

American Imperialism and the Illusions of Interimperial Rivalry Today

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The use of the term 'empire' or even 'imperialism' to characterize the current American role in the world has suddenly become almost commonplace. And as with the first use of the term in the late 1870s - when it was used by British writers and administrators in who wanted to strengthen and expand Britain's colonial empire – so it is being used by many today to advocate and/or justify the reinforcement and spread of the American empire.

This empire is an informal one: in fact it initially spread through the decolonization of the old formal empires. For a long time the face of American empire was obscured by this. As the great Canadian political economist, Harold Innis, said in 1948, American imperialism has been made plausible and attractive by its insistence that it is non-imperialistic'. But this only helped to make it a far more powerful empire than the old informal European and Japanese empires that it has succeeded, and indeed increasingly incorporated. .

With the collapse of the USSR, the Russian empire was also increasingly incorporated into the informal American one. And moreover, with the removal of the Cold-War danger that direct US military interventions in states outside the American hemisphere would lead to nuclear Armageddon, led liberal human rights advocates to call on the US to act as a surrogate international police power. It was hardly surprising in this context that more cynical and less naïve strategists of American global rule, and their academic and media 'hired prizefighters' began to drop the imperial veil and speak the language of a new white man's burden.

The 'loneliness of power' was increasingly involved here. The felt burden of ultimate responsibility (and since 9/11 the much greater sensitivity to US vulnerability as a target of terrorism at home as well as abroad) promoted both the hubris and sense of burden that came with the now evident unique power of the American state. This led it to question further whether even the limited compromises it had to make in operating through multilateral institutions so long as American imperialism was concealed were unnecessarily constraining its strategic options. This is what underlies the increasingly unconcealed nature of American imperialism today.

For all its justified outrage at the shameless actions of the imperial state today, there is some unmistakable signs of 'I-told-you-so' gratification on the Left at the ubiquity of the discourse of imperialism today. The concept of imperialism has always been especially important to the Left as much for its emotive and mobilizing qualities as for its analytic ones. The common use of the term today obviously makes its use for the former purposes easier. And the lack in the mainstream usage of any serious political economy or pattern of historical determination that would explain the emergence and reproduction of today's American empire, and the dimensions of structural oppression

and exploitation pertaining to it, serves as a poignant reminder of why it was Marxism that made the analytic running in theorizing imperialism for most of the 20th century.

Yet, for that very reason, there is a danger that the Left will inappropriately insist on trying to make 21st century American imperialism fit the categories classical Marxist developed to analyze the very different situation a century ago. This is reflected in the interpretations of the war on Iraq as determined by the attempt to spatially displace an economic crisis of over-accumulation, and the presentation of the disagreements among the leading capitalist states over the war in Iraq as evidence of inter-imperial rivalry. With end of the American boom of the 1990s, and the growing US trade and fiscal deficit, left-wing accounts of US military actions in terms of compensating for American economic decline amidst renewed inter-imperial rivalry have become as commonplace as 'new white man's burden' justification for imperialism on the center and right.

The evidence offered to sustain this is remarkably short-term and economic. Its as though the cooperation among all the Nato states in the war on Yugoslavia only few short years ago is forgotten, not to mention their cooperation through the 1990s in the economic embargo on and bombing of Iraq. Also forgotten seems to be the remarkable strength the US economy has shown relative to the European and Japanese economies in the era of neoliberalism, not to mention the relative shallowness of the recession that followed the end of the boom compared to earlier recessions

This is not to say that the current economic conjuncture does not reveal genuine problems for every state in global capitalism, including the American. But these reflect new contradictions that global neoliberalism has generated in all states, including the synchronization of recessions, the threat of deflation, the dependence of the world on American markets and the dependence of the United States on capital inflows to cover its trade deficit.

What is clear, or at least should be, is that we cannot understand imperialism today in terms of economic crises giving rise to inter-imperial rivalry. The extent of the theoretically unselfconscious use of the term 'rivalry' to label the economic competition between the EU, Japan/East Asia and the United States is remarkable. The distinctive meaning the concept had in the pre-World War I context, when economic competition among European states was indeed imbricated with comparable military capacities and Lenin could assert that 'imperialist wars are absolutely inevitable', is clearly lacking in the contemporary context of overwhelming American military dominance. But beyond this, the meaning it had in the past is contradicted by the distinctive economic as well as military integration that exists between the leading capitalist powers today.

The term 'rivalry' inflates economic competition between states far beyond what it signifies in the real world. In many respects, the other leading capitalist states have been 'Canadianized' in terms of their place in the American empire. while China may perhaps emerge eventually as a pole of inter-imperial power, it will obviously be very far from reaching such a status for a good many decades. The fact that certain elements in the American state are concerned to ensure that its 'unipolar' power today is used to

prevent the possible emergence of imperial rivals tomorrow can hardly be used as evidence that such rivals already exist.

None of this means, of course, that state and economic structures have become homogeneous or that there is no divergence in many policy areas, or that contradiction and conflict are absent from the imperial order. But these contradictions and conflicts are located not so much in the relationships between the advanced capitalist states, as *within* these states, as they try to manage their internal processes of accumulation, legitimation and class struggle.

To the extent that there is a crisis of American imperialism today, it arises in relation to the states outside the capitalist core. Where these states are – as in much of the third world and the former Soviet bloc – relatively undeveloped capitalist states, yet increasingly located within the orbit of global capital, the international financial institutions, as well as the core capitalist states acting either in concert or on their own, have intervened to impose neoliberal structural ‘reforms’, and all too often these interventions have aggravated rather than solved the problem because of the abstract universalism of the remedy. Whatever neoliberalism’s alleged successes in relation to strengthening an already developed capitalist economy, it increasingly appears as a misguided strategy for capitalist development itself.

As for so-called ‘rogue states’ – those which are not within the orbit of global capitalism so that neither penetrating external economic forces nor international institutions can effectively restructure them – direct unilateral intervention on the part of the American state has become increasingly tempting. It is this that has brought the term ‘empire’ back into mainstream currency, and it is fraught with all kinds of unpredictable ramifications. The trouble for the American empire as it inclines in this strategic direction, however is that very few of the world’s states today, given their social forces and economic and political structures, are going to be able to be reconstructed along the lines of post-war Japan and Germany, even if – indeed especially if – they are occupied by the US military, and even if they are penetrated rather than marginalized by globalization.

The disagreements over the war on Iraq between France, Germany and even Canada, on the one hand, and the American state, on the other, need to be seen in this light. These tensions pertain very little to economic rivalries. Indeed their bourgeoisies – visibly troubled by and increasingly complaining about not being on the same page as the Americans – are even less inclined to challenge American hegemony than they were in the 1970s. The tensions pertain rather more to an inclination on the part of these states themselves (in good part reflective of their relative lack of autonomous military capacity) to prefer the use of multilateral institutions given their subordinate status in the American empire.

The European leaders are above all pragmatists when it comes to playing power politics, and what they mainly want is a voice in Washington D.C. They would like to think that they will be at least be listened when they have something to propose, even if they know that it will be the Americans who will dispose. The Green German foreign

minister, Joska Fischer, told Jan Kavan, the Czech President of the UN General Assembly during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq (they were old friends from the days when they were student dissidents against their respective regimes) that he was anxious to quickly put the disagreements over the war out of the way. When Kavan asked why, Fischer gave a straightforward answer: 'Because it is better to be inside than outside Caesar's court'.

It was this kind of pragmatic calculation that so quickly led Canada to sign on to Star Wars missile defense shield as compensation to the Americans for not sending troops to Iraq. And it was the same calculation that led those European states that had opposed giving UN imprimatur to the Anglo-British invasion of Iraq to vote at the UN a year later to legitimate the occupation and the puppet Allawi government.

The real problem for American imperialism today lies not with the ruling classes of the European and Japanese states own imperialist inclinations. On the contrary, it is the danger posed to these states' legitimacy once they are located in a framework of American imperialism that is so visibly imperialistic. The American state's occupation of Iraq, precisely because it so flagrantly imperial and is so openly connected to a doctrine that expresses the broader purposes of establishing neoliberal capitalist order on a global scale, has evoked an unprecedented popular revulsion against American imperialism opposition, including within the capitalist core states. And managing this is not easy for the vassal states that are usually called America's partners and allies.

This is especially significant because since the American empire can only rule through other states, the greatest danger to it is that the states and ruling classes within its orbit will be rendered illegitimate by virtue of their articulation to the imperium. But such is their degree of integration with the imperium that they are unable to break with it. Only a fundamental change in class and structure within each of these states can bring about a disarticulation from the empire.

A Kerry victory in November might indeed make the empire look more multilateralist, but this will hardly address the underlying problem. The unconcealed nature of the American imperium would be made all the clearer under another four years of Bush but would be easily concealed again even under Kerry. Rather than a replay of the interimperial rivalry that led the most of working classes of the old empires to line up behind their ruling classes in World War One, the political space may well be opening up for the kind of mobilization from below that point towards the fundamental class transformations that are necessary in all the capitalist states to finally bring an end to capitalist imperialism.