

IMPERIALISM OF OUR TIME

AIJAZ AHMAD

I begin with the phrase ‘imperialism of our time’ as homage to Michal Kalecki who wrote his seminal essay ‘Fascism of Our Time’ at the juncture when the American far right had made a serious bid for the Presidency with the emergence of Barry Goldwater as the Republican candidate in the 1964 US election. Kalecki did not refer to Mussolini directly, although he might have, since it was after all Mussolini who first said that fascism is simply that form of rule in which government unites with ‘corporations’ – a term which for Mussolini meant something not unlike what President Eisenhower meant when warning of the US government’s convergence with the ‘military-industrial complex’. Kalecki’s analysis did suggest, however, that in its extreme form industrial capitalism does have an inherent fascist tendency, and he wondered what fascism would look like if it ever came to the United States in conditions of prosperity and stable electoral democracy. Kalecki’s intent was not to suggest that the US was becoming fascist, nor do I mean to imply that we are living in fascist times. Nonetheless, one of the salient features of the present conjuncture is that the United States, the leading imperialist country with historically unprecedented global power, is today governed by perhaps the most rightwing government in a century. The chickens of the most hysterical forms of authoritarianism that the US has been routinely exporting to large parts of the globe seem to be coming home to roost, with national as well as global consequences, including military consequences.

I also use the simple phrase ‘imperialism of our time’ with the more modest aim of avoiding terms like ‘New Imperialism’ which have been in vogue at various times, with varying meanings. Imperialism has been with us for a very long time, in great many forms, and constantly re-invents itself, so to speak, as the structure of global capitalism itself changes. What is offered here is a set of provisional notes toward the understanding of a conjuncture, ‘our time’, which is itself a complex of continuities and discontinuities – and, as is usual with

conjunctures, rather novel. I shall first offer a series of proposition and then, in the remaining space for this article, some further elaboration of these points.

I

The fundamental novelty of the imperialism of our time is that it comes after the dissolution of the two great rivalries that had punctuated the global politics of the twentieth century, namely what Lenin called ‘inter-imperialist rivalry’ of the first half of the century as well as what we might, for lack of a better word, call the inter-systemic rivalry between the US and the USSR that lasted for some seventy years. The end of those rivalries concludes the era of politics inaugurated by the First World War and it is only logical that the sole victor, the United States, would set out most aggressively to grab all possible spoils of victory and to undo the gains that the working classes and oppressed nations of the world had been able to achieve during that period.

This new face of imperialism arises not only after the dissolution of the great colonial empires (British and French, principally) and colonial ambitions of the other, competing capitalist countries (Germany and Japan, mainly) but also the definitive demise of the nationalism of the national bourgeoisie in much of the so-called Third World (anti-colonialism, wars of national liberation, the Bandung project, non-alignment, the protectionist industrialising state) which had itself been sustained considerably by the existence of an alternative pole in the shape of the communist countries. The three objectives for which the US fought a war of position throughout the twentieth century – the containment/disappearance of communist states, its own primacy over the other leading countries, the defeat of Third World nationalism – have been achieved.

Far from being an imperialism caught in the coil of inter-imperialist rivalries, it is the imperialism of the era in which (a) national capitals have interpenetrated in such a manner that the capital active in any given territorial state is comprised, in varying proportions, of national and transnational capital; (b) finance capital is dominant over productive capital to an extent never visualized even in Lenin’s ‘export of capital’ thesis or in Keynes’ warnings about the rapaciousness of the rentiers; and (c) everything from commodity markets to movements of finance has been so thoroughly globalized that the rise of a global state, with demonstrably globalized military capability, is an objective requirement of the system itself, quite aside from the national ambitions of the US rulers, so as to impose structures and disciplines over this whole complex with its tremendous potential for fissures and breakdowns.

Empires without colonies have been with us, in one corner of the globe or another, throughout the history of capital, sometimes preceding military conquest (commercial empires), at other times coming after decolonization (South America after the dissolution of Spanish and Portuguese rule), and sometimes taking the form for which Lenin invented the term ‘semi-colonial’ (Egypt, Persia etc). However, this is the first fully post-colonial imperialism, not only free

of colonial rule but antithetical to it; it is unlikely that the current occupation of Iraq will translate itself into long-term colonial rule, however long the quagmire may last and even if the superhawks of the Pentagon take US armies into Syria, Iran or wherever. It is not a matter of an ideological preference for 'informal' empire over 'formal' empire, so-called. It is a structural imperative of the current composition of global capital itself, as Panitch and Gindin argue in this volume. The movement of capital and commodities must be as unimpeded as possible but the nation-state form must be maintained throughout the peripheries, not only for historical reasons but also to supplement internationalization of capitalist law with locally erected labour regimes so as to enforce what Stephen Gill calls 'disciplinary neoliberalism' in conditions specific to each territorial unit.

The singular merit of Luxemburg's theory of imperialism was that, unlike Hilferding or Lenin or Bukharin, she sought to ground her theory in the larger theory of the capitalist mode of production itself and therefore focused on the question of the relationship between industrial and agricultural production which had been a notable feature of the Marxist theory of capitalism as such. One of her key propositions was that colonialism was not a conjunctural but a necessary aspect of the globalization of the law of value because capitalist zones require non-capitalist zones for full realization of surplus value; but she also went on to say that once capitalism has reached the outer reaches of the globe a crisis would necessarily ensue thanks to the increasing disappearance of non-capitalist zones. This latter inference would appear to be unwarranted, historically and even logically. Combined and uneven development does not strictly require that the peripheries remain 'non-capitalist', i.e., outside the global operation of the law of value. In actual history, the era of classical colonialism divided the world between an industrial core and a vast agricultural hinterland. Then, however, the dissolution of the great colonial empires and the postwar restructuring of global capital opened a new era in which the world was increasingly divided between advanced and backward industrial zones, while particular countries and continents were themselves divided between islands of the most advanced forms of finance and industrial production, on the one hand, and the most backward forms of agricultural production, on the other. At the extreme poles within the so-called 'Third World', one witnessed not only the stunning capitalist breakthrough in countries like Taiwan and South Korea but also, in contrast, the regression of parts of sub-Saharan Africa to levels below those obtaining at the time of decolonization. This transcontinental production of extreme inequalities is rife with potential for perennial violence, hence the need for state systems that guarantee extreme forms of extra-economic coercion. Meanwhile, one can witness across large parts of Asia and Africa all the processes of primitive accumulation and forced proletarianization that Marx specified in his famous chapter on the question, with reference mainly to England, and one remembers the central role he assigns to the state in the process, which, in his words, 'begat' the conditions for capitalist production 'hothouse-fashion'. To the extent that relatively similar processes are duplicated in a number of countries under regimes of

both nation-state and globalized management (the World Bank, the WTO, etc.), in a system that is itself trans-national, a supervening authority above national and local authorities is again an objective requirement of the system as a whole; hence the tight fit among the multi-lateral institutions, the US state and the local managers of other states.

At the broadest level of generalization, one could say that it took two world wars to decide whether the US or Germany would inherit the British and French empires and thus transform itself into the leader of the bloc of advanced capitalist countries, and hence the centre of a global empire. It is significant that while the German vision was mired in the primitive notions of a worldwide colonial empire, the US, already under Woodrow Wilson, was championing the dissolution of colonialism and the 'right of nationalities', an ideological precursor for today's imperialism of 'democracy' and 'human rights'. And, it was after World War I, as the centre of global finance shifted decisively from London to New York and the Bolshevik Revolution arose to challenge global capitalism as a whole, that the US positioned itself as the leader of the 'Free World', as was symbolized by Wilson's dominating presence at Versailles as well as the leading role the US always played in the containment-of-communism crusades, especially after the Second World War.

Precisely at the time when the US has achieved all its long-standing objectives, including the objective of full dominance over its partners in the advanced capitalist world, there has arisen in some circles the expectation of an 'inter-imperialist rivalry' between the US and EU as competing centres of global capitalist production, with reference mainly to the size of the European economy as well as a futuristic projection of an East Asian power, be it Japan or China or a bloc of East Asian states. This seems fanciful. The most the Europeans do in the Third World is look for markets and investment opportunities. There is no power projection, for the simple reason that there is no power. Not only is the US military power far greater than that of all of Europe combined, it also has a military presence in over a hundred countries of the world, in sharp contrast to Germany or even France, and NATO goes only where the US tells it to go. This military supremacy over its would-be rivals is supplemented then by the overwhelming power of its currency and finance, and its dominance over the global production of techno-scientific as well as social-scientific intelligentsias, and its global cultural and ideological reach through its dominance over mass entertainment and (dis)information.

The US fought as hard against radical Third World nationalism, as it did against communism during the second half of the century. Having championed decolonization as a precondition for the emergence of a globally integrated empire under its own dominion, it set its face against national liberation movements, whether led by communists (as in Indochina) or by radical nationalists (as in Algeria); against non-alignment (the rhetoric of 'for us or against us' of Bush Jr. today comes straight out of John Foster Dulles' speeches during the 1950s); as well as against particular nationalist regimes, be it Nasser's or Nkrumah's or Sukarno's or

even Prince Sihanouk's in Cambodia. Instead, it kept monarchies in power where it could and imposed dictators wherever it needed to. The failure of the national-bourgeois project in the Third World has all kinds of domestic roots but the implacable undercutting of it by the US was a very large part of it. One now tends to forget that in his postwar vision, Keynes himself had recommended not only state restrictions on rentiers in the advanced capitalist countries, but also regular long-term transfers of capital to the underdeveloped countries to guarantee real growth, and hence domestic peace, and hence stability of the global capitalist system as a whole, not to speak of more prosperous markets for the advanced capitalist countries' own commodities. This latter recommendation was rejected out of hand by the US which kept a tight control over the making of the Bretton Woods architecture. This undercutting of the national-bourgeois project – precisely because the project required high levels of protectionism, tariffs, domestic savings and state-led industrialization, with little role for imperialist penetration – certainly made all those states much weaker in relation to foreign domination but also made those societies much more angry and volatile, eventually even susceptible to all kinds of irrationalism, with little popular legitimacy for the indigenous nation-state. This phenomenon itself has required not only globalized supervision but also an increasingly *interventionist* global state. Little fires have – more and more – to be put out everywhere and now the whole system has to be 're-ordered', as Bush and Blair keep saying. The Cold War was never cold for many outside the NATO and Warsaw Pact zones, and US military interventions in the Third World, direct and indirect, was a routine affair throughout that period. Now, winning the Cold War has opened the way not to world peace but for an ideology of permanent interventionism on part of the United States: 'a task that never ends', as Bush put it some ten days after the 11 September catastrophe.

Defeat of all the forces which Hobsbawm cumulatively and felicitously calls 'the Enlightenment left' – communism, socialism, national liberation movements, the radical wings of social democracy – has led to a full-blown ideological crisis across the globe. Race, religion and ethnicity – re-packaged as just so many 'identities' – are now where class struggles and inter-religious, inter-racial, trans-ethnic solidarities once used to be, and a politics of infinite Difference has arisen on the ruins of the politics of Equality. Postmodernism is rife with thematics taken over from European irrationalism and with nostalgia for the pre-modern. Indeed, this idea of the pre-modern as the postmodern solution for problems of modernity is even more widespread, with far more murderous consequences, in the peripheries of the capitalist system, be it the ideologies of the Hindu far right in India, the sundry fundamentalisms of Islamic mullahs, or the millenarian ideologies of those who brought us September 11th. Terrorism is now where national liberation used to be, and the US today chases these handful of terrorists as assiduously and globally as it used to chase phalanxes of revolutionaries until not long ago. Nor is it a matter any longer of the peripheries. The United States itself is gripped today by a peculiar, cabal-like combination of Christian fundamentalists, zionists, far right neo-conservatives and militarists.

It is here that the specificity of the current Bush regime in the United States lies. We shall return to the fact that the US has fought a war of position not just against communism throughout much of the twentieth century, not only against radical nationalisms in the second half of that century but also, crucially, for its own dominance over its capitalist rivals and in pursuit of a role for itself as the sole architect of the global capitalist system. In that sense, of course, the current Administration continues a much older project, and some of the most aggressive of its policies can be traced back to not only Bush Sr. or Ronald Reagan but to Clinton and Carter as well. The first specificity of this regime lies in the fact that, thanks to the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, this is the first time in human history that a single imperial power is so dominant over all its rivals that it really has no rival, near or far, precisely at the time when it has the greatest capacity to dominate the globe; Clinton in this calculus appears as a transitional figure and Bush Jr's Presidency, the first US Presidency of the twenty-first century, seems to coincide fully with this moment when history's greatest concentration of force can be exercised without any restraint. That is the objective moment of this Presidency. The second specificity is that never in the post-1914 epoch has so concentrated a force of the far right taken hold of the governing institutions of the US state, a force so overdetermined in their ideology and projects that they recognize no limits to their own venality or criminality or global ambition. They are in their own way quite as millenarian as the most irrational member of Al Qaida but, unlike Al Qaida, they have power – more power than anyone else on earth. Thus it is that their actions by and large conform to the logic of capital but also may well exceed that logic.

II

To properly understand where imperialism stands today its necessary to begin by reconsidering Lenin's conception – hardly a theory, one might add – of 'inter-imperialist rivalry'. His thinking on this subject arose in the course of a conjunctural analysis required by an intense debate over whether a world war was imminent or not, the line that European social democracy was to adopt in case war did break out, the question of voting over war credits in the various countries (notably Germany), the question of what revolutionary possibilities might or might not open up in the event of a war and what kind of a power bloc (class alliances) the revolutionary parties were to try to constitute in that event, and where – if anywhere – the likelihood of a revolution would be the greatest. The notable feature of this conception was that it was not rooted in the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production nor a historical analysis of the competition that gave rise to recurring conflicts among colonial powers from the beginning. As a conjunctural analysis, however, Lenin's position proved to be unassailable. The First World War, contrary to what Kautsky, the master theoretician of German social democracy, believed, soon led to the Second, meanwhile creating a situation where the Bolshevik Revolution could be successful. At the end of the war,

countries like Germany and Italy did witness a level of revolutionary militancy that was not to be matched again during the inter-war period. And it was in consequence of that war and the Bolshevik Revolution that anti-colonial mass movements arose in a number of Asian and African countries, with the alliance of proletariat, peasantry and left-wing intelligentsia – which Lenin had recommended at the time – becoming a common feature of those movements, whether led by communists or not. Nor is there much doubt that as a latecomer to advanced capitalism without being a ‘colony-holding state’ (Luxemburg’s phrase), Germany was keen on a re-division of the colonial world.

The acuity of Lenin’s *conjunctural* analysis, and the recommendations on matters of strategy he drew from it, has nothing to do with whether or not he was right on other things, like export of capital, etc. The idea of ‘inter-imperialist rivalry’ was in fact much more closely integrated with the idea of ‘the weakest link’ (more revolutionary possibility in Russia than in Germany, for example), the political strategy of multi-class alliances based on the strategic alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry (a great innovation in Marxist revolutionary theory for backward countries: Stalin’s fatal crime that he broke that alliance), and the national-colonial question (the possibility of anti-colonial revolutions thanks to the weakening of the colonizing bourgeoisies, the rise of mass anti-colonial movements after the First World War, general decolonization after the second). One can appreciate the merits of the conjunctural analysis and the accompanying political theory without having to subscribe to the letter of the whole of the economic theory with which he sought to buttress it.

The conception of ‘inter-imperialist rivalry’, however, presupposed a stage in the global evolution of the capitalist mode of production in which national capitals are essentially discrete in nature and with little inter-penetration. And, it therefore presupposed a kind of state that represents the national bourgeoisie as such, in competition with other national bourgeoisies and their states. Rooted as the conception was in a debate over the inevitability and imminence of war among these competing and discretely organized states, ‘rivalry’ itself had a meaning far exceeding mere competition because it excluded the possibility of even any lasting collaborative competition *in those circumstances*. The idea that war was imminent similarly presupposed some equivalence, or at least illusion of equivalence, in levels of military capability, i.e. the rivals had to be seen to be erecting military structures that were capable of fighting each other.

This brief excursus on Lenin serves to make a point: one cannot lift the conception of ‘inter-imperialist rivalry’ out of a conjunctural analysis of almost a century ago. As one now re-visits those texts, one is struck by their belonging to a different epoch, entirely. The specificity of the conjuncture in the imperialism of our time, as different from Lenin’s, is that its core – consisting of advanced capitalist countries – is comprised of neither rivals nor equals. The total population and the collective GNP of the EU is certainly equal to that of the United States, marginally greater in fact. That’s where the matter ends, however. It has no centralized state structure even remotely comparable to that of the US,

no singular language, no standing army or security structure of its own, no foreign policy that is binding on member states, and its laws supersedes national laws only certain circumscribed fields. Its proposed constitution in 2003 was so bound by conditionalities and ifs and buts that it looked more like a statement of principle and vision than a proper constitution. The Brussels bureaucracy, the new Euro, and a whole host of good intentions seem to be the unifying factors.

All this became transparent during the decision-making process over the invasion of Iraq. Britain threw in its lot with the US, with complete disregard of even procedural consideration for the EU but in keeping with the role of loyal subordinate that the US imposed upon it soon after the second World War, and from which neither Wilson nor Thatcher nor Blair have ever deviated. Then, as France and Germany sought to distinguish themselves from that position and the US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld dismissed them contemptuously as 'old Europe', everyone from Derrida to Habermas marched to television studios to express dismay on Europe's behalf. Eventually, Rumsfeld did line up Britain, Italy, Spain, Portugal and a host of little/new countries of 'Europe' on his side, and it was in the Azores that Bush made the final decision to ignore the Security Council and proceed with the invasion. Equally significant is the fact that in the last round of negotiations at the Security Council before the invasion began, the Franco-/German alliance proposed a thirty-day warning to Saddam (and the inspectors) after which they too were willing to condone the invasion. Bush pointedly snubbed them by keeping to the schedule set by the Pentagon and ignoring the Security Council from that point on. The US instructed the UN to withdraw its inspectors forthwith and Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, did not even bother to call the Security Council in session, even though the inspectors had been sent there not by the US but by a Security Council Resolution; Annan simply instructed the inspectors to comply with US orders. Hans Blix, the chief inspector, was to say later that he had long believed that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and the whole thing was a charade anyway. Once the invasion got into full swing, even the Franco-German alliance began to pray publicly for a quick US victory and, only slightly less publicly, began begging for contracts for European firms in the 'reconstruction' of Iraq. When the US decided to establish itself as the occupying force and grant the UN no appreciable role in it, the Franco-German alliance complied.

Meanwhile, on the completely different issue of a Belgian law which grants Belgian courts the jurisdiction to try foreign nationals for war crimes, a stern warning from Rumsfeld that he might move the NATO headquarters from Brussels if the laws were not changed brought a swift promise of compliance from the Belgian government. So much for the claim by high-minded European intellectuals that respect for universal human rights is an integral aspect of the emerging European identity. Belgium apparently has no right to have laws of its own even on issues such as war crimes, even though these laws have no relevance to global trade, finance or commercial contracts. The doctrine of limited sovereignty that is emerging as a major component in US policy, with its vast

implications for the new imperial constitutionalism, is to be applied, apparently, not only to the Third World countries but even, selectively, to Europe's own ability to promulgate laws for itself.

In the theoretical field, developments of this kind concretely bring into question the Negri/Hardt conception of a supra-national 'sovereignty', which, according to them, has been so thoroughly globalized that it is hard to locate it anywhere in particular, just as this 'sovereignty' is to be opposed by a 'multitude' which too is beyond class or any other determinate identity or boundary. In actual reality, it is of course the United States that claims a sovereign right to act in its own interests (which it calls 'defence') while flouting the sovereignty of others, so that the sovereignty of the imperial state seems boundless. Indeed, it was Ms. Albright, a former professor at Georgetown University, who became the first high official of US administration, as Clinton's Secretary of State, to expound the notion that 'nationality' as well as 'sovereignty' belong to an outdated repertoire of political theory and need to be abandoned in view of new structures of globalization and imperatives of 'humanitarian intervention'.

The declaration of the Bush administration that it has the sovereign right to make war – what it calls 'pre-emptive war' – against any or all states that it perceives as a threat, while reserving the right to judge what constitutes a threat, is in fact an extension of a doctrine already in place since earlier Administrations. What we are witnessing is the making of an imperial sovereignty claimed for itself by a state which is at once the state of a nation as well as a globalized state of contemporary capitalism. The US arrogates to itself a limitless sovereignty which is arbitrary by nature, and can only exist in so far as its might is so superior to that of all others that its action would necessarily go unchallenged by other components of the global state system however resentful they might be otherwise.

While we are still on the question of inter-imperialist rivalry, as contrasted to the global sovereignty of the US imperium, it is worth recalling that there is yet another, even less plausible and more or less futuristic idea which locates this rivalry not in the Atlantic zone but the Pacific zone, so that the rival arises not from Europe but from East Asia. In an earlier version, the rivalry was to come from Japan but the deeply crisis-ridden nature of its current economy, contrasted with the remarkable growth rates sustained by the Chinese economy over the past more than a decade, seems to have shifted the attention to China. This too is implausible, however. Whatever its recent rates of growth, the scale of the Chinese economy is nothing compared with that of the EU, and whatever the immense size of its land army, the high-tech component of its military capability is still far behind even that of Russia. The preponderant role of its military establishment is internal, with respect to management of civil society and dominance over other institutions of state; for the rest, its war-making capabilities are largely defensive in character. Its economic growth itself has aggravated internal social contradictions, along fault-lines of class and region, and China will be lucky if it can survive, through this extremely difficult and lop-sided growth period, in its present territorial shape, and may face increasing mass unrest along class lines as

well. One can be fairly certain that the US will exploit that internal unrest to foster separatist movements, especially in the outlying regions such as Xinjiang, just as it closely watches Tibet as a possible staging area. Meanwhile the remorseless export orientation of the Chinese economy has served to integrate it deeply into the US consumer market, so that China today is beset by the nightmare that if there is a full-scale American recession Chinese exports will decline dramatically and its economy will consequently grind to a halt. Integration of China into the US-dominated global system as a way of increasing its dependency is an imperative that Bush Sr. and Clinton well understood. The current Administration may pursue a policy (in which India is likely to play an important role) of forcing upon China stupendous expenditures on building its military defences, taking those resources away from economic growth and thus exacerbating internal conflicts. In any case, China is extremely vulnerable to the United States, militarily and economically, and any idea of it as competitor is fanciful at best.

III

Unlike inter-imperial rivalry, the question of colonialism is – or should be – central to our thinking today. In the history of imperialism, the role of colonialism – generally conceptualized these days in terms of a contrast between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ empires – remains a contentious issue. Four initial observations can be offered without fear of much contradiction, except from devoutly Westocentric circles. First, colonialism was not an incidental, epiphenomenal or episodic feature of the development of capitalism, and the neglect of this fact has marred much Marxist theory of capitalism; colonialism was from the beginning an intrinsic part of the primitive accumulation of capital and former colonies continue to play this role in the primitive accumulation of capital on the global scale in postcolonial imperialism of even today (primitive accumulation, as David Harvey argues elsewhere in this volume, being a constant feature of capitalism throughout its history, right up to the present conjuncture). Second, there is a sharp contrast between different kinds of colonialism, as for example between settler colonialism (which succeeded in the Americas and Australia but failed in Africa) and the so-called colonies which were occupied, administered and exploited by bourgeoisies so external to them that they never put their roots down in the conquered lands (the experience of most colonies in Asia and Africa). Some of the white settlements in the temperate zones made a transition to advanced capitalism (notably North America and to an extent Australia-New Zealand) while others did not (South America). None of the occupied-but-unsettled colonies did, not even India which arguably had some potential at the moment of colonization. Much capital and technology was transferred to the settler colonies, very little to the unsettled ones. All this had rather consequential effects on the class structure of the respective sub-systems. The settler-colonies which made the capitalist transition are marked by the dominance of industry over agriculture, and they have a demographic balance in which the

employed greatly outnumber the army of the unemployed; in those which did not make that transition, the army of the unemployed and the indifferently employed tend to exceed the employed sections of the working class.

Third, the so-called ‘informal’ empire (imperialism without colonies) has been a recurring feature from the beginning, and full-scale colonialist conquest often came as an aftermath of other forms of imperialist exploitation. Coastal outposts in western Africa, combined with raids and incursions into the interior, were enough to empty it of much of its population via the slave trade and to disrupt its economic networks; conquest of the interior came much later. Even the beginnings of territorial conquest of India came very much later than the establishment of coastal outposts for purposes of commercial imperialism, and the full territorial conquest – not to speak of the transition from a possession of the East India Company to a crown colony – took a hundred years; by contrast, ninety years were to elapse between full conquest and decolonization.

Fourth, the global history of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ empires – not to speak of colonial conquest and decolonization – is parallel but non-synchronic. Latin America was fully decolonized well before the interiors of Africa and Asia were fully colonized; the history of Anglo-American rivalry over the ‘informal’ empire in Latin America after decolonization predates the rise of mass anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa by roughly a century. The fact that Latin American states originated in settler-colonial formations while most states in Asia and Africa did not experience even the attempt to impose that form has had enormously differentiated consequences for the development of languages, cultures, religions, demographic compositions, etc. in the respective continents. And some of the consequences of imperialism were rather similar in ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ empires so far as the colonized territories and the ‘semi-colonies’ (Lenin’s term) are concerned. India shifts to the status of a crown colony in the 1830s; Turkey, never colonized, undertakes modern bourgeois reforms under the Tanzimat at roughly the same time; by the 1920s both had developed remarkably similar property relations, legal structures, reform movements etc, not to speak of the modes of dependence on Europe (e.g., debt servitude) with the difference that India had been colonized and Turkey not.

The United States occupies a unique place in this whole history of colonialism. It was the only former colony that turned itself into an empire, but even during the nineteenth century when colonizing was quite the fashion in Europe, the US sought not to colonize Latin America but to dominate it. Born in genocidal annexation of vast territories, its initial Thirteen Colonies made a revolution, turned themselves into a nation, wrote for themselves a constitution which combined stirring rhetoric of what we today call ‘human rights’ with defence of slavery, so that the settlers could now go on doing what they were doing anyway – race-based slavery for the plantations, profits from the triangular trade, commerce and industry concentrated mostly on the eastern seaboard, petty commodity production in New England – without having to share profits with the ‘mother country’. The expansionist ideology that arose out of it was annex-

ationist rather than colonial in the European sense; what lay beyond the frontier was there to take, and frontiers could be extended through much of the nineteenth century. To the west, only the Pacific proved to be the limit; to the south and north, borders with Mexico and Canada were determined in warfare and annexation of territory, not conquering these neighbours as colonies. Unlike the 'colony-holding' states of Europe it never had the problem of surplus labour; it constantly accumulated for itself a massive surplus of resources. European colony-holders exported their populations to achieve a favourable demographic balance; the US thrived on importing slaves, skilled labourers and vast intellectual resources from other countries. Its first 'informal' empire was in the Americas itself, while the heart of the empire lay in the annexed territories that were constantly converted into more and more national territory; empire and nation were, in that originating moment, one.

IV

The US entered World War I not for re-division of the colonial world but as arbiter of European disputes, and emerged out of it as the first among equals. The Nazis initiated the Second World War with the ambition of turning the whole world into a vast and permanent German colony. Once the US entered the Second World War, it explicitly adopted the goal of persuading – or forcing – all the 'colony-holding' states to unburden themselves of the colonies and get on with the business of joining a unified capitalist empire on the global scale. Later, the US was to fight and fund many wars, the most lethal and protracted ones in Indochina of course, but never to colonize, only to obtain client regimes and make the world safe for capitalism.

The post-Second World War settlement was based on a combination of a clear-cut US leadership and a complex network of multilateral institutions. The most useful were the institutions – such as the IFIs and NATO – which the US could control more firmly. The UN was always treated as a necessary and useful nuisance because the USSR had veto power in the Security Council and because membership in the General Assembly was so numerous that, in the heyday of communism and Third World nationalism, majorities were not always easy to obtain; there even came a fleeting moment, in the 1970s, when UN itself became a forum for the pursuit of Third World nationalist projects through such subsidiary organizations as the UNCTAD. Now that those adversaries have been vanquished, a paradoxical situation has arisen in which the UN itself has become much more pliant but the US is now so determined to take the management of the capitalist world into its own hands that it is undermining not only the UN, but even, on occasion, the IMF and the World Bank which had been until recently among its chief instrumentalities for governance of, especially, the Third World. With hindsight, one can now see that the great emphasis on multilateralism in the past was itself perhaps a function of the fact that the US faced challenges from communism and Third World nationalism and

needed at least an institutional framework in which to buttress the unity and consent of its chief allies behind its own leadership. Now, with those challenges gone, the leadership firmly secured, and a much more belligerent US Administration in office, many aspects of this multilateralism are being allowed to lapse. Bush Jr's hysterical assertions of US imperial sovereignty stand in sharp contrast to the trilateralism of his father.

A very underrated aspect of the global hegemony the US established after the Second World War was the role its knowledge industry came to play in training and nurturing large elements of the ruling strata in the Third World, directly in its own institutions on US soil and indirectly through 'national' institutions located in the Third World itself, through supply of teachers, syllabi, grants, research equipment, libraries and so forth. Marx once remarked that a ruling class is stable only to the extent that it presses the best minds of the subordinate classes into its service. As it emerged as clear leader of the capitalist countries after the Second World War, at a moment when European empires were being dissolved in Asia and Africa, the US developed the largest, best funded, richest academic establishment ever known to humankind, and systematically set out to bring key intellectual strata from the newly decolonized countries into its own academic institutions, across the diverse fields of physical and technical sciences, social sciences and the humanities, arts, diplomacy, jurisprudence and so on. Many stayed on and became part of the intellectual powerhouse of the United States itself; from the 1960s onwards, certainly, the stupendous 'brain drain' from the Third World (principally Asia) gained momentum (as, by contrast, fewer European intellectuals were now inclined to migrate out of their increasingly prosperous and politically stable continent).

Those who returned became the home country's economists, scientists, diplomats, bureaucrats, professors, politicians, businessmen. By comparison, the role of the European countries in the intellectual formation of the postcolonial Third World intelligentsia declined sharply, and domestic institutions were re-fashioned to correspond as closely as possible to their American counterparts. The American imperial project was of course greatly aided by the fact that English became during this period something of a world language, thanks to the fact that it was the language of the two predominant imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The net result was that large parts of the state institutions in Third World dependencies were taken over simply through the intellectual takeover of many of their key personnel. The American worldview became the practical common sense for those personnel. Nor was this a matter of practical affairs alone. There was an attendant training of sense and sensibility, of literary and artistic taste, of patterns of consumption, the telecasting and absorption of news, the duplication of forms in the entertainment industry. Most European intellectuals are known in much of Africa and Asia today through their American re-packaging. The only Latin American literature that arrives in the bookshops of Delhi is that which has been translated, annotated, commented upon and published in the United States. The only 'universal' musical forms

today are the ones that either come from the US or are local duplicates and variants of the American form. Postmodernization of the world is actually Americanization of the world, with considerable degree of local colour and imitative originality no doubt. A good degree of this imitative originality can be seen in Europe too.

V

That, however, is not the only impact modern imperialism has had on the cultural and ideological spheres in the Third World. A general outbreak of irrationalism across large areas of the former colonies and semi-colonies is the other consequence of the defeat of the original anti-colonial project.

National liberation movements against colonialism and imperialism had risen within a determinate field of force, which was constituted on the one hand by anachronistic hierarchies of their own societies and foreign rule which was itself much too complicit with those hierarchies – and on the other hand, inspiration from the radical side of Modernity: the Enlightenment ideas of secular reason and the right of every social entity to emancipate itself through the exercise of that reason; the practical example of the relatively emancipated social life in industrialized societies; the ideas of the Bolshevik Revolution which had exploded upon the world just as these mass movements were coming into being and which itself inspired new mass movements. As such, they were, generally speaking, secular reform movements – secularization of religion itself was often an objective – as well as anti-colonial movements. As mass movements, their notable achievement was that they brought into the political field collective social actors which had never acted politically in the past. And as national movements for independence and social change, they sought to bring together diverse elements of society which otherwise belonged to different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups.

This was obviously not the only kind of opposition that grew against colonialism. A traditionalizing backlash in defence of the older social hierarchies was common enough, as hostile to secularizing reform movements as to colonialism. However, as one looks at a broad landscape – from North Africa, through West and South Asia up to Indochina – one is struck by how dominant the secularizing and reforming, even revolutionary, tendencies were. This would include Arab nationalism as much as the Indian anti-colonial movement, and the same was of course true of such reformist regimes as that of Ataturk which founded the modern Turkish state. Mass communist parties were a phenomenon not at all restricted to countries such as Vietnam where the communist-led national liberation triumphed, but also in a whole range of countries, from Iraq and Sudan to India, Malaya and Indonesia. Muslim societies seem to have been rather hospitable to communist ideas, while entities like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Indian RSS remained marginalized until the last quarter of the twentieth century. One might add that political Islam was nurtured in all

those societies by the US from the 1950s onward as a bulwark against communism, with eventually disastrous effects in Afghanistan and beyond. In class terms, meanwhile, such movements usually represented an alliance of the urban middle classes and the peasantry, and were led by the intelligentsia arising out of the former who were themselves aligned with the national-bourgeois project.

What, then, happened to this project after independence? That is a complex story, but as a broad generalization, one could say that every national bourgeois regime that arose after decolonization in the larger agrarian societies had a stark choice of alignment between imperialism and the peasantry, and in every instance it betrayed the peasantry. This is a theme of great significance. Gramsci argued that the European bourgeoisie that went through the experience of the French Revolution became so thoroughly frightened by the prospect of the peasantry carrying its own revolution to its logical end that no bourgeoisie was ever again to play a revolutionary role against the landholding classes. In the agrarian economies of the larger former colonies certainly, agrarian revolution was the only way out of imperialist dependence and lack of that revolution lies at the heart of the defeat of the national bourgeois project and the eventual acceptance of imperialist dictation and the formation of neoliberal regimes by the local bourgeoisies. This internal factor was certainly decisive in India, where the post-colonial state ‘begat’ quite a powerful industrial/financial bourgeoisie ‘hothouse-fashion’ and created a widespread class of rich farmers in the countryside – but never emancipated the vast bulk of the poor and landless peasantry. That type of state itself began to decay by the mid-70s, and when the appropriate moment arrived the bourgeoisie cut loose from the project of state-led growth strategies and reconciled itself to a greatly subordinated status in the structure of global capitalism. A major external factor contributing to the fate of the national-bourgeois project was the existence of the Soviet bloc which provided key supports for it in terms of technological inputs, finance and markets; the demise of the Soviet bloc also ended what little had remained of that project. Imperialist pressure was in any case the largest element in the demise of that project.

The defeat and/or decline of the democratic, secular, anti-colonial nationalism has given rise, in a host of countries, from India to Egypt to Algeria, to hysterical, irrationalist forms of cultural nationalism and atavistic hysteria. I have been arguing elsewhere in my writings that in the whole history of modern nationalism, from the early years of the nineteenth century onward, there has been a ferocious struggle between the Enlightenment project of equal citizenship and rational self-emancipation on the one hand, and the romanticist, identitarian, racialistic, religiously bigoted nationalisms. What we are seeing today is that the defeat of the Enlightenment project has necessarily led to the rise of savage identities based on race or religion. As Clara Zetkin once put it, fascism is a just reward for the failure to make the revolution.

This brings us to Al Qaida. In the Arab world, where the zionist state was a chief instrumentality of US imperialism, it was in the crucible of the Six Day

War of 1967 – Israel’s professedly ‘pre-emptive’ invasion of Egypt, instant destruction of its Air Force, occupation of the Sinai – that the radical-nationalist project of Nasserism collapsed; the re-stabilization of the monarchies and resurgence of political Islam in the Arab world can be dated back to that catastrophe. Defeat of the left and of the secular-democratic forces of national liberation in Palestine accounts for the latter-day rise of Hamas and the suicide bombers. In Iran, the destruction of the communist movement and forces of secular nationalism by the joint efforts of the CIA and Shah’s secret police paved the way for the Islamic regime to fill the vacuum and hijack the anti-monarchical, reformist sentiments of the Irani people. In Afghanistan, the US sponsored an elaborate, ferocious war against the reformist regime brought about by the communist forces, assembled a huge international force of Islamicist extremists to fight against communism and brought to the world stage the so-called ‘mujahideen’, the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and the rest; that is the monster of its own making that came to haunt the United States on 11th September 2001.

VI

We may now, finally, return to the question with which we began, namely wherein lies the specificity of Bush Jr’s regime. It does not lie, in the first instance, in the invasion of either Afghanistan or Iraq. In the case of Afghanistan, the US has only come back to profit from the war it initiated in 1978, under Carter, against the then new and deeply secular regime of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), through their Islamicist proxies who called themselves ‘mujahideen’ (‘fighters of the faith’); Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Advisor, has written that he sponsored that war with the explicit objective of drawing in the Soviets – and the Soviets obliged by walking into the trap. Taliban (literally, ‘students’) arose from among the youngsters and children who grew up in the refugee camps that the war itself had produced; they were trained in seminaries established with the express purpose of producing more ‘fighters of the faith’ in American service; and the regime of their Islamicist faction was foisted upon that wretched and bleeding country by the Pakistani intelligence agencies upon US advice. The so-called ‘Arab Afghanis’, among whom Osama was a leader, were CIA agents recruited to fight the Soviets. When the Taliban refused to cooperate fully with the US in its designs on Central Asian oil, the US decided to invade. Niaz Naik, the dean of Pakistan’s diplomatic corps, said on the BBC that he had been told by the Americans during the summer of 2001 that invasion would begin in October. The events of 11th September came between the making of the design and its execution.

War against Iraq began not in 2003 but in the course of the so-called ‘Gulf War’, in 1991, which continued through sanctions and no-fly zones, for over a decade – longer than the combined duration of the First and Second World Wars – under three consecutive US Presidents, two Republicans (father and son) and

one Democrat (Clinton, the ‘New Democrat’ who inspired ‘New Labour’ across the Atlantic). It was during the Clinton Presidency that the US Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, in 1998. When the sanctions regime was estimated by some UN agencies to have killed half a million Iraqi children, and journalists asked Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright whether their death was worth the price of upholding the sanctions, she said ‘the price was worth it’. The so-called no-fly zones in northern and eastern Iraq were declared by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the UN Secretary-General, to be illegal, and yet under that scheme the Anglo-American bombardment of Iraq became the longest aerial campaign since the Second World War; in 1999 alone 1800 bombs were dropped and 450 targets hit. Cumulatively, over some twelve years, the tonnage dropped on Iraq came to equal seven Hiroshimas.

‘Regime change’ is a catchy phrase, and the Bush Administration has undoubtedly raised it to the status of a legitimate right of imperial sovereignty. However, the US has been doing it for decades. It did so in Iraq itself when the CIA helped overthrow the progressive regime of Abd al-Karim Kassem in 1964 and brought in the Ba’ath party regime (‘We came to power on a CIA train’, exulted the General-Secretary of Saddam’s parent party), paving the way for the eventual personal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein who remained a close US ally throughout the 1980s when he fought a US-assisted war against Iran. ‘Regime change’ is what the CIA brought to Iran in 1953 and the US military to Grenada and Panama more recently. And the history of the US coming as ‘liberators’ and staying as occupiers goes back to the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century.

What is specific to the Bush regime is the combination of an intensification of such long-standing trends as well as a cluster of novelties which, taken together, amount to something of a historic break. Intensification of trends is obvious enough. What are the novelties internal to Bush Jr’s Presidency? First, the manner of his election: he was elevated to the Presidency by a judicial decision of dubious merit, combined with widely suspected disenfranchisement of a considerable section of the black electorate in the state of Florida which *happened* to be run by his brother, Jeb. Jeb Bush’s other major contribution to Bush Jr’s campaign was that he was the one who assembled that cabal of the neo-conservatives, drawn from the think-tanks of the far right and supervised by Dick Cheney, who came to define the domestic as well as foreign policies, the civilian as well as military structures, of the United States after the elections: they captured the Pentagon, hence the US military machine, just as the Bush brothers captured the White House.

The second novelty of this Presidency, which distinguishes it from the preceding ones, is the will to radically re-make the United States itself as it sets out to re-map the globe. Dick Cheney’s bland prediction that the war against terrorism may last for fifty years or more, and General Tommy Frank’s prediction even before the invasion of Iraq that US troops may have to be stationed there fairly indefinitely, on the model of Korea, is matched by a politics of

permanent hysteria at home, invoking a mixture of extreme insecurity and atavistic patriotism. The general populace is being persuaded to surrender many of its own fundamental rights, and to endorse distinctions between those born on US soil and the naturalized citizens, between immigrants from one part of the world and another, between 'good' and 'bad' members of one faith, Islam – all this buttressed by a historically new and now very extensive alliance between extreme zionism and Christian fundamentalism. The assault on American liberties is itself being coded as Patriot Act I & II. This tie between hysterical patriotism and a docile populace whose own rights are being abridged is itself something of a quasi-fascist move. Meanwhile, the already existing policies of shifting incomes upward and offering tax bonanzas to corporations and the rich while bankrupting the social state have been accelerated to a degree that a successor government may not even have the resources to save such things as Social Security in its present form even if it had the desire to do so.

What is being reversed, thus, is not only the so-called 'Vietnam syndrome' but even aspects of American social life dating back to the New Deal. In 'Re-Building America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources For a New Century', a report prepared by an impressive cross-section of the neo-conservative elite including Paul Wolfowitz, and issued by The Project for a New American Century in September 2000, the authors remarked that the kind of sweeping changes they are proposing may take some time unless some catastrophic and catalyzing event, like a new Pearl Harbour, were to occur. 11th September 2001 was the event they were waiting for. Condoleeza Rice urged her colleagues the next morning that ways be found to 'capitalize on these opportunities', while Donald Rumsfeld urged immediate invasion of Iraq.

How does one comprehend this peculiar mix of continuities and discontinuities as a whole? One way of putting it is that the rightwing backlash which began in the United States in the late 1960s (in response to the military defeats it was facing in Indochina, on the one hand, and, on the other, the immense successes at home of the Anti-Vietnam War movement, the radicalization of Afro-American politics, and the rise of the women's movement) has finally grown and matured to the point where it has actually captured state power. This offensive was prepared over a quarter century or more and Bush Jr's Presidency represents something of a historic break in the sense that these trends had remained scattered and subordinated to other exigencies of power, and its representatives, even as they began occupying positions in the Reagan and Bush Sr.'s administrations, were not in charge of all the key institutions of state, as they now are. One notable feature of this counteroffensive has been the role that think tanks and foundations of the far right have played in funding, training and delivering the requisite personnel transforming the intellectual climate in the US, and now the state apparatus. Another notable feature is the role quasi-messianic evangelical Christianity has played in preparing popular sensibilities receptive to all these changes.

A group of New York intellectuals had begun arguing as far back as the Nixon Presidency that the New Left, the anti-war movement, black nationalism,

women's liberation movements *et al* collectively comprised a disruptive but highly vocal minority and the real task was to organize and mobilize the 'Silent Majority' which was opposed to all that. Milton Friedman at Chicago University formulated an assault on the social state and advanced the ideology of the market as the final arbiter of the social good. His colleague Alan Bloom wrote best-selling books on 'the destruction of the American Mind' by the reforms that leftwing/black/feminist pressures had forced upon the educational system, including the formidable elite universities. Bloom's teacher, Leo Straus, himself trained some of those who were to emerge within the last decade as members of the neo-conservative intellectual elite. Hundreds of large and small, interlocking, neoliberal organizations now dotted the American landscape, and a rash of not very widely known rightwing foundations started appearing – the Carthage Foundation, the Henry M. Olin Foundation, the Phillip M. McKenna Foundation, the Henry Salvatori Foundation etc, etc. – which then helped to fund the more prestigious and influential ones: the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the elite of all neo-conservative think-tanks, The Project for the New American Century, whose founders include the core of the Bush Administration: Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Cheney's Chief Staff Lewis I. Libby, Reagan's Education Secretary William Bennet, and Zalmay Khalilzad, Bush's shadowy representative first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

A word about evangelical Christianity. When Reagan was re-elected with the largest electoral sweep in history, losing only one state, it was revealed that only 27 per cent of the potential voters had actually voted in his favour; the majority had stayed home. At the same time, a Gallup poll showed that 27 per cent of Americans subscribes to some variety of evangelical Christianity, and commentators noted that if all of them were to be mobilized as a voting bloc the US could have a permanent government of the far right. Not *all* of them have been mobilized yet – but that kind of government has now arrived. While Reagan gifted us supply-side economics and Star Wars, and the Left thought that he was as bad it could get, the rightwing of the Republican party thought of him as a Roosevelt democrat. That rightwing is now in power.

We may be witnessing an imperial overreach. Overdetermined by their own ideological delusions, Bush's neocons may be pursuing policies that far exceed the logic of global capitalism or the requirements of the imperial US state; even George Soros seems to think so. Two former Presidents, including the current President's father, opposed the invasion of Iraq before it happened. Ever the mildly Presbyterian Trilateralist, Bush Sr. emphasized that the US needed alliance with Europe and the war on Iraq would undermine it. As we have seen, the Franco-German alliance has accepted the consequences, however resentfully. But Iraq may yet prove to be a quagmire that cures the US populace of any appetite for the real wars that are fought on the other side of their TV screens. They may yet come to comprehend what a menace this Administration is for their own

security, especially as old age sets in, and to the security of their children. At the same time, the global revolt against imperial America that we witnessed on the eve of the Iraq invasion may regain momentum. This moment of neo-conservative extremity may yet pass as one of many murderous episodes in imperial history.