

3 Are We Living in a 'New Age of Imperialism'? Studying the History of Interaction between Nationalist and Imperialist Worldmaking

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3.1 Introduction

Is imperialism on the rise again? It certainly can seem that way. Many observers of today's world politics regard Russia's expansionist ambitions, particularly its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, similar developments in China, Turkey, Iran and, more recently, in the United States as signs of the beginning of a 'new age of imperialism' (e.g. Novo 2022). While at least in the Western world, many still raise the alarm about this trend and write about what might counter it (e.g. Harari 2024), others already argue with a sense of resignation and from an accepting or even supporting perspective (e.g. Münkler 2023; Kimmage 2025). These observations seem to imply that the dominance of other WMPs is coming to an end and that imperialism is making a triumphant comeback on the world stage, re-establishing the *animus dominandi* (Hans Morgenthau) of the 'great powers' and the sweeping dynamics of nineteenth-century great power competition.

But there is also a contrasting story to be told. If we consider nationalism and imperialism as competing worldviews and study them in historical perspective, nationalism may appear as the ultimate winner. Given the institutionalization of international law after 1945 and the legal and political support for the right to self-determination and national sovereignty within the framework of the United Nations, it can be ar-

gued that it is nationalism – or a certain kind of nationalism – that has been widely accepted as the guideline for building the international order. Nationalism also helped delegitimize colonialism and imperialism, thus enabling the founding of numerous new nation-states, large, mid-sized, and small (Manela 2007; Wimmer/Feinstein 2010). Officially today, all states represent nations. As a consequence, ‘according to the formal-legal underpinnings of the contemporary state system, empires are not supposed to exist anymore’ (Beissinger 2005: 14). According to this story, the existing nation-state system is ‘empire’s nemesis’ (Lieven 2000: xvi). People may talk about imperialism, but what we are really seeing is power politics between nation-states, legitimized by modern nationalism and legally protected by international law.

This chapter argues that both of these scenarios are misleading. They do not sufficiently take into account that nationalism and imperialism have a long and complex historical relationship that is still ongoing, and they neglect to consider that the two are not only political endeavors pursued by individual nationalist movements, states or empires. Rather, in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, both managed to establish themselves as worldmaking projects in the terms discussed in this volume (WMPs): as imaginaries that envision the world political sphere in specific ways and seek to change it according to their respective vision. With the help of what is referred to here as the infrastructural nexus, imperialism and nationalism were transformed into WMPs – and are still with us today.

The focus on WMPs draws attention to a level of analysis that is often neglected in research on nationalism and imperialism: the question of how *global legitimacy* is produced and assigned. WMPs aim at legitimizing certain political endeavors by making them part of imaginaries of global order, thus helping determine their acceptance and ultimately their chances of shaping international institutions. Studying nationalism and imperialism in these terms therefore promises to deepen our understanding of how and how far power politics depends on global legitimacy. This implies questions such as: which political practices benefit from the legitimacy provided by well-articulated and

widely-accepted WMPs? How do political practices adapt, and which new practices emerge, when such legitimacy is missing or diminishing?

Nationalism and imperialism are particularly promising objects of study in this regard, as they were transformed into WMPs largely simultaneously in the era of so-called 'new internationalism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This suggests, first of all, that they formed in close relation with each other and other WMPs. What makes them stand out among other WMPs, however, is that they are usually perceived in terms of *particularist* power politics. 'Nations' and 'empires' are usually imagined as defining their own identities and pursuing their own interests, and ascribing global legitimacy to the pursuit of these interests is what nationalism and imperialism – as WMPs – are all about. This explicit 'particularism' might suggest that they are less dependent on discursive legitimation than, for example, liberal-cosmopolitan or socialist-communist politics defined by their focus on 'universalist' norms and values. Yet, this is one of the major implications of analyzing world politics in terms of WMPs: in a political world populated and shaped by WMPs, the chances of enforcing nationalist and imperialist policies also increasingly depended on being able to wrap oneself in WMPs and thereby justify oneself. If legitimacy is a valuable asset, then it also makes sense for proponents of particularist identities and interests to strive for it. This is not only reflected in the history of nationalism and imperialism; it could also help us develop more informed scenarios about the future of imperialism.

Historically, this view suggests a focus on the period between the mid-to-late nineteenth century and the early-to-mid-twentieth century, which has been characterized in the literature as the 'age of empire' (Hobsbawm 1987), as well as the age of 'mass-producing traditions' (Hobsbawm 1983), such as nationalism, in Europe and beyond (Goswami 2002). As mentioned before, this was also the time described by contemporaries and historians as the period of the 'new internationalism', which we reinterpret here as a period when WMPs emerged and proliferated. Finally, as Diana Lemberg and Heidi Tworek show in their chapter, this was when the infrastructural conditions for the emergence of worldmaking projects were established, creating what we

call the 'infrastructural nexus'. All of this suggests that an examination of encounters between nationalism, imperialism and other WMPs in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries might help us gain additional insights into the links between these worldmaking projects and the infrastructural nexus, while also preparing us for an analysis of how and in what form these WMPs are still with us today.

The chapter starts with conceptual considerations that explain how far nationalism and imperialism can be characterized as WMPs, the qualities that distinguish them, what they have in common, and how they differ. The following section then focuses on the historical emergence of both WMPs from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. I argue that the formation of both WMPs was enabled by communications infrastructures, particularly by what I call the telegraph-news alliance, and a complex interplay of imperial/nationalist political practices and imperialist/nationalist thought enabled by these infrastructures. These observations suggest the more general point that we can understand the emergence, interplay, and impact of WMPs in new ways by paying attention to the 'global media system' forming since the nineteenth century. Against this background, the final section offers some preliminary thoughts on what conclusions can be drawn for an analysis of today's discussion on a 'new imperialism'. It suggests studying this trend in terms of *nationalist informal imperialism*. This term highlights the distinction between formal and informal imperial politics and proposes my view that to understand what's new about current forms of imperialism, we should focus on the relationships between informal imperial practices and the rhetoric and practices of nationalism.

3.2 Nationalism and imperialism as WMPs: Conceptual remarks

In line with the first chapter, worldmaking projects in the realm of world politics are defined here by three characteristics: the articulation of (a) universal aspirations ('worldmaking') and (b) normative visions for the future ('project'), and (c) the fact that these articulations relate or refer

to an emergent world of states or of world statehood ('world politics'). I will discuss the first and second elements in more detail below. The third element is merely intended to clarify that the focus here is on worldmaking that aims at a (re)ordering of the properties of relationships between political entities or polities, both as an end in and of itself and as a means to other ends (such as global equality, human rights, self-determination, etc.). It is in this sense that we can speak of WMPs specifically as world-political projects. This reflects the historical fact that such worldmaking projects since the nineteenth century have had to relate to the world being increasingly governed by or colonized by states, particularly self-described empires and nation-states.

To examine the emergence and interplay of WMPs, it is also important to distinguish between the formation of WMPs on the one hand and practical policies that pursue the goals of individual states or collective identities on the other. For example, the fact that the British Empire pursued imperialist goals (by laying cables, financing news agencies, waging colonialist wars, etc.) does not per se mean that there is an 'imperialist WMP'. WMPs require that such policies be couched in terms of universal aspirations (e.g., 'the whole world is/will/should be ruled by empires'), and a forward-looking vision (e.g. 'we should remake the world so that it is effectively ruled by empires'). Not all political action takes place within the horizon of worldmaking projects, nor do all worldmaking projects necessarily lead to corresponding political action. These distinctions are essential when it comes to examining, on the one hand, how WMPs emerge, develop, and relate to one another, and, on the other, how the formation of WMPs is related to political practices of all kinds, including nationalist and imperialist power politics.

As already indicated above, what makes nationalism and imperialism particularly interesting cases for studying WMPs is that their 'universal aspirations' are distinct from most other WMPs. WMPs tend to center around norms, values and visions that transcend the identities and interests of particular polities, arguing, for instance, for a rule-based order based on international law or for goals such as human rights irrespective of national belonging, race, or gender. It is not by accident that the terms 'universalism' and 'universalist' are usually associated with the

pursuit of such ‘anti-particularist’ ideas of worldmaking. But universal aspirations are not necessarily linked to such norms and visions. Rather, *aspirations are universal if they refer to the whole world and address humankind in generalist terms*. This also applies to variants of nationalism and imperialism that articulate ideas on how to govern the world to support their notions of nations and empires. Embedding particularistic ideas into an imaginary of global reach can add ideological power and, ultimately, global legitimacy to such notions. Proponents of nationalism and imperialism therefore often universalize their particularist notions, but they do so in distinct ways.

Nationalism conceives of the world as consisting of national collective identities with their own political interests and equal rights to political self-determination (cf. Calhoun 1997; Werron 2021). The core ideas of modern nationalism have been around at least since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. Anderson 1983; Getachew 2016), and perhaps earlier, as so-called anti-modernists in the study of nationalism argue (e.g. Gorski 2000). By the mid-nineteenth century, we find various nationalist movements and nationalist policies, as well as an emerging discourse on ‘national self-determination,’ mainly among European leaders of nationalist movements (e.g., Giuseppe Mazzini). These, however, were aimed at a European audience, did not think of nations as a global phenomenon and were part of a largely European understanding of international politics (see, for example, Case 2018). In other words, they did not yet articulate *universal* aspirations. This began to change in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, due in part to the increasing influence of anticolonial nationalism (Goswami 2002). From now on, self-determination was increasingly embraced as a universal idea, as evidenced in the global debate over Wilson’s Fourteen Points in 1918 (Manela 2007), in the ensuing debates over the League of Nations, and in the legal institutionalization of the right to national self-determination in the context of the United Nations (in particular, the UN Charter 1945; the ‘Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples’, 1960). Article 1 (2) of the UN charter, in particular, officially sets out the goal ‘to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of people’. Interna-

tional law thus attributes the right to self-determination to *all* nations, not only to existing nation-states, articulating a universalist vision for the present and future political order of the world. This is how nationalism was transformed into a WMP.

Imperialism, on the other hand, imagines the world as divided into large-scale metropole-periphery structures, i.e. empires and their respective spheres of control (e.g. Go 2011). Empires and imperial politics had existed for millennia, dividing the world into independent 'imperial worlds' (Hall 2024). However, ideas explicitly advocating a (re)ordering of world politics in terms of imperial control and power relations only seem to have gained ground in the age of 'high imperialism' from the mid-to-late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The articulation of such ideas as a WMP was the result of a long and gradual development, which took place in different discursive circles and languages. Neitzel (2000) analyzes these discourses in terms of a 'world imperial doctrine' [*Weltreichslehre*], which developed in Germany, Great Britain, the USA, and France between the early nineteenth century and World War I. This lengthy process eventually led to more sophisticated variants with clear universalist aspirations, produced in the 1930s by representatives of the German political right.

Carl Schmitt, in 'Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung' (1939a), proposed dividing the world into a small number of 'great spaces' ['Großräume', sometimes also translated as 'greater spaces' or 'large spaces'], each ruled by a great power and supported by a 'prohibition of interference by external powers' ['Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte']. He explicitly contrasted this thinking with 'universalism', i.e. the liberal universalism that the British Empire, in his view, propagated only for the purpose of disguising its own political expansion and economic interests (Schmitt 1939b). Schmitt's contemporary Ferdinand Fried developed a similar view, but with a stronger economic focus (e.g. Fried 1932). He argued that economic globalization and nationalism were only temporary phases and that 'a dialectical movement was sweeping all the nations of the world, liberal, communist, and fascist, towards the same destination: a world order composed of largely self-sufficient blocs, prone to violence along their peripheries, but ultimately

capable of coexistence and mutually beneficial exchange' (Derman 2021: 765). Just as the UN Charter articulates the universal aspirations of modern nationalism, such theories, and similar views today, give expression to the universal aspirations of imperialist thought. They thus illustrate that by the mid-twentieth century, the imperial practices of past centuries had effectively been transformed into a social imaginary that aimed to justify and legitimize attempts to establish a division of the world into 'great spaces', in short: an imperialist WMP.

Described in this way, nationalist and imperialist WMPs show significant similarities. Most importantly, both combine universal aspirations with the support of particularist identities and interests: in the case of nationalism, national collective identities and their claim to self-determination and sovereign statehood; in the case of imperialism, great political powers and their control of 'great spaces'. And although they were rhetorically pitted against (liberal) 'universalism', they in fact espouse their own brand of universalism, given that they promote the establishment of *world* orders that conform to their respective particularist principles. This explains why nations easily can be 'imperialized', in terms of worldmaking, just as empires can be 'nationalized'. You only have to think of empires at the same time as nations that establish their spheres of influence over other nations, or, vice versa, of nations as empires in competition with other nation-empires. The result of such a combination is a vision of what could be called 'imperial nationalism' (Kumar 2010) or 'the marriage of empire and nationalism' (Hall 2024: 3). Focusing on such articulations, it may appear as if both are not two different WMPs, but one and the same.

However, nationalist and imperialist WMPs also differ in important ways. The first major difference concerns the *imagined relationships between the political entities* for which they develop their ideas of order; the second concerns their *discursive legitimacy* and the support they receive from international law. Nationalist worldmaking is based on the premise that all nations are formally and legally equal – the UN Charter, after all, calls for respect 'for the principle of *equal* rights and self-determination of people'. Imperialist WMPs, on the other hand, presuppose *inequality* between the imperial centers (metropolises) and the political entities (pe-

ripheries) they are supposed to dominate. Despite nationalism's inherent 'particularism' and the undeniable problems associated with its aggressive forms, the assumption of formal equality of all nations makes nationalist worldmaking more compatible with other WMPs for which ideas of equality are central – particularly liberal-cosmopolitan or socialist-communist ones that start from the assumption that all human beings are equal.

By contrast, imperialist WMPs are not easily aligned with most other WMPs. This can also be seen from the fact, as mentioned at the beginning, that 'imperialism' and associated concepts such as 'empire' were largely delegitimized after 1945, with its traces more or less thoroughly eradicated from the international legal system in a succession of international treaties (even across the line of conflict in the Cold War, cf. Beissinger 2005). This does not mean, of course, that imperial power politics has disappeared (more on that at the end of this chapter). What it does mean is that at the formal-legal level, imperialist ideas for shaping the world are in conflict with nationalist ones. There are fundamental overlaps *and* tensions between the two, rooted in their respective ways of worldmaking, which deserve to be explored in more detail.

3.3 The infrastructural nexus: Observing the emergence of and the interplay between nationalist and imperialist WMPs

Such insights into convergences and tensions between nationalist and imperialist WMPs raise questions relevant with regard to all the WMPs analyzed here, but especially these two: Why and how did they emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Which developments during this period were conducive to the formation of WMPs that combined particularist ideas with universalist aspirations? And how do these developments continue to have an impact today? To deal with these questions, we have to examine in more detail how their emergence is related to the 'infrastructural nexus' and take a closer look at relations with other WMPs forming in the same period.

3.3.1 Setting the stage: internationalisms in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century has often been described as a period of increasing global awareness that suggested to political actors of all kind to imagine the world and their specific projects in universalist terms. As other WMPs that emerged during this period, imperialism and nationalism also recast the world in explicitly global terms. However, their explicit particularism makes them stand out among most of the 'internationalisms' emerging at the time (see the corresponding chapters in Sluga/Clavin 2017): religious internationalism; socialist internationalism; feminist internationalism; liberal economic internationalism; internationalism of human rights – all these internationalist movements are universalist in the sense that they assume the equality of all human beings and base their ideas on how to transform world politics, if any, on these universalist assumptions.

There are exceptions, however, in this catalogue that suggest the possibility of 'particularistic universalisms' emerging in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Take, for instance, the case of 'fascist internationalism' discussed by Herren (2017), who shows how fascist movements and states made use of internationalist strategies and penetrated liberal-internationalist networks to further 'the construction of fascist world orders spanning the world from Berlin to Tokyo', 'aimed at creating spheres of influence beyond territorial control' (Herren 2017: 192). In Herren's interpretation, fascists infiltrated international organizations not only to implement thinking in terms of great powers and their 'spheres of influence' but also to promote 'a state-driven strategy of global governance' (Herren 2017: 196). This points to the existence of fascist internationalists who had universal aspirations and placed themselves in the service of imperialist worldmaking. At the same time, it is also an extreme example of nationalist worldmaking, given that fascism can be understood as a 'paligenetic form of populist ultranationalism' (Griffin 2006: 26). With these connotations 'fascist internationalism', as controversial as the term may be, perfectly captures the tension between particularist and univer-

sal aspirations that is characteristic of both imperialist and nationalist WMPs.

Nationalism makes another interesting appearance in research on the 'new internationalism' in Liang Pan's (2017) analysis of what he calls 'national internationalism' in Japan and China in the first half of the twentieth century. Pan describes the formation, rise, and fall of a kind of nationalist thought that emerged as the result of 'interactions between liberal internationalist and nationalist considerations' (Pan 2017: 170). It was based on outspoken criticism of cosmopolitanism, which 'ignores nationalism', as Chou Keng-shen, a leading figure of Chinese cooperation with the League of Nations, argued in 1924, while also looking for new ways to reconcile nationalism and internationalism. Some of its proponents even thought of a nation-based world only as a phase in the long-term development to a cosmopolitan one. What makes these thinkers 'internationalists' is that they were all interested in exploring how international disputes might be prevented or resolved 'via the pacifist principles promoted by international organizations'. At the same time, they were keenly aware of power asymmetries within international organizations dominated by Western powers, 'which, in their views, tended to ignore the interests of non-Western states' (Pan 2017: 171). The resulting view is perhaps best summarized by Nitobe Inazo, former deputy secretary general of the League of Nations, who opined in May 1933 (after Japan had exited the League of Nations): 'A good internationalist must be a good nationalist and vice versa. . . . One can serve best the cause of internationalism by serving his country. On the other hand, a nationalist can best advance the interests and honour of his country by being internationally minded.' (Pan 2017: 171–172; Inazo 1972: 471).

This view perfectly summarizes what I understand to be the core ideas of nationalism as WMP: it insists on the legitimacy of serving *particular* national interests; and it *universalizes* this idea by arguing that it is the task of every nationalist to reconcile the pursuit of these interests and international exchange and cooperation. And the fact that such views were articulated by Chinese and Japanese scholars and officials in the 1920s (many similar quotes from other authors could be given)

suggests that we are dealing with a WMP that from early on was not only based in Western thinking but also in opposition against Western dominance. It was global not just in scope but also in its discursive practice.

3.3.2 Immersion in the telegraph-news-alliance: How nationalism and imperialism became part of the infrastructural nexus

While the emergence of nationalist and imperialist thought in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century points to the possibility that they developed universalist aspirations mainly to avoid being left behind in a rapidly internationalizing world, it also hints at how nationalism and imperialism were able to establish themselves as WMPs in their own right. They managed to do so by adapting to the technological and institutional change of the time and aligning themselves effectively with the infrastructural nexus. More specifically, I would like to argue that the transformation of nationalism and imperialism into WMPs was made possible by the formation of a global media system and infrastructurally based on what I would like to describe as the ‘telegraph-news-alliance’. The particularism-universalism-connex typical of both WMPs was inscribed into the global media system, both in terms of power constellations and cultural-institutional conditions of its emergence, and the rise of nationalist and imperialist WMPs both reflected this development and helped bring it about.

The fundamental historical significance of telecommunication technologies – from the telegraph, telephone, wireless in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to mobile phone and digital communication in the early twenty-first century – lies in the fact that they have decoupled the speed of communication from the speed of the transportation of goods and people (cf. Wenzlhuemer 2010). Such technologies can enable mutual observation without direct interaction and information exchange. However, for this purpose, they were also integrated with other communications infrastructures such as news agencies, newspapers, radio and other mass media into a ‘global media system’ (Winseck/Pike 2007).

In the late nineteenth century, it was the electric telegraph that paved the way for alliances between telecommunications technologies and other infrastructures. The historical focus on the telegraph suggests that a distinction should be made between two general effects of telecommunications technologies: (a) *direct effects*: they enable and accelerate the direct exchange of information across spatial differences. In this respect, it could be understood as an accelerated and localized version of the postal service: shortening the time it took for information to be exchanged between actors around the world (including leaders and bureaucrats, diplomats, cosmopolitan activists, nationalists and others), while also limiting the types and amounts of information that could be exchanged (for both technological and financial reasons). (b) *indirect effects*: Telecommunication technologies can enable mutual observation without direct interaction and information exchange. However, to do so, they benefit from cooperation with other communications infrastructures such as news agencies, newspapers, radio and other mass media. As the literature about the 'global media system' of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century shows, the telegraph not only helped to accelerate communication, but also pioneered the interconnection of telecommunication technologies and other infrastructures (Müller/Tworek 2015: 266–267). The structural effects can be described with a term suggested by Bruno Latour: The telegraph network worked with news agencies and newsrooms to create 'centers of calculation' (Latour 1987) that collected and published information from around the world. By constantly producing 'newsworthy' events, they established a new understanding of the world as a source of 'news' (Rantanen 1997) and, on this basis, helped to see and address the whole of humanity as a 'global public' for newsworthy events (Werron 2020).

Seeing the whole world as a source for daily news and everyone as a recipient of news suggests seeing the world as a place where any world event can be compared with any other world event, and where everyone is connected to everyone else as a member of the news audience. In such a world, it was almost inevitable that attentive observers would come up with the idea of developing new concepts for the formation of a world political order that reflected this new type of interconnectedness (cf. Ma-

zower 2012). For this reason, while both effects are important, the indirect effects – and the telegraph-news alliance that produced it – merit special attention when it comes to the historical analysis of WMPs.

The telegraph-news alliance was formed during the period of ‘high imperialism’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when modern forms of nationalism also emerged and spread worldwide (e.g. Wimmer/Feinstein 2010). However, this was never an either-or relationship from the start. Rather, imperialist states such as Britain, France, Germany or the United States were increasingly ‘nationalized’ in the metropolises and often campaigned for political support by claiming that their imperialist expansion was in the national interest. It likely was this particular combination, rather than imperial competition or nationalist zeal per se, that led to the First and Second World Wars – as John A. Hall (2024) rightly emphasizes.

The emergence of imperialist WMPs between 1850 and 1950 was accompanied by a division of the news space among a small number of news agencies, namely Havas (France, 1835), Associated Press (USA, 1846), Wolff (Germany, 1849), Reuters (Great Britain, 1851). These news agencies were regulated by states and partly functioned as ‘instruments of empire’ (Müller/Tworek 2015: 269; for Germany, see Tworek 2019a), but they also were commercial enterprises, pooled their resources, co-operated, and exchanged information across imperial borders. Havas, for example, covered not only the French Empire but also South America, while Wolff’s territory included Russia and Scandinavia, and both exchanged messages with each other. In summary, the news agencies formed a global oligopoly and cartel that could (and did) serve various agendas, including, in particular, imperial policy, private business interests and often neglected internationalist agendas.

Yet, the cartel not only served imperial agendas and the commercial interests of empires, but was also closely linked to internationalist modernization projects (Winseck/Pike 2008), such as the founding of the International Telegraph Union (ITU, 1865), the Universal Postal Union (UPU, 1874), and other forms of global cooperation. On the one hand, it was divided along the boundaries of the spheres of influence of Western imperial metropolises and very much part of inter-imperial

competition. On the other, it was also dependent on collaboration on multiple levels – inter-imperial, commercial, transnational. It appears, therefore, that the rise of an 'imperial news space' in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries made the formation of imperialist WMPs more plausible and likely, but that its emergence must also be analyzed in terms of the *relations* it established with liberal-internationalist infrastructure projects. Both were closely, even inextricably, intertwined.

Nationalist WMPs also co-evolved together with the global media system of the mid-to-late nineteenth to early twentieth century. The shared 'news world' described above was not just a product and instrument of empires, it also helped nationalists worldwide to observe and communicate with each other, for instance, to discuss and define ideas for national economic development (cf. Bayly 2004: 300–302) or organize resistance against imperial rule. As Benedict Anderson (1998) notes in his perceptive analysis of the news language forming around 1900, this was accompanied by the emergence of a 'serial' vocabulary for the production of news, i.e. categories that allowed journalists to describe political figures around the world in similar terms ('leader,' 'president,' etc.), even when using different languages and explicitly addressing national audiences. The result was (and still is), that 'news-papers everywhere take "this world of mankind" as their domain no matter how partially they read it', while this 'universality has been profoundly reinforced – everywhere – by an unself-conscious standardization of vocabulary which radically overrides any formal division in the newspaper between local and foreign news' (Anderson 1998: 33). On this basis, global news have been incorporated into an ongoing conversation between national news outlets and their respective national audiences. This paved the way for the development of the core ontological idea of nationalist WMPs: seeing the whole world as consisting of nations, each imagined as 'a people' governed by 'a president' (or similar kind of 'leader').

The formation of nationalist WMPs also needs to be understood in light of the rise of inter-national organizations and international conferences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as these helped normalize the idea of nations as the primary units and nation-

states as the primary legitimate actors of world politics. Therefore, even more so than in the case of imperialist WMPs, there is a clear affinity between nationalist and other WMPs forming during the same period. For the sake of illustration, just remember Nitobe Inazo's formulation from 1933 mentioned above that 'a good internationalist must be a good nationalist and vice versa'. Nitobe was not only one of the Under-Secretaries General of the League of Nations from its start in 1920 until Japan's exit in 1933 but also a self-described 'good nationalist', who was deeply disappointed by his country's withdrawal from the League. He used this wording to express his commitment to a rule-based 'nationalist internationalism' at a time when a more aggressive kind of 'nationalist imperialism' took hold in Japan (Pan 2017).

Such different ideas on how to adopt and interpret nationalism were discussed at a time when both nationalist and imperialist WMPs seem to have reached their peak. They were also combined on a broad ideological spectrum, as the liberal variants just described and the 'fascist-internationalist' versions discussed in the preceding section illustrate. All of these forms consolidated in the early to mid-twentieth century in what could be called a 'co-colonial' constellation, where nationalism was mobilized on both sides of the colonial divide: as part of expansionist world views and to legitimize colonial expansion ('imperial nationalism'; Kumar 2010: 128), but also as an element of the anti-colonial struggle, which was primarily directed at an audience in the colonies or periphery (see Go/Watson 2019).

Through this lens, it becomes evident that nationalist worldmaking could serve both imperial and anti-imperial purposes, and it did so in multiple forms. Just as nationalism took on many faces, 'empires changed character when facing the nationalist principle within the competitive state system' (Hall 2024: 2). Both imperial and the anti-imperial kinds of nationalism drew on the same basic ideas of how to organize the world, while inspiring conflicting visions of what 'nations' are, what their purpose is, and what role they should play in world politics. In addition, both were also in constant interaction and similarly closely connected through the infrastructural nexus. Daniel Headrick (2010) highlights the latter in his analysis of the British Empire's attempts to

use the telegraph as a means of exercising imperial control over British India – and of Indian nationalists using the same technology to resist that very same colonial control. In this context, the older and largely isolated 'imperial worlds' (Hall 2024) were integrated into a common world in which imperialist and nationalist ideas of world order confront and constantly interact with each other.

The interaction between these different kinds of nationalism is often neglected, which can lead to a limited and Eurocentric understanding of the history of nationalism. As Adom Getachew (2016) has shown, standard narratives of anticolonial nationalism tend to follow a script that she calls the 'narrative of realization': by describing anti-colonial struggles (only) in terms of inclusion and exclusion into Western conceptions of nationalism, they largely reduce the role of these struggles to the realization of the promises of inclusion as introduced during the French Revolution and in particular by the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Thus, they overlook what Getachew calls the genuine *worldmaking capacities of anticolonial movements*: their ability to advance their own universal aspirations, including conceptions of national autonomy and self-determination invented specifically for the purpose of anticolonial struggle. It was this tradition, not just the adoption of Western ideas, that fueled the struggles for national self-determination in the twentieth century, often linked to ambitious universal aspirations based on more substantial ideas of global equality (Getachew 2019). Despite these differences, these and other forms of nationalism belong to the same nationalist WMP: an imaginary that divides the world into national collective identities and supports their legitimate right to pursue particularist interests.

The analysis of relationships between imperialism and nationalism is further complicated by the fact that they tend to draw on similar organizing principles. After all, these are closely related projects that emerged at the same time in an 'internationalizing' environment and support both particularist and universalist aspirations. Among the principles they tend to share are the support of 'sovereignty' (for all nation-states in the nationalist view, from an imperialist perspective, mainly reserved for the imperial powers), for ideas of 'balance of power' (equally

conceivable between empires or nation-states; cf. Albert 2016), and the goal to establish order to contain violence and war (with both presenting themselves as the superior means of doing so). These overlaps suggest that, despite of their differences, they can work together quite effectively on many levels. On the whole, their relationship can perhaps best be described as a kind of love-hate relationship: they were created together, are closely linked by both attraction and repulsion, and will probably remain so for the foreseeable future.

3.4 Conclusion and outlook: Studying 'nationalist informal imperialism'

How might this analysis inform the ongoing discussion about a 'new age of imperialism'? In contrast to the either-or scenarios outlined at the beginning, it suggests that imperialist and nationalist WMPs entertain a longstanding and complicated relationship that is likely to persist with new twists and turns in the future. Rather than seeing this as a race that only one of them can win, we should try to understand in more detail the current state of their relationship and on this basis develop more nuanced future scenarios. For this purpose, we can build on the insight explained in the introduction to this volume that WMPs do not only matter if they are advanced in a systematic way and propagated in a public manner. Once formed and articulated, they can reproduce themselves in more subtle ways, in particular by motivating and legitimizing all kinds of *informal* political practices. 'Informal' practices, in my understanding, draw their specific meaning and impact from the *distinction* between the formal and the informal; they are practiced informally under circumstances where they cannot easily be formalized (cf. Holzer 2015).

Given the institutionalization of the nationalist WMP in international law and its political support within and beyond the UN system, it appears unlikely that imperialism will be able to officially reshape world politics according to its own imaginary of 'great spaces' anytime soon. This is true even in light of the apparent ascendancy of imperialist politics today. There are too many international institutions and too many

nation-states dependent on the legal language of equality for imperialist worldmaking to be widely accepted. The more likely scenario is that it will retain this delegitimized status for the foreseeable future, but that *informal* imperial practices will increase. The imaginary of a division of the world into 'great spaces', in particular, can remain present and influential, even if it can only be expressed indirectly and informally for the time being – which, however, in the long run might lead to the resurgence of imperialist WMPs also on a formal level. Informal imperialism could foreshadow formal imperialism. In light of the historical relationship between imperialism and nationalism explained above, it can also be assumed that this will happen in close connection with nationalism and in reference to nationalist WMPs. This amounts to a scenario that might best be described as *nationalist informal imperialism*: a scenario where the *language* of imperialism would be largely continued to be avoided, while many of its *practices* are adopted – and *combined* with the language of nationalism.

With this scenario in mind, the analytical task is to identify the practices that characterize this nationalist informal imperialism, both by drawing conclusions from the history of imperial politics and paying attention to how imperial politics are invested with nationalist thought, rhetoric and activism. To identify issues that deserve particular attention, in my estimation, I am drawing on the historical record of forms of 'informal empire' (e.g. Go 2008; Attard 2022; Hecke 2022) and, to a lesser degree, on the discussion on related ideas such as 'neocolonialism' (coined by Nkrumah 1965) and 'neoimperialism' (Sasse 2022). It should be noted that terms such as 'informal empire' and 'informal imperialism' should be used with caution, as Sedgewick (2015) rightly points out, since the focus on the 'informal' tends to obscure the very formal prerequisites of liberal market economies – and their political implications. I will first discuss variants of informal imperial practices, then their interplay with nationalism.

3.4.1 Informal imperial practices

On a *discursive level*, subtle shifts in the use of political language may indicate a change towards informal imperial practices. For example, we seem to be witnessing an increase in attitudes towards international affairs that base the ‘authority’ of particular states and the hierarchical relations between them (Lake 2009) on sheer size, economic weight, and military might rather than on other, ‘softer’ criteria. The increasing popularity of distinctions such as those between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ or ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ states would point in a similar direction. In this context, we might also observe an increasing use of terms such as ‘sphere of interest’ and ‘sphere of influence’ (Hast 2014; Hecke 2022), which serve to describe informal forms of control (e.g. Allison 2020), as well as an increasing obsession with ‘balance of power’ (Albert/Müller 2021) and comparative practices that reinforce thinking in terms of power (un)equilibria (Müller/Albert/Langer 2022). Such and other phrases could increasingly normalize the aspiration of a small number of states to informally control ‘great(er) spaces’ beyond their own territory, creating a worldview consistent with imperialist WMPs.

In the *economic sphere*, an increase in informal imperialism would be characterized by practices to create economic dependencies and hierarchical economic relations (much in line with the original meaning of the term ‘informal empire’, which was introduced in the historiographical discussion of the British Empire, cf. Attard 2022). In the history of imperialism, we find various practices of this kind that could become even more frequent in the coming years. For example, we could see more attempts to enter into ‘unequal treaties’, i.e. treaties between formally equal parties that informally aim to cement inequalities and dependencies (such treaties were already discussed at length in the legal context of the League of Nations and criticized by the League against Imperialism in the 1920s; cf. Hecke/Stafford 2024). At the time of writing, the ‘negotiations’ between the U.S. and Ukraine, as well as other goals formulated by US President Donald Trump (Greenland, Canada), point in this direction. Other informal imperial practices that come to mind in this context are the introduction of high tariffs designed to structurally

weaken smaller economies or the conditioning of development aid on compliant behavior (e.g. voting in the UN General Assembly and other international organizations).

On the *practical political level*, we could see an increase in practices aimed at forcing other states to accept foreign influence of any kind, including attempts to influence elections (e.g. representatives of the US government in Germany in February 2025). Perhaps even more importantly, we could see an increase in activities aimed at strengthening relations between the 'great powers' in order to establish and mutually protect their respective 'spheres of influence' (e.g. in March 2025, when the US government unilaterally lifted sanctions against Russia). If such practices were to be applied on a larger scale, relations between these powers would come closer to an informal version of the 'prohibition of interference by external powers' suggested by Carl Schmitt in the 1930s as a major principle of imperialist worldmaking. As has been observed for some time, Russian foreign policy, while perhaps not based on a reading of Schmitt's writings, has been in line with this way of thinking at least since the 2000s (see Auer 2015; Drozdova and Robinson 2019). Other heads of state and government could follow. At some point, this could lead to legally recognized arrangements aimed at creating a multipolar world with spheres of regional unipolarity – at which point it would no longer be an exaggeration to say that 'Schmitt is back as an actor and observer' (Auer 2015: 954).

All these practices will not go unnoticed, however, and many of them will face fierce opposition, both formally and informally. In contrast to informal imperialism, this *resistance* can also be based on the formal, institutionalized procedures of international law, on arbitration proceedings (e.g. WTO), on appeals to international courts, as well as on international alliances or the power and procedures of supranational institutions (e.g. EU). It can also draw on various informal practices that seek to establish bilateral and multilateral cooperation between 'smaller' nation-states, including diplomatic activities, arms and defense cooperation, and trade agreements. All of this could effectively help to protect the current system of nation-states, which is based on the principle of

the equal right to self-determination, from an attempt to transform it into a Schmittian system of 'great spaces'.

3.4.2 Relationship with nationalism

Equally important as the examination of informal imperial practices and forms of political resistance against them is the study of the relation of these practices to nationalist thinking and rhetoric. In fact, I would argue that this is where the greatest dangers of the current trends and perhaps also their main novelty could lie. As discussed above, nationalism has been used since the nineteenth century both in the imperial metropolises and in the peripheries, both to establish imperial structures and to resist expansion, to protect existing nation states or to found new ones. On the basis of the infrastructural nexus and in mutual interaction, imperialism and nationalism emerged as WMPs. Likewise, in the current situation, it is to be expected that nationalist rhetoric and practices will be used both in the service of the 'great powers' and of states that risk becoming victims of imperial practices. Nationalism is also effective in the peripheral areas of the imagined 'great spaces'. Wherever nationalist empires go, counter-nationalisms will react. And as humanity has repeatedly experienced, especially in World War I and II, conflicts fueled by both imperialist ambition and nationalist zeal are particularly likely to escalate and difficult to stop. Last but not least, this combination could also endanger democratic structures and accelerate the transition from democratic to autocratic regimes on both sides, imperial and anti-imperial. In conclusion to this chapter, let me briefly describe and illustrate each of these points.

The *instrumentalization of nationalism for informal imperial practices* is already in full swing. It is to be expected that informal imperialism will increasingly be accompanied by nationalist rhetoric and practice in order to legitimize expansive power politics as being in the national interest. In Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran, such discourses have been developing and expanding for decades. What has been said about China, namely that it is characterized by an 'elitist nationalism of an expropriated and humiliated great power' (Cabestan 2005: 2), could just as easily

be said about Turkey, Iran, and Russia. This refines the view of imperial power politics in important ways. Against the background of insights into discourses of national humiliation, it can be argued, for example, that 'Putin's Russia has not only regained its old territory but also its national dignity through the recent annexation of Crimea' (Auer 2015: 957). Donald Trump's 'America First' movement apparently serves a similar purpose, both lamenting the decline of the US and celebrating its revival. The unifying motif seems to be the reliance on claims about national history to buttress a claim to 'national greatness' and future expansion of spheres of influence – including, most recently, Trump's invocation of the 'frontier' as a symbol of the enterprising, inventive, and expansionist United States and the basis for his pledge to forge 'the most dominant civilization ever to exist on the face of this earth' (Trump's March 4, 2025 address to a joint session of Congress; Associated Press 2025). In this sense, all these imperialist aspirations benefit from the language of nationalism. What we see, then, is not just 'great powers' pursuing their 'rational' political interests, but rather informal imperialist agendas intertwined with and reinforced by fervently nationalist rhetoric.

However, nationalist informal imperialism is certain to meet with *nationalist resistance*, and the formation of such counter-nationalisms is already well underway. Perhaps the most obvious example to date is Ukraine, where nationalist mobilization goes a long way of explaining the resistance of the Ukraine military and population against the Russian invasion in 2022 – the latter of which, of course, was also justified in nationalist terms (amounting to 'existential nationalism' on both sides, as Knott 2022 observes; for 'eschatological-cataclysmic' explanations on the Russian side Pynnöniemi/Parppei 2024). At the time of writing in March 2025, politicians and the public debate in Canada and Mexico are already showing similar nationalist reactions in their united opposition to the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration. These examples demonstrate once again that among the consequences of increasing nationalist sentiments is more willingness to engage in conflict and, if necessary, to endure the consequences of conflicts and to see them through (Hutchinson 2017).

Now, what exactly is new about this? Imperialist-nationalist agendas, nationalist resistance, and struggles for national self-determination have all been with us for a long time, and both sides today can draw on scripts that have been developed over centuries. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is at least one genuine novelty in the current developments, as compared with nineteenth-century ‘high imperialism’, that draws our attention to the level of domestic politics: all this is taking place in a world in which, for the first time in history, about a slim majority of states are democracies. This may give additional cause for pessimism and fears, but also hope:

If conflicts between nationalist informal empires and nationalist resistance continue and intensify, they could further accelerate the *backsliding of democracies* (e.g. Przeworski 2019; Haggard/Kaufman 2021) and the rise of new types of autocratic regimes. These regimes have been termed ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Schedler 2006), ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky/Way 2012), ‘illiberal democracies’ (Zakaria 1997) and ‘democratorships’ (‘Demokraturren’, Karolewski/Leggewie 2022), among others. What is new about them is that they do not attempt to establish an overt dictatorship and instead adhere to minimal democratic procedures such as largely free and fair elections, yet they still manage to disrupt the actual functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law to such an extent that changes of government become virtually impossible.

Based on the experience of recent cases, notably Hungary under Victor Orbán or Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the establishment of such regimes depends heavily on the mobilization of (ultra-)nationalism, including the aggressive state-led organization of nationalist-minded ‘civil societies’ (Karolewski/Leggewie 2022). Backsliding of democracies and the resurgence of nationalism, particular of the ethnic-identitarian kind, apparently go hand in hand. If nationalist forces are further strengthened by the interaction between informal imperialism and the resistance to it, then the risk of democratic backsliding is likely to increase further – both in the ‘great powers’ that cannot yet be clearly classified as autocracies (such as the U.S., possibly India) and in

the states in their imagined 'sphere of influence' such as Canada or in Western Europe.

Conversely, however, halting the rise of informal imperialism before it spirals out of control would also be a means of protecting democracy, just as the existence of electoral democracies, the rule of law, and popular support for democratic institutions could be important weapons in the fight against imperialism. In other words, the fact that today's (informal) imperialism often collides with democracies and democratic politics brings with it both additional dangers and new opportunities. It is this broader landscape of domestic politics, alongside the existing formal international order, that so strikingly distinguishes the current situation from the 'high imperialism' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It could therefore be more difficult to bring back these past times than today's proponents of imperialist worldmaking imagine or hope.

If all this is an indication of the future, then talk of 'a new age of imperialism' would have to be qualified to suggest that we are entering a period of *nationalist informal imperialism* that carries with it the possibility of a vicious circle of imperial ambitions, nationalist zeal, and de-democratization. In the long term, these developments could also shake the structure of the international institutions we have grown accustomed to, and lead to the articulation of new – and this time perhaps even more influential – imperialist WMPs. But they could also trigger resistance that revitalizes democratic institutions and, together with the existing international institutions, help preserve the foundations of the international order built after World War II. It follows that we need to examine more closely how informal imperialism, nationalist mobilization, and domestic political processes interact – both to understand what is going on and to help develop political counter-strategies in support of democratic resistance.