



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 34

Issue 2 June - *Special Issue on Globalization,
Social Justice & Social Welfare*

Article 21

2007

Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors.

Charles S. Maier.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

(2007) "*Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors.* Charles S. Maier.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 2 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss2/21>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Subsequent chapters provide a brief history of the tax system in the United States, discuss the challenges for women resulting from specific tax policies introduced in recent years, and describe the continuing concentration of wealth. The final chapter presents a plan for tax reform, suggesting that women work towards a tax system that meets national goals and adheres to the principles of fairness, equity, adequacy, and responsibility. The book concludes with a selection of brief essays on tax reform by members of the National Council for Research on Women who were consulted in the writing of the book. For those interested in further information on tax reform and women, the book includes a helpful resource list.

The one weakness of the book is that it does not discuss non-tax-related solutions to some of the social problems presented; the call for a concise volume focused on the tax system may have made it impossible to address other types of policies that may achieve similar goals and benefit women more. Nevertheless, Abramovitz and Morgen breathe life into an issue that many of us dismiss as too dull or complex. They provide an excellent introduction to tax policy and make a compelling argument for a feminist analysis and reform of the tax system.

Sarah Taylor, University of California, Berkeley

Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. \$ 27.95 hardcover.

There is a good deal of discussion today, both in academic and popular circles, about whether the United States has become a global imperial power similar to the great empires of the past. This debate has been facilitated by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the deployment of American forces to other countries as well. However, most scholars recognize that the contemporary global role of the United States differs significantly from the type of imperial power exercised by the ancient empires and by European countries in recent centuries. On the other hand, some believe that there are key similarities between the current practices of the American government

and past imperial ventures. In addition to these disagreements, the normative question of whether the United States should seek to exercise its military, economic and diplomatic power to direct international events is widely discussed.

Charles Maier tackles these complex issues by placing the question of American imperialism in a historic context which covers the earliest records of conquest in Mesopotamia to more recent global power struggles between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. The discussion is interwoven with many other historical examples of imperialism and its complex dimensions. Included are illustrative references to the Greek and Roman empires as well as those of the Arabs and Ottomans. Drawing on these examples, Maier seeks to elucidate some of the key issues in debates about contemporary imperialism.

An obvious starting point is whether the historic experience sheds light on the definition of imperialism and the question of what imperialism involves. Maier reviews numerous definitions and makes interesting points relating to the spatial and temporal dimensions of imperial ambitions as well as the extent to which imperial power is exerted both domestically and internationally. He applies these ideas to the current situation and examines the notion that the United States is a hegemon rather than imperium. He also offers an interesting discussion of the economic theories that have sought to explain the dynamics of imperialism and shows the limitations of their appeal. Several chapters of the book focus specifically on the American experience since the Second World War. This discussion links issues of power politics to economic influence in an interesting and novel way. Contemporary imperialism, the author suggests, must be understood in the context of global economic forces.

Maier has a masterful historic grasp and his analysis is wide-ranging and comprehensive. However, this is by no means an introductory book, and students who wish to know more about the subject will be challenged by its discursive and reflective style. On the other hand, for those who have an understanding of the issues, Maier's virtuoso analysis and its broad historic sweep will be both informative and entertaining. The book makes a major contribution to current debates

and should be widely consulted by anyone interested in contemporary international events.

Bruce Podobnik, *Global Energy Shifts: Fostering Stability in a Turbulent Age*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006, \$22.95 papercover.

We are facing a global energy dilemma. Our primary source of energy—oil—is a finite and dwindling resource. The largest sources of oil are located in politically unstable regions where Western countries do not enjoy strong influence. Additionally, the negative consequences of the use of fossil fuels are apparent in global warming and negative health effects. Nevertheless, energy consumption continues to increase. Where do we look from here? In his book, *Global Energy Shifts: Fostering Sustainability in a Turbulent Age*, Bruce Podobnik suggests we look to the past.

The book consists of seven chapters examining the historical patterns of past energy shifts from one primary energy source to another. The author believes that these shifts can inform decisions in the future. The initial chapter explains the author's world historical perspective and outlines his main premise that in order to truly understand energy shifts we have to account for actors at the state, corporate, and social levels. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the ascendancy of coal as the primary source of energy and the conflicts that arose in the coal sector. Chapter 4 examines the rapid movement toward an oil-based energy system brought about by the two World Wars. Chapter 5 describes the shift to an oil-based energy system along with the rise in natural gas and nuclear power. This chapter also offers an interesting analysis of the emergence of energy consumption inequalities. Chapter 6 describes the changes in the global energy system caused by the oil crises in the 1970s and the increase in global competition for oil resources. Finally, Chapter 7 offers a summary of the research and the author's view of how the next transition toward a more sustainable energy system can be established.

Podobnik has gathered an impressive amount of data to