I have pointed out that shifting focus from colonisation to empire creates greater analytical clarity that could strengthen these claims. For example, we know from the interpretivist comparative scholarship that there is no endogeneity of polity out of which empires arise and a few examples of federal structures. We also know that empires have a pattern of attrition and the

⁸⁹ Kroeber and Schmidt, *Imperialism*; Muldoon, *Empire and Order*.

⁹⁰ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*.

⁹¹ Muldoon, *Empire and Order*; Kroeber and Schmidt, *Imperialism*; Folz, *The Concept of Empire*.

⁹² This seminal text by Timothy Mitchell is generously used by interpretive comparativists but it is seldom noticed that all of his examples of state society relations are imperial.

possibility of reconstitution, and we know that the idea for an empire based on Anglo alliance can be traced to the late Nineteenth Century and was predicated upon communications technology as the conditions of its possibility.⁹³ Using the comparative interpretive approach, a more robust case could be made that AUKUS could be the first step in a partial reconstitution of the British empire with changes to the constitution of the metropole. From the same scholarship we also know that empires engage in practices of differential rule that change as empires expand. European empires predicated their practices of differential rule on an ideology of racism, which are now having to be reformed through institutional changes in education, governance, and reconciliation. Burbank and Cooper have argued that one of the reasons that the British empire did not follow the common imperial pattern of passing an “Augustan Threshold” (where formerly subordinated regions of an empire are included on more equal footing) is because of the ubiquity of their racist ideologies.⁹⁴ The several attempts to reform education,⁹⁵ to create more inclusive and representative practices of governance and formalise reconciliation in Australia, Canada, and other former colonies of the “White Possessive” could be part of an attempt to pass an Augustan Threshold. Comparative attention to empire within the interpretivist mode of inquiry has the capacity to provide robust answers to the question of Australian empire.

In this paper, I argued that the decolonial project should shift its focus to empire as its referent object. A decolonial project should contain a robust understanding of what an empire is, how it can reform and adapt, how it can be resisted and what kind of political arrangement would be post-imperial. I made this argument by comparing on methodological grounds different scholarships with their gaze trained on empire as a form of politics. I showed that approaches following the conventions of political science tend to emphasise a succinctly defined entity (usually as distinct from state) with recognisable context independent organisational and behavioural properties. I suggested that as these assumptions are consistent with imperial modes of knowledge production, using them to inform context independent universal theories creates an endogeneity problem. If the decolonial project rests on an ethical normative commitment to those on the sharpest end of imperial differentiation, violence and dispossession, “we” have an ethical responsibility to produce the most robust account of empire possible. Only when we know the “truth” about empire can we decolonise anything, only when we know the truth about empire, can we confidently contribute to a politics that would be post-imperial.

Acknowledgement

Open access publishing facilitated by Australian National University, as part of the Wiley - Australian National University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

⁹³ Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*.

⁹⁴ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*.

⁹⁵ This includes the global reform movement for Global Citizenship Education and Australia's reforms represented in the Melbourne Declaration 2008 and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, 2020.