Ways of Resisting Empire and Alternatives to Empire: Comparing Ancient and Modern Options

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Abstract

The aim of this paper will be to offer a comparison of violent and non-violent types of resistance amongst Jews and early Christians to the early Roman Empire on the one hand, and similar forms of resistance to modern imperialism on the other. In addition, systemic alternatives of social justice offered in antiquity (by philosophers, Jews and early Christians) and modernity (by liberal and more radical, postcolonial thinkers) to imperial oppression will be compared and assessed.

1. The injustice of empire

“Empire,” the Indian subaltern theorist Rajanit Guha (1997:482) begins his article Not at Home in Empire, “is ... territory. That is a place constituted by the violence of conquest, the jurisdictions of law and ownership, the institutions of public order and use.” Or again in the African historian Frederick Cooper’s (2001:201) formulation: “Empires are a particular kind of spatial system, boundary-crossing and also bounded.” “Their structure,” he says, “emphasizes difference and hierarchy, yet they also constitute a single political unity and hence a potential unit of moral discourse.”

Although Guha has been focusing on the British Empire in India, and Cooper on the French and British Empires in Africa, both of them are willing to propose definitions that would characterize imperial systems in general. Cooper’s (2004, 2005) most recent line of inquiry into the political imagination has indeed been directed increasingly towards a comparison of empires, from ancient Rome to the USA in our own times. Comparing empires requires not only sensitivity to historical difference, but also assumes cross-cultural similarities – or else we would not be able to compare these political formations by that name in the first place.

Thus, although America may not be “an empire of colonies but an empire of bases,” the USA may still be considered, according to some recent voices, as “the second coming of the Roman Empire” (Johnson, in Crossan 2007:3). In both cases, as Dominic Crossan (2007:12-14) argues in his...
application of Michael Mann’s historical analysis of social power, we observe a synergy of military, economic, political and ideological power. It is therefore understandable that the terrorists of September 11, 2001, directed their combined attacks against the Pentagon as symbol of America’s military power, the twin towers of the World Trade Center as symbol of its economic power, and the White House and Capitol as symbols of its political power.

For Rome its military power was, of course, based in the legions stationed along the frontiers of empire, always ready to move in and crush any rebellion that might occur within its conquered space. Rome not only acquired new territories, but also kept and controlled them by force and violence. Its economic power was next made possible by urban commercialization and the well-paved roads built by its military engineers, whereas its political power was exercised – originally at least – through a land-holding Roman aristocracy with the collaboration of local elites throughout the Roman empire. Lastly, and most crucially, Rome’s ideological power was created by an imperial theology that functioned as the glue that held its empire together.

Although the strength of imperial power depends on the close interaction of all four types of power, it is the last one – the ideological control that empire exercises over interpretation and meaning – that I would like to foreground with reference to Rome, since this forms the inescapable context within which Jewish and early Christian forms of resistance to Rome’s empire – the focus of my paper – should be understood.

Rome’s imperial theology was, to begin, created and propagated by its poets, inscribed on stone across the empire, observed in the visual imagery of temples and statues, enshrined in the emperor cult, worn as cameos by noble women, held in aristocratic hands to be admired on cups at banquets, but also put into the hands of common people as coins – “an immensely successful advertising campaign,” one may say with Crossan (2007:15-16), “that inundated everyone, everywhere, from all sides and at all times.” But what, one should ask, was the content of this imperial theology?

In Rome’s foundational epic Virgil presents Rome’s imperial destiny as divine mandate. When Venus reminds Jupiter of his promise that the Romans would descend from her grandson Aeneas to rule sea and land, Jupiter confirms: “For these I set no bounds in space or time; but have given empire without end …. The Romans, lords of the world, and the nation of the toga. Thus it is decreed” (Aen 1.231, 236, 278-83). And when Aeneas visits his dead father in Hades, Anchises tells him: “You, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud” (Aen 6.851-53) - where “the proud,” of course, refers to those who resist Rome’s “peace” and “justice” (cf Crossan 2007:17).
Horace indeed, taking over as court poet after Virgil’s death, celebrates the dawn of Augustus’ new age in his *Carmen Saeculare*: not only does he praise Augustus for ushering it in by restoring the *mos maiorum* through his newly proclaimed marriage laws, but also does he pray that Augustus be “triumphant over warring foe, but generous to the fallen” (Crossan & Reed 2004:99).

Even clearer is the content of this imperial theology from the *Res Gestae*, from Augustus himself, in which he eulogizes his accomplishments. He lists temples restored and newly built, describes wars at home and far away, territories added to the empire and peoples conquered, and extols the “peace” that he brought, he says, “without waging an unjust war on any people” (Crossan 2007:25). Roman imperial theology was, in short, a “peace” brought through violent victory, and sanctioned by the appropriate gods.

And it stayed as such long after Augustus’ death. Thus, on one of the southern friezes in Aphrodisias’ *Sebasteion*, a divine Claudius (41-54 CE) stands ready “to pierce the female figure of Britannia with a spear” and a nude, muscular Nero (54-68 CE) on another “stands astride a slumped Armenia” (Crossan & Reed 2004:268-9). Imperial conquest is here portrayed as violent rape. But, as one turns to the northern gallery, the conquered peoples who have submitted to become part of the empire, are restored as “elegantly dressed females standing on inscribed bases” (:18). Rome’s imperial injustice through violence, called “peace” by Rome, was clear for all to see.

Its brutal reality could even be articulated in a speech that Tacitus created for the British general Calgacus just before his encounter with Rome’s military might. Says Calgacus:

*To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire [imperium]; they make a desolation and call it peace. Children and kin are by the law of nature each man’s dearest possession: they are swept away from us by conscription to be slaves in other lands; our wives and sisters, even when they escape a soldier’s lust, are debauched by self-styled friends and guests: our goods and chattels go for tribute; our lands and harvests in requisitions of grain, etc (Tacitus, *Agricola* 30-31; Crossan 1991:41-42, cf Crossan 1994:39).*

We thus see a hierarchical system of violence in which one nation lords it over others, where men subjugate their women, masters rule their slaves, and a stratified society in which the few exploit and live off the many. To this, we must now ask the moral and political question: Was this kind of world endorsed by one and all under Roman rule? And should it be accepted today? If not, as Calgacus just confirmed, what alternatives were imagined and practised then, and with what choices are we still confronted today?
2. Taking up arms: Violent resistance to empire

One option has been to take up arms against the empire and its local collaborators. Violent resistance from the peasant class, Frantz Fanon (1952; 1961) argued in the 1950’s, was the only appropriate counter-response to the French imperialists’ use of brute force in Algeria - at least as the first phase towards liberation. Only through acts of violence against the settlers, Fanon said, could the oppressed natives be cleansed of their inferiority complex, gain self-respect and attain their own humanity (cf Young 2001:xv; 2003:146).

In the late 50’s and early 60’s of the first century CE, we learn from Flavius Josephus, the sicarii used violence against Jewish aristocrats, especially members from the wealthy high-priestly family, who collaborated with the Roman occupation. Under their clothing these urban Jewish terrorists would carry short daggers, with which they would - especially during crowded festival times in Jerusalem - stab high-profile Jewish collaborators, and so create panic amongst them (cf Crossan & Reed 2001:146; Crossan 2007:90). “The panic created,” Josephus says, “was more alarming than the calamity itself” (Jewish War 2.254-57; Crossan & Reed 2001:146; Crossan 2007:90).

In the late 60’s CE anti-Roman Jewish rebels from the peasant class, who referred to themselves as Zealots according to Josephus, were “forced inside the protective walls of Jerusalem as Vespasian's scorched-earth devastation swept southward.” Not only did these peasant rebels then engage in a class warfare by conducting “a bloodbath against some of [the] priestly aristocracy,” creating “a reign of terror against the upper classes” who were accused of conspiracy with the Romans, but they also proceeded to replace the aristocratic high priest with one selected by lot from their own peasant class, thus giving us some insight into their ideological motivation (Crossan 1991:194-196, 1994:72-74; Crossan & Reed 2001:190-191, 211).

3. Imagining divine violence: Millenialist resistance to empire

Now if actual violence is the first type of resistance to empire, the apocalyptic dream of divine intervention may be seen as the second. Although Jewish messianic groups of this type usually did not engage in violent action themselves, the metaphors that they used were often extremely violent and angry.

At Qumran two divine agents, a military royal-Davidic messiah and a priestly-Aaronic messiah, were expected to defeat the sect’s Hasmonean opponents who erroneously combined royal and priestly offices in one person in the Jerusalem temple. In the final war against their opponents,
these scribal millennialists imagined, the priestly messiah would have precedence and would instruct the warrior king, who would obey not only in killing the sect's Hasmonean opponents “by his sword” and goring them “like a bull,” but also in trampling their Roman allies “like mud of wheels.” Thus, although the *Pesher on Habakkuk* (1QpHab 9) may regard the Romans / *Kittim* as divinely appointed instruments to punish the illegitimate and exploitative royal-priests in Jerusalem (probably referring to Pompey’s conquest in 63 BCE), the *War Scroll* (1 QM 1, 19) on the other hand considers them as the ultimate enemy to be conquered in the final war and calls on God to act against them, probably through his angelic intermediary, with great brutality: “Lay Thy hand on the neck of Thine enemies // and Thy feet on the pile of the slain! // Smite the nations, Thine adversaries, // and devour flesh with Thy sword!” (Vermes, in Strijdom 1998:72-75).

Similarly the literate millennialists behind the first century CE *Similitudes of Enoch* use the most violent images to portray God’s final judgment through his heavenly agent, called after Daniel’s angelic mediator “that Son of Man.” The Roman oppressors and their Herodian collaborators, it is envisaged, will be condemned to eternal misery: “darkness shall be their dwelling, and worms shall be their bed, and they shall have no hope of rising from their beds” (46:4), their teeth will be broken (46:4), and they will burn like straw in fire and sink like lead in water (48:9). God’s sword will be drunk with their blood (62:12). Not only do these righteous sectarians picture themselves as witnessing these final events (48:9) but also as actually participating in their eventual execution (38:5, 48:9, 62:12) (cf Strijdom 1998:66-69).

The most venomous millennialist attack against the Roman empire comes, however, from the Christian book of Revelation, written for internal consumption during Domitian’s rule in the 90’s CE. Rome is portrayed as a monstrous beast and a great whore, with whom his urban Christian addressees in Roman Asia Minor should have nothing to do and with whom they are not to cooperate in any way. Rome will be mercilessly judged, the author announces, by God, through his warrior agent, the slaughtering messiah Jesus, riding on a battle horse - a Christ, we read in Chapter 19, whose “eyes are like a flame of fire” and whose robe is “dipped in blood.” “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations [ie, the Romans], and he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’” And after that victory, Rev 19 foresees further, God’s great supper will follow, to which the conquering Christ will call all the vultures of heaven to feast on the bodies of the slaughtered enemy lying on the battle field of Armageddon. It is only after that terrible cleansing, the seer holds, that heavenly utopia will be restored for God’s
faithful who will know no grief, no thirst and no hunger anymore (cf Crossan 2007:226-230).

With Crossan (2007:196) we should reject such brutal fantasies of divine violence, not only because they infect the hearts of those growing up on them, but also since they may incite to actual violence, as is evident from Islamic and Christian fundamentalism’s “lust for imminent human slaughter and cosmic catastrophe,” and even American faith-based foreign policy. “We had fed the heart on fantasies,” warns Yeats, “The heart’s grown brutal from the fare” (Crossan 2007:191).

4. Non-violent resistance to empire: The radical alternative

There is, however, a third way to oppose systemic imperial injustice, practiced both in the ancient world and in our own contemporary world: the possibility of non-violent but provocative resistance. When around 40 CE Caligula ordered that his statue be erected in the Jerusalem temple for emperor worship, Jewish peasants opposed the pending desecration by insisting that they would “on no account ... fight” (Antiquities 18.271), but instead presented themselves at Tiberias to the Syrian governor Petronius, who had come southward to execute the decree, as martyrs ready to die. Petronius realized “that the country was in danger of remaining unsown - for it was seed-time and the people had spent fifty days idly waiting upon him” (Jewish War 2.200) and so he returned to Antioch with his legions. In this case a collective willingness to martyrdom combined with what was in effect an agrarian strike, which would have meant no produce to be taxed, proved successful (cf Crossan 1991:130-134; Crossan & Reed 2001:143-144; Strijdom 1998:85, 87).

“In a campaign of noncooperation against the salt tax in 1930 - probably the most renowned of his actions - Gandhi,” Jonathan Schell (2003:137) recounts, “marched with seventy-five or so followers to the sea to make salt, in defiance of an English monopoly on salt making, and then was jailed, after which his followers marched nonviolently upon the salt-works at Dharasana, suffering many dozens of casualties at the hands of police wielding clubs.” But Gandhi’s program of satyagraha, of holding fast to truth, eventually entailed much more than just nonviolent but provocative resistance to the British empire as the most effective weapon “different from and infinitely superior to,” as he explained, “the [armed] force that the white settlers commanded in such ample measure” - an insight that occurred to him between 1904-1909 while still in South Africa (Schell 2003:125). “Holding fast to truth,” most importantly, he insisted back in India, also involved a constructive program to address the social ills of India, of “ending untouchability, cleaning latrines, improving the diet of Indian villagers,
improving the lot of Indian women, making peace between Muslims and Hindus - through all of which he believed he would find God” (Schell 2003:142).

The same primary goals to be achieved at local, everyday level, by non-violent means, but from a secular rather than religious motivation, were propounded by the writer activist Václav Havel to his fellow Czechoslovakians to resist the Soviet empire. Not only was it unrealistic to attempt a violent overthrow of this brutal system, but also morally it would be unacceptable: “A future secured by violence,” Havel believed, “might actually be worse than what exists now; ... [such a] future would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it” (Schell 2003:203). The subversion was to work at a much deeper level, by simply bypassing the totalitarian government and aiming at changing, through the establishment of new associations, the concrete lives of ordinary people at local level, which Havel - not unlike Gandhi - appropriately called “living in truth.”

I assume all of this as background to conclude with what two Jews, one an itinerant in rural Galilee and the other a traveller of the major cities of the eastern Roman empire, were trying to achieve with their followers in the late 20’s to early 50’s CE.

The kingdom that the historical Jesus proclaimed in parables and aphorisms, and enacted in the mutual sharing of food and the reaching out to the sick and marginalized in Galilean villages, was at odds with the exploitative empire of Caesar and his Herodian and High Priestly collaborators. Jesus of the tiny village of Nazareth instead offered an alternative vision and program that would empower his fellow-peasants by sharing whatever material and spiritual resources they had. The God of Jesus was identical with that God of the Hebrew tradition who demanded a just system, in which the material goods of land and food were to be distributed equally amongst the people. But this vision and social program were in collision with the unjust realities of the time, especially caused by the increasing commercialisation of the Galilee under Antipas, Rome’s client-king. In presenting and implementing with his followers the alternative program of a just Kingdom in non-violent but provocative opposition to Rome and her collaborators, Jesus came to be seen as a potential threat to the status quo by the Jewish Temple elite as well as the Roman governor. Condemned for claiming to be the “King of the Jews,” he was publicly executed - like many other political rebels at the time - by the brutal means of Roman crucifixion.

But as both Josephus (Antiquities 18.63-64) and Tacitus (Annals 4.282-83) confirm, his movement did not die in the Jewish homeland but continued to spread widely throughout the Roman empire, reaching the capital of Rome itself. Crucial in its spread was, according to our evidence, a
Pharisee by the name of Paul, originally from Tarsus, capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, who came to consider it his vocation to persuade non-Jews sympathetic to Jewish religion and morality to become followers of Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Messiah that he proclaimed.

Like Jesus before him, but in the big cities of the Roman empire rather than the small villages of Galilee, he tried to establish little cells of sharing communities as an alternative to those imperial hierarchies of exploitation maintained by means of violence. Instead of Caesar as Lord, Saviour and Son of God (huios tou theou translated divi filius typically on every Roman coin), he proclaimed Jesus as Kurios, Soter and Huioi tou theou. Against the good news of Caesar’s birth (euangelia on an inscription from Priene near Ephesus) stands the euangelion of his messiah Jesus. Instead of the expected arrival (parousia) of and meeting (apantesis) with Caesar, Paul announces to the Thessalonians that of Christ.

But Paul’s project is not merely calculated anti-imperial theology. It is simultaneously constructive program, in which equality of class, gender and ethnicity within his Christian ekklesiain is of paramount importance. “There is no longer Jew or Greek,” Paul tells the Christians in Roman Galatia, “there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28). Women indeed figure prominently in the Pauline house-churches: Phoebe, a literate woman of means, is a benefactor (prostates) of the Christian community in Corinth and the carrier of Paul’s letter from Corinth to Rome, where she is expected to circulate, read and explain it; Prisca is mentioned before her husband Aquila, and Junia is called a prominent apostle alongside her husband Andronicus (Rom 16; cf Crossan & Reed 2004:114). The systemic injustice of slavery, so characteristic of Roman imperial society, is equally rejected by Paul. He thus tries to convince Philemon not only to receive his run-away slave Onesimus back as “brother in the Lord” (en kurio), but also to free him as “brother in the flesh” (en sarki) (Phlm 1:16).

Paul’s condemnation of class discrimination is particularly clear from his stance on the humiliation of the poor at common meals in Corinthian house-churches. The powerful few arrive first and enjoy the best food, leaving only the crumbs - as it were - to the poor majority who by necessity arrive late. The Lord’s supper (kuriakon deipnon), he argues, should not be like this, but should be an agape or share meal, in which the typical patronal hierarchies of imperial society are not replicated. It is not difference that Paul objects to, since diversity of members and functions is imperative to build the house churches of Christ. The problem is rather one of hierarchy, he explains in 1 Cor 12-14, of “superiority and inferiority, who is better than whom, who has the most important function, the best position, the best gift” (Crossan & Reed 2004:345). His answer then is that the body has many
members, each with its own function, but with none more important than the others. They are equally important, equally dependent on each other.

Paul's sense of distributive justice is finally clear from his collection for the poor in Jerusalem, which he explains to the Corinthians as all about the sharing of spiritual and material resources. "I do not mean," Paul says in 2 Cor 8:13-14, "that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance (ex isotes) between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance (hopos genētai isotes)."

The master model to be imitated by his Christian believers, he thus insists, is that of the kenotic Christ of Phil 2:6-11 and the crucified Christ of 1 Cor 1-4. Instead of Rome's imperial paradigm of lording-it-over its subjects, the Christians in the Roman colonia of Philippi are to "empty themselves" by serving each other. Instead of the rich treating the poor with contempt, the powerful few in the Roman colonia of Corinth should follow the example of the crucified Christ and adapt to the needs of the many. This, he would like to say, is the kind of new life of the resurrection, that you are welcome to come and see in our little house church at the corner of the block.

We are then, with Jesus and Paul, miles away from those taking up arms against empire or using violent images to wish divine retribution on their oppressors. We witness a third option, not simply a modern one invented by a Gandhi or Havel, but an ancient one flowing from a powerful strand within the Hebrew legal and prophetic tradition: a non-violent option that was articulated as follows in the apocalyptic vision of the Jewish Sibylline Oracles 2.313-338, written under Augustus a generation before Paul, in Phrygia, "along whose eastern borders Paul moved northward through Galatia" (Crossan & Reed 2004:233): "The earth will belong equally to all," the prophet is hoping, "undivided by walls or fences. ... Lives will be in common and wealth will have no division. For there will be no poor man there, no rich, and no tyrant, no slave. Further no one will be either great or small anymore. No kings, no leaders. All will be on a par together."

This was also the option, I believe, that was continued by the Gospel of Mark in its non-violent vision of Jesus. Instead of Revelation's Christ coming on a battle stallion, it has an anti-imperial Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. Instead of identifying Christ's second coming with brutal conquest on the battle field of Armageddon, Mark tells his community that Jesus' way was not that of the terrorist Barabbas against the Roman empire and that Jesus' coming was not to be identified with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Instead the Markan Jesus tells his disciples after
announcing his passion for the third time, loosely translated to reflect his
tone:

You know how it is amongst the nations, how they lord it over others and
how their powerful men abuse their power; but amongst you it should not
be like that. Whoever wants to be great amongst you, must be your servant;
and whoever wants to be first amongst you, must become a servant of all,
because the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve and to
give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:42-44).

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