

# When the Social Sciences Revisit the Notion of Empire

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**Review of:** Jan Zielonka *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, 293 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0199292219.

*Jan Zielonka's Europe as Empire is an exception in that sense for it offers the reader a groundbreaking explanation to the EU enlargement and integration by honouring a scholarly definition of empire acquired from Imperial Studies. Given the widespread misinformation on the notion of empire, even in the academic milieu, scholars, who seek to put forward a theory of empire without demonising it, concern themselves with the essential necessity of submitting a complete clarification of why they use the term. By the same token, Zielonka takes the pain to articulate well the reason why he brings the notion of empire into his analysis of EU enlargement. In providing his explanation, he contests the common tendencies attributing an aggressive, conquering and always exploiting character to empire.*

*The inclusion of ten new member states from Eastern Europe has drastically changed the plans for building a Westphalian super-centralised, super state out of the EU with fixed and clear borders. Because the enlargement has created, an as yet unbridgeable, economic, political, cultural and technological heterogeneity within the EU, it has inevitably given way to multilayered, multispeed, and multicentered governance, which could, according to the author, very possibly be viewed as a neo-medieval empire.*

Since the end of the World War II, the Social Sciences have treated empire as a category dated and irrelevant and incapable of offering an explanation to the current unfolding of world politics. The age of empires was pronounced dead and the students of Social Sciences focused on fresh concepts and theory, confident that mankind would carry on his political adventure on earth without pursuing an empire ever again. Of course, the main reason behind the Social Sciences' loss of interest in the discussions of empire was the predominant, but inaccurate, tendency to associate the notion of empire fully with the nineteenth-century imperialism, which is an exceptionally inhumane episode of world history and has been condemned not only in the common conscience of humanity but also by international law. Nevertheless, as the scholars of Imperial studies have revealed, the topic of empire is too complex, deep and broad to be delimited to this single version, which was evidently degenerated in implementation. Unfortunately, the wide spectrum of theories, history, rhetoric, and reality of empire, as the Humanities understand them, has not been communicated well to the Social Sciences. Although twenty-first century US foreign policy has recently reintroduced the students of International Relations and Political Science with the topic of empire in general along with the question whether there is an American Empire. Contemporary political literature is permeated with catch-phrases, oversimplifications, and pejorative remarks all drawn from the common misconception restricting the knowledge of empire to the practices of imperialism. Jan Zielonka's *Europe as Empire* is an exception in that sense for it offers the reader a groundbreaking explanation to EU enlargement and integration by honouring a scholarly definition of empire acquired from Imperial Studies.

Given the widespread misinformation on the notion of empire, even in the academic milieu, scholars, who seek to put forward a theory of empire without demonising it, concern themselves with the essential necessity of submitting a complete clarification why they use the term. By the same token, Zielonka takes pains to articulate well the reason why he brings the notion of empire into his analysis of the EU enlargement. In providing 'special justification and explanation' (p. 11), he contests the common tendencies attributing an aggressive, conquering and always exploiting character to empire. However, the philosophies of empire in essence suggest a regional or global humanitarian project unfolding towards the triumph of order over instability and chaos. Political entities that function on the principle of spreading a certain type of legislation, values and norms in the name of spreading prosperity, peace and security bear the potential to 'become empires by default.' (p. 13) From this perspective, subsequent to the latest wave of enlargement, the EU has grown into a neo-medieval empire, which is by no means 'the type of empire the Euro-sceptics have feared so much.' (p. 1) What the author identifies as neo-medieval is the EU's still evolving governance model of 'overlapping authorities, divided sovereignty, diversified institutional arrangements, and multiple identities.' (p. 14)

When Hedley Bull inquired about the possibility of the transformation of the international politics into a medieval model of regional integrations, multilayered loyalties and nation-state-based disintegrations in 1977, he did not foresee that the global and regional economic, political, technological, and cultural integration through transnational organisations would have reached its contemporary advanced level (Hedley 1977: 254–5, 264–276). And now regarding the EU's eastern enlargement, Zielonka considers it apt to reinitiate Bull's inquiry of medievalism within the context of Europe and its future. It is important to underline here that Zielonka's neo-medievalism does not stand for 'anarchy and chaos.' It should, on the contrary, be understood as 'pluralism,' which is, in author's words, 'Europe's great historical and cultural treasure.' (p. 18) The inclusion of ten new member states from Eastern Europe has drastically changed the plans for building a Westphalian super-centralised, super state out of the EU with fixed and clear borders. Because the enlargement has created, an as yet unbridgeable, economic, political, cultural and technological heterogeneity within the EU, it has also inevitably given way to 'more layers of authority, more cultural, legal, and political pluralism, more diversified and crosscutting institutional arrangements.' (p. 3) For that reason, the current terms available in the literature of European Studies should be proven insufficient to depict this newly emerged picture of the EU, which should unmistakably remind the reader of a medieval sort of extensive network of allegiances and multiple layers of integration. Unlike what the Europhiles would argue, the new stage that the EU has evolved to is not necessarily wrong or unpleasant.

While conveying his comparative method of explaining the present status of the EU, Zielonka warns that his 'Westphalian and medieval models...merely represent theoretical benchmarks rather than the exact approximations of the course of history,' and on this account should be 'treated as analytical paradigms indicating different ways of exercising political authority rather than empirical blueprints.' (p. 15) The neo-medieval character attributed to the EU, therefore, should be perceived as a novel theory inspired by a version of empire acquired from Imperial Studies. The neo-medieval empire of the EU appears to be 'quite benign and incentive driven' aiming at peace, democracy, and prosperity equally dispersed throughout Europe. (p. 48) When compared to Westphalianism, this neo-medievalism offers 'more effective ways of governing the EU than through adoption of a European Constitution, strengthening the powers of the European parliament, creating a European army, or introducing a central distribution and taxation system via Brussels.' (p. 19)

The recent assessments of enlargement harshly criticize the new members for failing spectacularly to implement fully the *acquis communautaire*, meet the macroeconomic criteria for convergence and to achieve the perfect initiation of the twinning projects of transformation. Nevertheless, Zielonka does not consider the immediate outcomes of the last wave of enlargement sufficient to doubt the future stability and

prosperity of the EU. Reminding us how history has proven social scientists wrong, who were convinced that Eastern Europe would be permeated with non-European forms of 'bureaucratic, populist, paramilitary, or nationalistic dictatorship,' (p. 33) Zielonka argues that the enlarged EU's uneven patterns of development, democracy, welfare, and open-market operations should not be treated as the overall failure of the entire EU project. First of all, the statistical data of the enlargement demonstrates that 'there are no reasons to demonise this increased diversity.' (p. 88) Throughout the history of the EU integration, diversity has always existed and has not necessarily represented a problem. Secondly, the new, Eastern European members will eventually provide the EU with the 'flexibility, devolution, delegation, and decentralisation' (p. 115) definitely needed to govern this ever-growing European system. Diversity, uneven patterns of integration and rather blurry borders, which would threaten a Westphalian type of super state's endurance, are elements that enhances, even further, the neo-medieval empire in question.

According to Zielonka, the EU's multilayered, multispeed, and multicentered governance, which has become more visible through enlargement, appears to be well-equipped to cope with the mounting problems concerning economics, democracy, and foreign affairs. By embracing diversity and pluralism with the last wave of enlargement, the EU will succeed at what the Westphalian centrality and homogeneity cannot. Through this, what the author calls, 'impressive exercise in empire building,' (p. 44) Eastern Europe will converge with the rest of the EU at its own pace but always under the strict monitoring of the EU institutions, the safeguards of 'fundamental norms of democracy, market economy, human rights, and social justice.' (p. 56) In return, the new members will gain increasing access to the EU's decision-making processes and the imperial network thus provides mutual benefit.

Nevertheless, despite all his praise for the neo-medieval character of the EU, Zielonka is troubled with the problem of democratic checks and balances, accountability, and individuals' participation in this vast 'patchwork of various quasi-sovereignties and overlapping hierarchies.' (p. 145) Although the existing institutional framework, legislative body and treaties provide a legitimate amount of transparency and democratic control over the policy-making, the degree of European citizens' involvement in the decision-making mechanisms seems insufficient. According to the author, only when EU citizens have been 'offered meaningful ways for contesting decisions directly affecting them,' (p. 186) will the level of individuals' participation in the governance of this neo-medieval empire have acquired an adequately democratic nature.

Zielonka's *Europe as Empire* is an exceptional contribution to contemporary European Studies in terms of attempting to understand and explain an enlarged EU with the help of his non-historical analogy of a neo-medieval empire. The author's approach to empire is praiseworthy in the sense that he has gathered accurate infor-

mation on empire and has not resorted to the clichés and misinformation pervading the Social Sciences today. If a content analysis of the official EU papers had been conducted, however, Zielonka's model of empire would have been more complete in demonstrating the elements of empire embedded in the enlargement discourse and practice.

## References

Hedley, Bull (1977) *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. London: Macmillan.