

Introduction

‘American imperialism... has been made plausible and attractive in part by the insistence that it is not imperialistic.’

Harold Innis, 1948¹

The American empire is no longer concealed. In March 1999, the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* displayed a giant clenched fist painted in the stars and stripes of the US flag above the words: ‘What The World Needs Now: For globalization to work, America can’t be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is’. Thus was featured Thomas Friedman’s ‘Manifesto for a Fast World’, which urged the United States to embrace its role as enforcer of the capitalist global order: ‘...the hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist.... The hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.’ Four years later, in January 2003, when there was no longer any point in pretending the fist was hidden, the *Magazine* featured an essay by Michael Ignatieff

entitled 'The Burden': '...[W]hat word but "empire" describes the awesome thing that America is becoming? ...Being an imperial power... means enforcing such order as there is in the world and doing so in the American interest.'² The words, 'The American Empire (Get Used To It)', took up the whole cover of the *Magazine*.

Of course, the American state's geopolitical strategists had already taken this tack. Among those closest to the Democratic Party wing of the state, Zbigniew Brzezinski did not mince words in his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, asserting that 'the three great imperatives of geo-political strategy are to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence amongst the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.'³ In the same year the Republican intellectuals who eventually would write the Bush White House's National Security Strategy founded the Project for a New American Century, with the goal of making imperial statecraft the explicit guiding principle of American policy.⁴

Most of what passes more generally for serious analysis in justifying the use of the term 'empire' in relation to the US today is really just an analogy, implicit or explicit, with imperial Rome. On the face of it, this is by no means absurd since, as an excellent recent book on the Roman Empire says, 'Romanization' could indeed be

understood as the assimilation of the conquered nations to Roman culture and political worldview. The conquered became partners in running the

empire. It was a selective process that applied directly only to the upper level of subject societies but it trickled down to all classes with benefits for some, negative consequences for others.... Roman supremacy was based on a masterful combination of violence and psychological persuasion – the harshest punishment for those who challenged it, the perception that their power knew no limits and that rewards were given to those who conformed.⁵

But an analogy is not a theory. The neglect 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, is striking. It serves as a poignant reminder of why it was Marxism that made the running in theorizing imperialism for most of the twentieth century. But as a leading Indian Marxist, Prabhat Patnaik, noted in his essay 'Whatever Happened to Imperialism?', by 1990 the topic had also 'virtually disappeared from the pages of Marxist journals' and even Marxists looked 'bemused' when the term was mentioned. The costs of this for the left were severe. The concept of imperialism has always been especially important as much for its emotive and mobilizing qualities as for its analytic ones. Indeed, in Patnaik's view, rather than 'a theoretically self-conscious silence', the 'very fact that imperialism has become so adept at "managing" potential challenges to its hegemony made us indifferent to its ubiquitous presence.'⁶

Yet the left's silence on imperialism also reflected severe analytic problems in the Marxist theory of imperialism. Indeed, this was obvious by the beginning of the 1970s – the last time the concept of imperialism had much currency – amidst complaints that the Marxist treatment of imperialism 'as an undifferentiated global product of a certain stage of capitalism' reflected its lack of 'any serious historical or sociological dimensions'.⁷ As Giovanni Arrighi noted in 1978, 'by the end of the 60s, what had once been the *pride* of Marxism – the theory of imperialism – had become a tower of Babel, in which not even Marxists knew any longer how to find their way.'⁸

The confusion was apparent in debates in the early 1970s over the location of contemporary capitalism's contradictions. There were those who focused almost exclusively on the 'third world', and saw its resistance to imperialism as the sole source of transformation.⁹ Others emphasized increasing contradictions within the developed capitalist world, fostering the impression that American 'hegemony' was in decline. This became the prevalent view, and by the mid-1980s the notion that 'the erosion of American economic, political, and military power is unmistakable' grew into a commonplace.¹⁰ Although very few went back to that aspect of the Marxist theory of inter-imperial rivalry that suggested a military trial of strength, an era of intense regional economic rivalry was expected. As Glyn and Sutcliffe put it, all it was safe to predict was that without a hegemonic power 'the world economy will continue without a clear leader...'¹¹

There was indeed no little irony in the fact that so many

continued to turn away from what they thought was the old-fashioned notion of imperialism, just when the ground was being laid for its renewed fashionability in the *New York Times*. Even after the 1990-91 Gulf War which, as Bruce Cumings pointed out, 'had the important goal of assuring American control of... Middle Eastern oil', you still needed 'an electron microscope to find "imperialism" used to describe the U.S. role in the world.' The Gulf War, he noted, 'went forward under a virtual obliteration of critical discourse egged on by a complacent media in what can only be called an atmosphere of liberal totalitarianism.'¹²

This continued through the 1990s, even while, as the recent book by the conservative Andrew Bacevich has amply documented, the Clinton Administration often outdid its Republican predecessors in unleashing military power to quell resistance to the continuing aggressive American pursuit of 'an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism.' Quoting Madeleine Albright, Clinton's Secretary of State, in 1998 ('If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation,') and, in 2000, Richard Haas, the State Department's Director of Policy Planning in the incoming Bush Administration, (calling on Americans finally to reconceive their state's 'global role from one of a traditional nation state to an imperial power'), Bacevich argues that the continuing avoidance of the term imperialism could not last. It was at best an 'astigmatism', and at worst 'an abiding preference for averting our eyes from the unflagging self-interest and large ambitions underlying all U.S. policy'.¹³

By the turn of the century, and most obviously once the authors of the Project for a New American Century were invested with power in Washington D.C., the term imperialism was finally back on even a good many liberals' lips. The popularity of Hardt and Negri's tome, *Empire*, had caught the new conjuncture even before the second war on Iraq. But their insistence (reflecting the widespread notion that the power of all nation states had withered in the era of globalization) that '*the United States does not, and indeed no nation state can today, form the center of an imperialist project*' was itself bizarrely out of sync with the times.¹⁴

The left needs a new theorization of imperialism, one that will transcend the limitations of the old Marxist 'stagist' theory of inter-imperial rivalry, and allow for a full appreciation of the historical factors that have led to the formation of a unique American informal empire. This will involve understanding how the American state developed the capacity to eventually incorporate its capitalist rivals, and oversee and police 'globalization' – i.e. the spread of capitalist social relations to every corner of the world. The theory must be able to answer the question of what made plausible the American state's insistence that it was not imperialistic, and how this was put into practice and institutionalized; and, conversely, what today makes implausible the American state's insistence that it is not imperialistic, and what effects its lack of concealment might have in terms of its attractiveness and its capacity to manage global capitalism and sustain its global empire.