

What's So Bad about the Empire?

Everyone familiar with *Star Wars* knows that the Empire is bad, and the Rebellion is good.

But, why?

Seriously. What makes life under Emperor Palpatine so unbearable, and what would make life under the New Republic so much better, for the ordinary citizens of the galaxy? The movies offer surprisingly little information as to what's actually wrong with Imperial rule.

Now, I'm not talking about blowing up planets or Anakin murdering Jedi children. I'm talking about the daily lives of ordinary citizens. People who don't have any connection to the Sith or the Jedi or the battle for the Senate or any of that stuff.

Sure, behind closed doors, Emperor Palpatine is secretly a Sith Lord who can shoot light bolts from his hands. That definitely seems evil, but, according to the movies, nobody but a few Jedi even knows about it. He doesn't walk down the street electrocuting random peasants.

For the most part, his brutality seems to be limited to confrontations with the Rebel Alliance. And yeah, Darth Vader is one of the most intimidating villains of all time, and he's obviously a menace to Rebellion soldiers and the Jedi, but imagine you're just some ordinary moisture farmer going about his business on Tatooine. Unless your name is Owen Lars, Darth Vader almost certainly doesn't care about you. He's mainly interested in finding Luke Skywalker. So the question is, what would it mean to live in a Galaxy "ruled" by the Empire, and why is it the ultimate depiction of Tyranny in popular

culture?

The more I've thought about this, the more I have struggled to come up with an answer based on anything actually depicted in the films themselves. Part of the problem is that in most *Star Wars* movies, the characters are all fighting in a single political struggle. And apart from Padme's interminable dialogue about Senatorial procedure in the Prequels, there's almost no discussion of governing philosophy in the entire series.

Ask yourself: What does the Rebel Alliance stand for besides the destruction of the Empire, and what does the Empire stand for apart from maintaining power?

In *A New Hope*, Grand Moff Tarkin at least offers some insight into the Empire's operation, when he explains that regional governors have "complete control" over their territories. But, what does that actually mean? What policies does the Emperor want to be enforced across the Galaxy? What is it that he's actually imposing on his citizens that requires multiple planet-destroying superweapons to enforce?

I mean, I get that Palpatine wanted power, but, what does he actually do with it? Once he acquired political control over the Galaxy, did he ban gay marriage? Droid marriage? Gay droid marriage? Did he ban books and restrict speech? Does *Star Wars* even have books? Did he nationalize (or "Galactize") major industries?

For something that's so important to the story, *Star Wars* doesn't really even try to answer these questions.

When Liberty Dies

But here's what we do know.

First, there's a lot of smuggling in the *Star Wars* universe. And that probably means that there are a lot of laws and

regulations making various goods and services costly or illegal. Prohibiting or restricting trade creates Black Markets, it can also impoverish many people and make their lives much harder when they can't access the things that they want and need.

Even though it's the invisible fabric of everyone's daily life, commerce doesn't really seem to exist in the *Star Wars* universe at all, but one way the Empire could be ruining people's lives is by controlling what gets bought, sold, or traded; dictating prices; or by taxing everything so much that even basic necessities become impossible to afford.

Another thing we know is that the Imperial military uses its power against citizens of the Empire, and not just in terms of collateral damage.

In *Star Wars: Rebels*, Storm Troopers and other Imperial agents are often seen conscripting innocent people into their armies and seizing their property without compensation. More recently, in *Rogue One*, we see a Star Destroyer hovering over a Kybur Crystal mine, and the Empire appears to force people to work in the mines in order to acquire key components of the Death Star.

We might assume that the Imperial military gets many or most of its supplies and resources through similar means – stealing from people around the galaxy, taking their property by force. But that assumes some kind of property rights, and that's never fully established in that world.

And there's one more terrible thing we know about the Empire from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Reformed Storm Trooper Finn (FN-2187) explains to Rey that he was actually taken from his family as a child, conscripted into the Imperial Army, and trained to be a soldier. That's a form of slavery that many real-world governments have used throughout history. Sadly even the United States government

still has the power to draft its citizens into war, though that hasn't happened for decades.

Unfortunately, *Star Wars* never actually wrestles with these issues in any meaningful way.

It seems to assume that the major difference between a "good" world and a "bad" world is the presence of Democracy, but that's hardly a guarantee. Many Democratic leaders have created misery for their citizens and even used Democracy to amass power and become dictators themselves – just like Emperor Palpatine did.

I think the idea that a Senator becoming Chancellor becoming the Emperor works so well in the film because it's so true to what we actually see in real life. And when Padme says "This is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause," she gets to the real issue here.

Liberty.


The only answer to this question that actually makes sense is that the Empire is an awful place to live because its people lack individual freedom.

Citizens of the Empire aren't secure in their possessions and property. They can't go where they want without being stopped by Imperial forces. They can be imprisoned or forced into an army without a trial or the opportunity to say no, and restrictions on trade and commerce make them poor and condemn them to getting what they need from dangerous black markets, smugglers, and gangsters.

If the Rebellion stands against that, then they are true heroes.

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market educational community. This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#). 

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