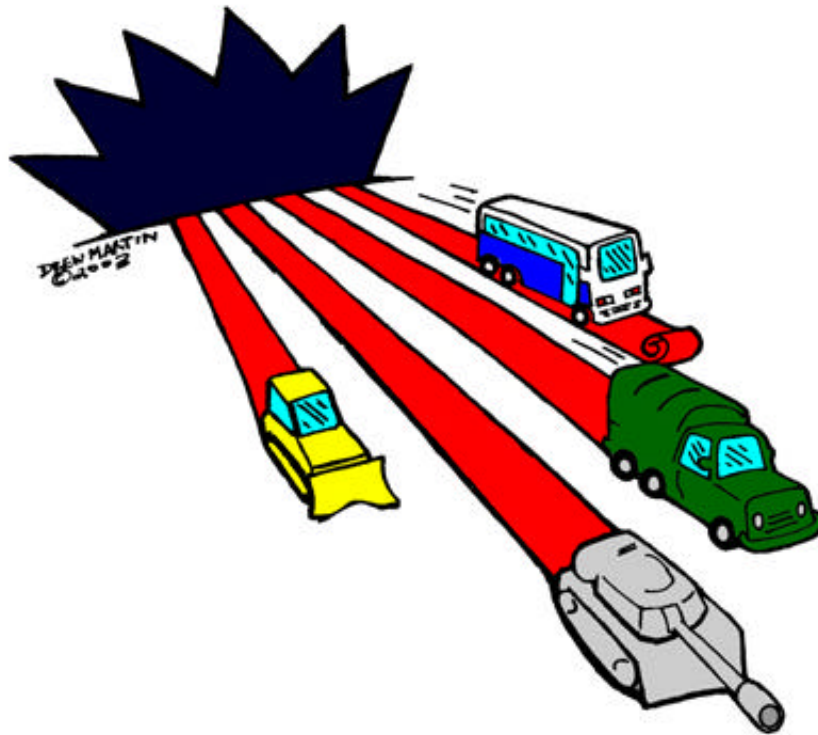


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Iraq, Hegemony and the Question of American Empire

by
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It is rare that political debates typically confined to the left will burst into the mainstream with any degree of interest, let alone profundity. But this has not been the case with the question of American empire and the recent military campaigns in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. For many on the left, this was a political question with a cut and dried answer: the American-led military campaign was a clear expression of its imperial policies and motives, the object of which is economic global dominance. But in some ways, such assumptions voiced by much of the American and European left—specifically among its more dogmatic and sectarian strains—mischaracterize and even misunderstand the reality of American global power and the possible contributions of the western political tradition more broadly.



With each passing day the events in Iraq deliberately evoke the question of American empire, and not without good reason. The neoconservative position on this has been to see American policies and its position in the world as that of a hegemon: a nation which seeks to lead the constellation of world nations into the end of history itself where the fusion of “free” markets and liberal democracy is seen to be the institutional panacea for the world’s ills and with this the enlargement of capital’s dominion. But the deepening morass of the occupation of Iraq belies such intentions. Paul Bremer’s statement that “we dominate the scene [in Iraq] and we will continue to impose our will on this country,” is a concise statement betraying not America’s imperial motives, but, rather, the way that its hegemonic motives have ineluctably been pushed into a logic of imperial control. America has, in other words, become an empire by default, not by intention, and the crucial question now is: how are we to respond?

But the charge of America-as-empire is not as obvious as many have assumed even though many superficial elements of its history point to that conclusion. Students of American political history know of the dual policies of American empire from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Gunboat Diplomacy” was the imperial policy of backing up all foreign territorial policies with direct military force. From the Philippines to Cuba, Grenada and Haiti, this was an effective policy—copied from the British and their acts in the Opium War—which allowed the United States to extend itself as a colonial power.

“Dollar Diplomacy” was America’s effort—particularly under President William Howard Taft—to further its foreign policy aims in Latin America and the Far East through the use of economic power. Theodore Roosevelt laid the groundwork for this approach in 1905 with his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, maintaining that if any nation in the Western Hemisphere appeared politically or fiscally so unstable as to be vulnerable to European control, the United States had the right and obligation to intervene. Taft continued and expanded this policy, starting in Central America, where he justified it as a means of protecting the Panama Canal. In 1909 he attempted unsuccessfully to establish control over Honduras by buying up its debt to British bankers. In Nicaragua, American intervention included funding the country’s debts to European bankers. In addition, the State Department persuaded four American banks to refinance Haiti’s national debt, setting the stage for further intervention in the future.

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Both policies were imperial to the extent that they wanted to manipulate and use other countries as geographical means for domestic economic and political ends. To expand markets were meant, during the late 19th century and early 20th, as a means for displacing excess domestic industrial productivity—the cause of most cyclical recessions during that period. Goods produced in excess could be unloaded in more local foreign markets and there was also the return of agricultural goods and natural resources, too.

We could probably say that America is once again becoming an empire of sorts, but this is something that is more recent than some may in fact think. The Cold War was a battle of hegemony—between the U.S. and the Soviets—and this has, since the latter's collapse and the ascendancy of neoconservatives to positions of influence and power in Washington, turned into a political situation where American interests are pursued unilaterally without the intervening countervailing tendencies of international institutions such as the UN. And it is here that the moment of empire begins to eclipse that of hegemony: when a single nation begins to hold direct control over foreign territory for its own interests. The Iraqi oil fields were up and running not long after the fall of Baghdad where, even now, electricity and clean water are in short supply if even existent. (An Iraqi friend in Baghdad tells me that they have power for about one hour a day.)

When I visited Baghdad in January of 2003, several of my colleagues and I were fortunate enough to be able to have a private conversation with several members of the faculty from the College of Political Science at Baghdad University. For them, the consensus for political change in Iraq was clear: the ousting of Saddam Hussein was necessary for the Iraqi people and any semblance of political freedom, but it was his *regime* that was the problem and it was the regime, they felt, that should be the focus of UN sanctions and pressure, not the total annihilation of state institutions that the Ba'athists had inhabited and, in part, created. (See the interview in *Logos*, Winter 2003: 2.1 at www.logosjournal.com/issue_2.1.pdf.)

Hegemony in international terms without some kind of competing force—such as the Soviets—can clearly lead to the abuse of power and a unilateralist flaunting of international institutions that do not serve at the imperium's whim. But this should not mean that hegemony itself is a negative concept. Although empire is something rightfully reviled, hegemony may not be as bad as everyone thinks. We need to consider what is progressive and transformative in the ideas and values of the western republican and liberal traditions. We need to advocate not an anti-hegemonic stance in *form*, but an

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anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist stance in *content*, one that advocates the particular interests of capital of the market in more broad terms rather than the universal political interests of others. Rather than choose between western hegemony on the one hand and political and cultural relativism on the other, we need to approach this problem with an eye toward *cosmopolitanism* and what the political theorist Stephen Eric Bronner has called “planetary life.”

Simple resistance to American “imperial” tendencies is no longer enough for a responsible, critical and rational left. Not only does it smack of *tiers-mondisme* but at the same time it rejects the realities of globalization which are inexorable and require a more sophisticated political response. The real question I am putting forth is simply this: is it the case that hegemony is in itself inherently bad? Or, is it possible to consider that—because it can, at least in theory, consist of the diffusion of western political ideas, values and institutions—it could be used as a *progressive* force in transforming those nations and regions that have been unable to deal politically with the problems of economic development, political disintegration and ethnic strife?

It is time that we begin to consider the reality that western political thought provides us with unique answers to the political, economic and social problems of the world and this includes reversing the perverse legacies of western imperialism itself. And it is time that the left begins to embrace the ideas of the Enlightenment and its ethical impulse for freedom, democracy, social progress and human dignity on an international scale. This is rhetorically embraced by neoconservatives, but it turns out to be more of a mask for narrower economic motives and international *realpolitik*, and hence their policies and values run counter to the radical impulses of Enlightenment thought. Western ideas and institutions can find affinities in the rational strains of thought in almost every culture in the world, from 12th century rationalist Islamic philosophers like Alfarabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sinna) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) to India’s King Akbar and China’s Mencius. The key is to find these intellectual affinities and push them to their concrete, political conclusions.

Clearly, the left’s problem with the idea of the spread of western political ideas and institutions is not entirely wrong. There was a racist and violent precedent set by the French and English imperial projects lasting well into the 20th century. The problem is in separating the *form* from the *content* of western hegemonic motives and intentions. And it is even more incorrect to see the occupation of Iraq as a symptom of western ideas and Enlightenment

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rationalism. Nothing could be further from the case and the sooner this is realized, the more the left will be able to carve out new paths of critique and resistance to a hegemony that is turning into empire.

AND IT IS PRECISELY FOR THIS REASON WHY, in institutional terms, the UN needs to be brought back in. Although there are clearly larger political and symbolic reasons for this—such as the erosion of a unilateralist framework for the transition from Hussein’s regime—there is also the so-called “effect of empire” where Iraq is being transformed into an instrument of ideological economics. The current U.S. plan for Iraq—one strongly supported by Bremer as well as the Bush administration—will remake its economy into one of the most open to trade, capital flows and foreign investment in the world as well as being the lowest taxed. Iraq is being transformed into an neo-liberal utopia where American industries hooked up to the infamous “military-industrial complex” will be able to gorge themselves on contracts for the development of everything from infrastructure to urban police forces.

As time moves on, we are seeing that Iraq provides us with a stunning example of how hegemony becomes empire. It is an example of how the naïve intention of “nation building” is unmasked and laid bare, seen for what it truly is: the forceful transformation of a sovereign state into a new form suited to narrow western (specifically American) interests. Attempts to build a constitution have failed not from the lack of will, but from the lack of any political discourse about what form the state should take and about what values should be enshrined in law. Ruling bodies have become illegitimate almost immediately upon their appointment because there exists almost complete social fragmentation, and the costs of knitting it together are too great for America to assume.

In the end, America has become, with its occupation of Iraq and its unilateralist and militaristic posture, an empire in the most modern sense of the term. But we should be careful about distinguishing empire from a hegemon and the implications of each. And since, as Hegel put it, we are defined by what we oppose, the knee-jerk and ineffectual response from the modern left has been to produce almost no alternative at all to the imperatives that drive American empire as seen in places such as Iraq. To neglect the military, economic and cultural aspects of American power is to ignore the extent to which it provokes violent reaction and counter-reaction. But at the same time, to ignore the important contributions of western political ideas and institutions and their power and efficacy in achieving peace

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and mutual cooperation—whether it be between ethnic communities or whole nations themselves—is to ignore the very source of political solutions for places where poverty, oppression and dictatorships are the norm and remain stubbornly intact.

Western hegemony will not be seen as problematic once the values of the western political tradition and specifically those of the Enlightenment—from the liberal rule of law, the elimination of the arbitrary exercise of power and the value of political and social equality—are set in a cosmopolitan global framework. Only then will the words of Immanuel Kant take on any kind of concrete meaning for people the world over. “To think of oneself as a member of a cosmopolitan society in compliance with state laws is the most sublime idea that man can have about his predicament and which cannot be thought of without enthusiasm.”

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