Empire?
Some Thoughts on Colonialism, Culture and Class in the
Making of Global Crisis and War in Perpetuity

I take up below the issue of imperialism presented by Empire, authored by Michael Hardt and
Antonio Negri, in conjunction with developments in world politics since September 11, 2001.1 I am not
sure whether what I have to say below is a commentary on that book in light of events over the past
year, or a discussion of those events from the perspective that Hardt and Negri provide. What needs to
be underlined is that too much attention to September 11 as a new point of departure in world politics
conceals the fact that September 11 has a history that goes back to the depths of EuroAmerican
colonialism or neo-colonialism; which warmongers in Washington, DC, and London have sought to
erase, and leftist critics to foreground. On the other hand, preoccupation with colonial history may be
equally misleading in ignoring what may be new about September 11, and fundamental transformations
in world politics that were dramatized by the events surrounding that date, which are exploited and
distorted in right-wing arguments for war in perpetuity, while they are mostly ignored in left critiques.
This, I think, is an important reason for conjoining the discussion of Empire with a discussion of those
events.

It may seem ludicrous, if not bizarre, at this particular historical juncture to suggest, as Hardt
and Negri do, that imperialism is a thing of the past, having been replaced by “Empire,” an abstraction
without an identifiable location or center. Hardt and Negri are not the only ones to have raised this

question, however, even though they have done so more boldly and with greater eloquence and sophistication than others. I would like to reflect here on the appearance of this question from the 1980s in conjunction with the discourse on globalization, and briefly discuss two issues that Hardt and Negro raise that I take to be central to the argument offered in *Empire*, as well as to the search for an alternative to a politics, on the rise globally, of class interest and cultural obscurantism.

The suggestion that colonialism and imperialism as we have known them for over a century are things of the past goes against the legacy of a century of left-thinking, and a more recent preoccupation with colonialism (in contrast to capitalism in general) in postcolonial discourses. It also goes, at least seemingly, against a common sense reading of the evidence of the world, especially at the present juncture. The United States government is bent on starting a war in Southwestern Asia. Right wing ideologues in the government speak openly of redrawning the map of the region to align it with American interests. The map may be redrawn, indeed, but more by default than by plan, as the ragtag politicians with whom the United States hopes to replace Saddam Hussein are unlikely to achieve more politically than legitimize a United States/Britain oil grab from France, Russia and the People’s Republic of China. It may be reductionist to attribute the crisis in Southwestern Asia to the greed of United States oil corporations or the United States government’s single-minded pursuit of the control of oil (two sides of the same coin), but neither is it possible to ignore evidence to that effect which is surfacing despite efforts to conceal it behind talk of weapons of mass destruction. The smell of oil, wherever it may be, seems to excite the oilmen currently in charge of the government in Washington, DC, into frenzies of colonial longing. Iraq is in many ways the last domino in the nearly complete encirclement of oil and gas
fields around the Caspian Sea. And, in light of the news from North Korea that has surfaced since mid-October, one wonders what part oil may play in United States government thinking that the issue of weapons of mass destruction may be resolved through diplomatic means in East Asia but not in Southwest Asia (aside from a probable reluctance, also, of going to war once again on the Chinese border, which is consistent with the bullyism that has become a feature of United States foreign policy).

But interest is not everything. There is the matter of resentment of an unfinished job, and revenge for Hussein’s cockiness. There is the hostility to Islam, and the Arab world, that refuses to go away in spite of all the talk about good Islam/bad Islam. There is even talk of invading the region to reform Islam. Outrageousness aside (except to the more backward of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson followers), it is not quite clear what that has to do with the secularist Iraqi regime which, whatever its criminal record otherwise, is innocent by ideology of aspirations to theocracy; some of Hussein’s planned successors, however, may well have such aspirations. Planning war against Arabs and Islam are right-wingers aligned with, and taking instruction from, Israeli extremists engaged in colonial terrorism against Palestinians. And straining at the leash is the prime minister of Great Britain, hopeful to share with the master the spoils of war, presumably as partial compensation for the empire that once

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2 Dan Morgan and David Ottaway, “Future of Iraq’s Oil already creating buzz,” The Register-Guard, Monday, 16 September 2002, 1A/7A (from The Washington-Post). For an extensive argument that oil has been the motivating factor all along, see, Rahul Mahajan, The New Crusade: America’s War on Terrorism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002). Mahajan’s book went to press before the Iraq issue heated up, and, at least to this author, seem more persuasive today than it did earlier in the year. Ahmed Rashid, a foremost commentator on Central Asia, also notes the importance of oil in the “new great game,” although somewhat less insistently. See, Rashid, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), especially part III.
was. Bullying sovereign states, replacing their leaders with ones closer to United States tastes and interests, and the politics of oil are all legacies of imperialism that are still very much alive, practiced presently more shamelessly than ever before, without the pretense to concealment of earlier, colonial, days, when the presence of a socialist alternative made at least for some caution in imperialist policies.

How much evidence do we need of the persistence of imperialism, not merely as an abstraction of capital, but in its most vulgar sense of the naked use of power in the cause of economic interest, political coercion and cultural prejudice, all wrapped up in bundled paranoid anxiety about world domination in perpetuity? Not much, we might suggest, but still wonder about the utility of imperialism as a concept in grasping the structuring of the contemporary world or, at the least, whether or not it is as useful a way to comprehend the world presently as it was in an earlier day, say in the immediate decades after World War II?

The evidence of the persistence of imperialism needs to be placed in the contexts of both United States politics, and the broader structural context of Global Capitalism. There is little need to belabor here the special situation in the United States created by the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001, and the ways in which those events have played into the hands of a particularly reactionary administration. I use the word “reactionary” advisedly here. It is arguable that the last two decades of the twentieth century will appear in historical hindsight as a period of transition marked by the decline and fall of socialism, which was also to raise fundamental questions about two centuries of revolution and modernity, as well as the globalization of capital made possible by the end of colonialism after World War II, and the subsequent fall of socialism, which rendered an earlier “three” worlds into a
single world of global modernity, in the process universalizing the contradictions of capitalist modernity. The United States has been the major beneficiary of these changes which have left it as the sole superpower militarily. But the world of global modernity is also a world which presents challenges to the Eurocentrically conceived modernity of an earlier day (in both its socialist and capitalist versions). Whatever one may think of the political implications and cultural assumptions of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” idea, he nevertheless pointed to a fundamental question of the times. One aspect of his argument, restated in Gramscian terms, may be immediately pertinent here: if Huntington is right, and there is good geopolitical evidence to support his thesis, the remaining superpower may achieve its ends only by negotiation or outright coercion, because, whatever may be the appeals of McDonald’s and Coca-cola, it is no longer the hegemonic power in the sense of providing leadership globally, or an example for emulation. This gap, or contradiction, between the power to coerce and the failure to offer a social and ethical model for emulation against other claims (stated in a postsocialist world in the language of culture rather than society) is a feature of the transition that we are in, and obviously a source of immense anxiety. There is more than one way to deal with this anxiety. For right-wingers in United States politics, who feel that they are on the verge of consolidating their hold on power, the anxiety seems to find expression in attacks on internal and external antagonists in an effort to turn back the clock against three decades of efforts to understand critically the United States role in the world, and the constitution of the United States itself. Culture wars are both internal and external—and so are the enemies. From Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell to Lynn Cheney and George Will, recent months

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have witnessed an intensification of two decades of attacks on intellectuals for their so-called “cultural relativism.” To cite from the relatively intelligent side of the spectrum, George Will gloats that everything has been more or less the same since September 11 except one thing, the welcome silencing of intellectuals:

It is axiomatic that everything changes except the avant-garde,

which in America is frozen in an adversarial pose toward the nation beyond campus gates. But who cares? It has been 40 years since the Kennedy administration was stocked with academics chattering about a confluence of the Charles and Potomac rivers.

Sept. 11 sealed the self-marginalization of the adversarial academy.4

The same George Will commemorated the first anniversary of September 11, by condemning “the cultural relativism that gives rise to the fetish of multiculturalism,” regardless of whether or not it is internal or external, which he did not specify, and calling for war to overcome it: “Sometimes gunpowder does smell good because civilization-especially the highest, ours, is not inevitable. So we fight.”5

There is in many of these writings a nostalgia for times gone by, before the sixties, before

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4 George Will, “Welcome Changes Followed Sept.11,” The Register-Guard, Tuesday, 12 March 2002, p.11A

5 George Will, “War helps us to remember who we are, why we fight,” The Register-Guard, Wednesday, 11 September 2002, p.11A
Vietnam and the Kennedy’s, when America was America and Americans were Americans.\(^6\) When such nostalgia becomes the basis for public policy, in denial of history as nostalgia usually is, it is a dangerous thing. And we no doubt live in a time of danger. But the imperialism it generates needs to be viewed critically, in its differences from the past. It is a product of an anxiety that the past is not there to be recaptured. The anxiety may issue in a dangerous recklessness, but it is also a sign of imperialism uncertain about itself, without the confidence of any kind of mission, except the assertion of power for its own sake. Referring to the recent acts of the executive branch, and the way Congress has rolled over to legitimize the most egregious distortions of history and contemporary evidence, the columnist William Pfaff writes that “this is not the conduct of a serious government or a serious nation. War is a grave matter even for a country that fancies itself invincible. One does not attack another society, inflict destruction upon it, kill its soldiers and people, and send one’s own soldiers to death on the basis of speculation, hypothesis and partisan theories about the future.”\(^7\) It may be deadly in its consequences, but it is not serious imperialism either; not, at any rate, in any systematic understanding of that term.

The other context for the current situation is globalization, which also bears directly on the question of an imperial “center.” The questioning of imperialism as a way to understand the structuring of the contemporary world is largely coincident(at least in left-thinking) with the emergence of the

\(^6\) For similar observations, by an author far better informed than I with the dramatis personae, see Anatol Lieven, “The Push for War,” London Review of Books, 24.19(3 October 2002):8-10. Lieven’s concluding lines are worth quoting for their poignancy: “What we see now is the tragedy of a great country, with noble impulses, successful institutions, magnificent historical achievements and immense energies, which has become a menace to itself and to mankind.”(p.10)

\(^7\) William Pfaff, “U.S. plans for Iraq full of fantasies, errors,” The Register-Guard, Thursday, 17 October 2002, p.11A
discourse of globalization in the 1980s. There are many problems associated with this discourse; the one that is pertinent here is whether or not globalization is just another term for imperialism, in particular United States imperialism. Arguments against the equation of globalization with imperialism include the decentering of capitalism, especially in the emergence of East Asian competitors to the United States and Europe, themselves in uneasy competition; the decline in the power of the nation-state in its invasion by global institutions and ideologies, which raises questions about the meaning of imperialism, as imperialism and colonialism in their modern senses have been entangled with nations and nationalism; and, finally, the emergence with globalization of a “transnational capitalist class,” in Leslie Sklar’s terminology which, for all its conflicts, has a common interest through the agency of transnational corporations and other transnational organizations in sustaining Global Capitalism. These various moments in the structuring of power in the contemporary world inevitably raise questions about the meaning of imperialism, as well as its center.

On the other hand, however transnational the new capitalism may be, the distribution of economic power, itself hardly distinguishable from political and cultural power, is highly uneven, dominated as it is by United States corporations, international institutions in which the United States plays a key role, and most visibly the cultural practices and products of United States capitalism that have taken the world by storm, creating fears about cultural homogenization. Looming above it all is awesome military power, and an apparent readiness to strike out in defense of United States interests, or in their expansion, as is the case with oil presently.

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The ambiguities created by this situation is apparent in the following defense of the imperialism thesis against globalization by two analysts of capitalism and imperialism who view globalization not as something novel but as “yet another phase in a long historical process of imperialist expansion.” The authors argue that globalization is “an ideological tool used for prescription rather than accurate description. In this context it can be counterposed with a term that has considerably greater descriptive value and explanatory power: *imperialism.*” They explain,

Using this concept, the network of institutions that define the structure of the new global economic system is viewed not in structural terms, but as intentional and contingent, subject to the control of individuals who represent and seek to advance the interests of a new international capitalist class. This class, it is argued, is formed on the basis of institutions that include a complex of some 37,000 transnational corporations (TNCs), the operating units of global capitalism, the bearers of capital and technology and the major agents of the new imperial order. These TNCs are not the only organizational bases of this order, which include the World Bank, the International Monetary fund...In addition, the New World Order is made up of a host of global strategic planning and policy forums....All of these institutions

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form an integral part of the new imperialism—the new system of

global governance.\footnote{Ibid., p.12}

While Petras and Veltmeyer, point to the dominance of the United States in this new imperialism, however, what makes the imperialism “new” as such is that it is no longer a national but a “class project.”\footnote{For US domination, see, Ibid., pp.61-67; for class project, p.12} And it is here that the ambiguities of globalization or global capitalism appear, marking its differences from earlier notions of imperialism. I would like to suggest here that too much preoccupation with terminology may lead critics astray over the question of the structuring of the contemporary world. There is no question, at least for this author, that globalization as concept is prescriptive and ideological, as Petras and Veltmeyer argue. On the other hand, the imperialism at hand is not the same old imperialism either, unless we are prepared to argue that imperialism has always been a class, not a national, project; or a project in which class interests have been divorced from, and taken priority over, national ones. What is new about the current class project is precisely the element of transnationality: while there is no doubt about the weight of the United States in the world economy or politics, ruling class interests in the United States may be realized best not in antagonism to but in cooperation with ruling class interests elsewhere, through transnational organizations, that now include representatives from all societies, with their different and conflicting but common claims on global modernity—with a globalized capital at its core. What is important in all this, it seems, is the “class” element. The term imperialism, burdened with the legacy of unequal and oppressive relations between nations, is itself problematic in disguising this commonality of transnational class interests, however
unevenly power may be divided within this class.

If it is plausible that a nostalgia for the past is an important element in driving the policies of the present administration in the United States, reasserting the power of fractions of the ruling class in the United States is also intended as a move to roll back the restructuring of power under Global Capitalism, which is in fact what has isolated the United States globally at the present juncture. That isolation, however, should also give us pause in jumping back upon the bandwagon of imperialism as an explanation, as that term itself has become quite ambiguous in its implications.

Adding further to the ambiguity are transformations in postcolonial regimes. The anti-imperialist national liberation regimes in search of alternatives to capitalist development have been replaced by and large (even in formerly socialist societies) by regimes anxious to be admitted into the sphere of global capitalism, who find in the revival of native “traditions” the only way to assert their difference against the homogenizing forces of capital. It is only fundamentalist religious regimes such as that of the Taliban, interestingly, that insist on repudiating in toto capitalist modernity, which may account for the hostility they provoke. In all these cases, however, qualifications of or oppositions to capital are legitimized by the reaffirmation of reactionary or retrograde traditions that resort to the most conservative essentializations of cultural traditions against globalization. These regimes are not throwbacks to the past, or reproductions of the nativist movements of an early phase of imperialism, but products of modernity, and of its contradictions; they are, if anything, third world Robertsons and Falwells in power. Rather than provide an alternative to a capitalist modernity, they partake in the operations of a global capitalist economy (even the Taliban was prepared to make oil deals with global corporations), while they stand firmly against forces of democracy and human rights. A global multiculturalism has for
the last decade equated “national” or “civilizational” cultures with their most conservative, essentialist, and homogenizing versions, overlooking that these societies are already modern, that they have all the divisions in society and culture brought by modernity, and that so-called cultural preservation or the privileging of claims to cultural difference plays into the hands of the most conservative elements in these societies. Any serious critique of a “new imperialism,” if it is to serve progressive purposes, must be conjoined with a critique of these regimes; for they are in the end partners in a global modernity.

There are two aspects of the argument offered by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* that, I think, are quite relevant to a situation such as this one. The first relates to their discussion of sovereignty in a United States dominated world, which they view as an extension globally of elements already present in the United States constitution, expressed in the metaphor of “network”:

This democratic expansive tendency implicit in the notion of network power must be distinguished from other, purely expansionist and imperialist forms of expansion. The fundamental difference is that the expansiveness of the immanent concept of sovereignty is inclusive, not exclusive. In other words, when it expands, this new sovereignty does not annex or destroy the other powers it faces but on the contrary opens itself to them, including them in the network. This, we may note, may describe just as well the “sovereignty” of a globalizing capital. The

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12 Hardt and Negri, p.166

13 The metaphor of “network” is crucial to one of the most satisfactory analyses of Global Capitalism in Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Vol. I of Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and*
United States under the regime of globalization arguably has behaved as if there were no limits to its sovereignty in dictating to others while claiming for itself a position above international laws—limited only by practical considerations (such as the costs of war). As with global capital, one important consequence of the expansion of this notion of sovereignty is the “disappearance of the outside,” which brings the whole world and its manifold contradictions into the interior of a United States with boundless sovereignty. What also disappears in the process is the possibility of transformative politics, especially of revolutionary politics, which now is illegal by definition, and can appear only as terror against a regime to which there can be no conceivable alternative.

What kind of politics is possible under such circumstances? How does one transform power that is at once centered and de-centered? If the “U.S. world police acts not in imperialist interest but in imperial interest,” as Hardt and Negri assert, how do we locate the “imperial interest,” which now resides not in any one particular address, but is globalized across a transnational elite and transnational interests?

There has been much criticism of Hardt and Negri for the abstractness of the analysis and solutions they offer. And indeed there is something unnerving from a received Marxist perspective about an argument that points to power that manifests itself at best as a de-centered totality and a structureless structure, that may be challenged only in shifting alliances of political groupings devoted to the defense of places, of everyday life, and of particular interests that may come together on some issues but not on others, whose politics are aimed not at systemic transformation (impossible by

\[\text{Culture (Boston, MA, and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p.180}\]
definition) but carving out spaces of democratic politics in a protracted struggle without visible end. The anarchistic guerilla overtones of such a political struggle that does not point to immediate systemic results are no doubt inconsistent with Leninist traditions of Marxist politics.

On the other hand, it is arguable that the flexibility of radical politics that is implicit in such an argument resonates with the circumstances of a present where not only capital but its political and military defense are premised on flexibility. The problems presented to radical politics by global transformations suggest that whatever its continuities with the past, global modernity also represents a reconfiguration of an earlier capitalist modernity centered around EuroAmerica; so that inherited assumptions about nations, revolutions and even capital, the dialectics of which were crucial to past radical strategies, need to be reconsidered—even if such reconsideration reveals their irrelevance to the present. Problems of the present may even help shed light on our understanding of problems of past radical movements and strategies. As Gareth Stedman Jones has written recently,

What has stultified the thinking of the left has been its
continued belief that capitalism is to be wholly accepted or rejected as a single system. It retains a lingering conviction that capitalism is all of one piece and can be rejected in the name of a non-existent communist system destined some time to form the basis of an alternative world order. But if there is no post-capitalist society in the name of which we can despise all attempts to reform the existing political and economic system, we should embrace the only alternative. That is the
progressive relationship between pressure from without and reforming activity from within the political system.\textsuperscript{15}

The transformations of capital in its globalization have complicated further its operations and manifestations, while different needs of societies in a global modernity have created even greater dissonance on the meaning and possibilities of radical politics.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, the proliferation of voices as different social constituencies around the world have acquired a hearing in politics rules out the possibility of any kind of “vanguard” politics-and any single “theory” to guide such politics. The idea of multitudes suggested by Hardt and Negri is an attempt to respond to such a situation. It may not be readily acceptable, but it is a good point of departure for rethinking the future of politics without precluding political action at the present.

If I may return to the present crisis by way of conclusion, it is urgent right now that “multitudes” around the world be mobilized to counteract the drive to war that is against the interests not only of populations around the world, but of important constituencies of global capital, as is demonstrated by the dissension in the ranks of the powerful. It is equally important, in doing so, to keep in mind that in the long-term, radical politics needs to account not only for easily identifiable manifestations of an old-fashioned imperialism, but forces favoring the surge of reactionary politics globally. On the constructive side, unlike an earlier radicalism preoccupied with centers of power as entries to rapid and systemic

\textsuperscript{15} Gareth Stedman Jones, “All that’s left is reformism,” The Guardian Unlimited, Monday, 12 August 2002. http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,772994,00.html

\textsuperscript{16} For recent discussions of the complications of globalization, see the essays in, Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington (ed), Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)
social transformation, such radical politics needs to focus on transformations from the bottom up, through the practices of everyday life, which of necessity differ from place to place.

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