

**Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı**

**Paul Strathern, *Rise and Fall: A History of the World in Ten Empires*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019**

**Sevket Akyildiz\***

(ORCID: 0000-0001-9545-4432)

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Paul Strathern’s *Rise and Fall: A History of the World in Ten Empires* is a concise world history analysing the characteristics and impact of ten empires from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and America. Explaining the spirit of adventure, administration and power of ten of the most significant empires is central to this study. War, subjugation of conquered peoples, and a ‘civilising agenda’ are linked with this. Broadening the analyses to include how empires operate hand-in-hand with world civilisation (notably long-term social development and technological advances) and the migration of early humans across continents and oceans offers the reader a thought-provoking experience.

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\* Dr., SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom, sevket.akyildiz1@gmail.com.  
Dr. SOAS, Londra Üniversitesi, Birleşik Krallık.

British academic Strathern's research sources are secondary texts. The core argument reads: *'Every empire contains the seeds of its own destruction: so what precisely is social progress? Who benefits from it, and who suffers? Rise and Fall reminds us that the progress of humankind takes many forms, and that - perhaps - the systems we take for granted today are far from being the only or inevitable course of future civilisation'* (Inside cover). The book explores these questions in all ten empires.

The author states that empire creation has three notable aspects, *'the sense of adventure, the administration involved, as well as the dogged pursuit and exercise of sheer power'* (p. 8). Furthermore, *'The multiplicity of synchronised organisation that goes into the creation and function of a great empire is certainly humanity's most complex achievement, responsible for much of our formative historical evolution'*, and *'our impression of empire, whether informed or jingoistic, remains ambiguous to this day'* (p. 8). So, what is an 'empire'? The *Oxford English Dictionary* says: *'An extensive territory (esp. an aggregate of many separate states) under the sway of an emperor or supreme ruler; also an aggregate of separate territories ruled over by a sovereign state'* (p. 10). Concepts investigated are 'sideways history', which is contrasted with history as a linear process. Rather, sideways history *'may be seen as a horizontal line, taking account of various stages of history running parallel'* (p. 92). Strathern discusses empires and countries (in this case, circa the 1200s), saying the Chinese Empire was *'highly stratified'*, and Muslim Caliphates though religiously ordered, *'tolerated'* science and philosophy. At the same time, Russia and Eastern Europe were *'tyrannies of primitive serfdom'* (p. 93). Finally, each chapter concludes with a 'sequence' section that highlights the developments and ethos of the empire analysed and compares it with previous or parallel empires.

The empires analysed are the Akkadian, Roman, Umayyad and Abbasid, Mongol, Yuan, Aztec, Ottoman, British, Russian, and the United States. The content for each is rich in detail without being ponderous. In the first part of each chapter, the general history of the empire under review is outlined; however, the second part of each chapter is more engaging analytically. For instance, we learn that the

Middle Eastern Akkadian Empire (2334 to 2154 BC), the first example of an empire, *'had no blueprint for what they were doing'* (p. 27). However, the forced imposition of Akkadian culture on conquered peoples led to their downfall. The lesson is that empires that allow subjects to generally live without imposing themselves tend to last longer (p. 27). Later, to appease Rome's population, the Caesars and Senate provided *'bread and circuses'* (p. 49). The Mongol ruler Kublai Khan had his capital built on land the Chinese now call Beijing (p. 83), while his grandfather, Genghis Khan adopted for his tribe the Uyghur-Turkic script (p. 89). Furthermore, the Aztecs developed *'untouched'* for so long by the European civilisations; interestingly, young Aztec men were raised to *'develop self-knowledge, wisdom and care'* (p. 145). Finally, the British Empire's slavery system and, later, the huge compensation paid to slave owners to end the trade: *'would create banks, country mansions and vast estates. It would fund the age of steam, of canals, of railways and the world's greatest navy. This was the money that financed the Industrial Revolution...'* (p. 185).

The book's strength is its intellectual history content, the author's knowledge, and engaging writing style. Strathern seeks to explain patterns and commonalities – and nuances – in world history and makes the reader contemplate the bigger picture about human endeavour and organisation. The author does not shy away from the dubious morality and cruelty of empires. The work rightly criticises the mass killings of people by communist regimes and others. It also acknowledges how class and economics play a role in empire-building.

In terms of weaknesses, there are some observations. The author correctly notes that Vladimir Putin's Russia seeks to regain its former Soviet and Imperial Russian power and prestige. However, more might have been said about Russia's *'incremental expansion and influence'* (p. 217) – outside of the Orthodox Christian world – that is primarily financed by the extraction and selling of natural resources like oil and gas (and, to a lesser extent, technology). So, is contemporary Russia economically and culturally comparable with the United States, the European Union or China? Probably not. Second, Strathern argues that the United States's power is threatened by *'international communism'*: he says, *'And ironically this challenge comes from the very source that it*

*assumed it had eradicated. Namely, communism – this time in its new variant forms in China and Russia. Capitalism, it seems, is not the only way of doing things that is capable of survival through self-transformation'* (p. 235). But is Russia communistic today? Is there a Marxist Russian Communist Party active and mobilising the working masses? Surely, what motivates Russian elites is not social equality and the redistribution of wealth but money, power, and (ultra-) Slavic nationalism. While in Beijing's case, the ruling Chinese Communist Party has evolved to balance communism with capitalism, clothed in ultra-Han Chinese nationalism and a particular Chinese ethos. Notwithstanding, Strathern is correct in emphasising the real threat of authoritarian (and totalitarian) governments. Third, due to the book's focus on the political elites associated with empire-building, the masses (the working class, enslaved people, subjugated peoples, and women) are discussed as the objects of more powerful actors. Their stories are not told. The text is an international history study laced with comments by philosophers and intellectuals.

The *Rise and Fall* is recommended for first and second-year university students, journalists and the general reader. Its overall strength is its author's readability and skill to make four millennia of history accessible. The shameful and negative side of world empires is presented starkly. Empire-building is discussed in the broader story of the human struggle to find a greater purpose, in this case, through adventure, administration and power-seeking.