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The Heart of Empire? Theorising US empire in an era of transnational capitalism

DOUG STOKES

ABSTRACT Contemporary critical theorising on US Empire tends to diverge in two ways. First, more traditional approaches tend to foreground the national basis of the USA's imperial project and the subsequent ongoing inter-imperial rivalry inherent between rival capitalist states and regions. A second 'global-capitalist' approach rejects the notion of US Empire and instead posits the transcendence of a nationally based imperialism in favour of an increasingly transnationally orientated state and global ruling class. I argue that both accounts fail in their singularity to capture the nature and role of the US state within a global political economy. Instead, I argue that the US state has long been both subject to and demonstrative of a dual national and transnational structural logic that seeks to enhance US national interests while reproducing a world order favourable for global capital as a whole. Crucially, the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks on 9/11 have exacerbated the tensions between these dual logics; these will potentially affect both the hegemony of American Empire and the future of international relations in profound ways.

After 9/11 it has become common to analyse the USA as an empire and US interests in the third world as essentially (neo)-imperialist. This 'new imperial' discourse is typically periodised in relation to either the post-9/11 era or the end of the Cold War. This article starts by outlining these new discourses and then critiquing them by arguing that the US state has long been imperial. I ground the contemporary trends in US foreign policy within the historical development of global capitalism. While historical materialism has long theorised on the relationship between capitalism and imperialism, Lenin's notion of inter-imperial rivalry between leading capitalist states is not sufficiently attentive to the transnationalisation of capitalism and the relatively benign and positive-sum nature of US Empire in relation to other core capitalist powers. Conversely, 'global-capitalist' theorists who posit the transcendence of the nation state and *American Empire* through the transnationalisation of capital and class fail to fully capture the continuity of a logic of 'national interest' inherent within US Empire. After outlining

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these competing theories of contemporary US Empire the article historicises the role of the US state within a global political economy and argues for a dual 'national' and 'transnational' logic inherent within contemporary US Empire that seeks to enhance US interests in the world *and* maintain a world order conducive to the generic reproduction of global capitalism. Crucially, the end of the Cold War and 9/11 have exacerbated the tensions between these dual logics, which will in turn radically affect the American Empire's relations with other leading capitalist powers and its future role in world order.

The new imperial discourses

One of the pre-eminent historians of American Empire, William Appleman Williams, famously stated that one of the central 'themes of American historiography is that there is no American Empire'.¹ With the events of 9/11, however, the analysis of America as a global empire has moved from the margins of International Relations (IR) scholarship and gained increasing usage among hitherto mainstream analysts of US foreign policy and world order.² This trend has undoubtedly been spurred on by the USA's increasingly unilateral policy orientation, which has sought overtly to bypass global institutions of multilateral governance, combined with its new doctrine of pre-emptive war against a number of third world states that comprise a so-called 'axis of evil' as part of a global 'war on terror'.³ As Michael Cox pointedly argues, after 9/11 a number of analysts are now arguing that 'we should start calling things by their right name, drop the pretence that America is not an Empire, and accept that if the world was going to be a stable place, the US had to act in much the same imperial fashion as the British and Romans had done several centuries before'.⁴ Cox's point underscores the importance of 9/11 to the emergence of this supposedly new imperialism. Thomas Friedman, for example, compares the events of 9/11 with the Second World War and the end of the Cold War in terms of its significance for international order and US foreign policy. He uses the events of 9/11 to call for a more imperial US policy in relation to the so-called third world 'failed states':

World War I gave birth to the League of Nations and an attempt to re-create a balance of power in Europe, which proved unstable. World War II gave birth to the United Nations, NATO, the IMF and the bipolar US–Soviet power structure, which proved to be quite stable until the end of the Cold War. Now, Sept 11 has set off World War III, and it, too, is defining a new international order.

Friedman continues that, like the earlier cold war era, the new post-11 September era 'is also bipolar, but instead of being divided between East and West it is divided between the World of Order and the World of Disorder' with the mission of the world of order led by the overwhelming power of the USA to 'stabilize and lift up the World of Disorder'.⁵ Within the new US imperial discourse there are various sub-discourses which are animated

around the essentially benign nature of contemporary US Empire. Michael Ignatieff argues that:

America's Empire is not like empires of times past, built on colonies, conquest and the white man's burden. . . The 21st century imperium is a new invention in the annals of political science, an Empire lite, a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known.⁶

Moreover, the USA is invariably portrayed as a reluctant empire that has almost accidentally inherited the capacity for global power projection thanks to the preponderance of power left over from the superpower confrontation. America's Empire was thus not desired nor sought, but was established almost by default with the extension and consolidation of empire in the post-11 September era allegedly driven by defensive considerations to bring order to the zone of war within the Third World. Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's National Security Adviser, boldly declared that 'the collapse of the Soviet Union and 9/11' signified a major shift in 'international politics' with the post-11 September era providing the USA with the opportunity to 'expand the number of democratic states' in the Third World.⁷ Robert Kaplan explained that there is 'a positive side to Empire. . . It's in some ways the most benign form of order', as a globally hegemonic USA provides the best hope there is for peace and stability.⁸

Sebastian Mallaby echoed Kaplan's themes and argued that, in the post-11 September era, 'anti-imperialist restraint' on the part of the USA, which has allegedly characterised its foreign policy since 'World War II', is increasingly becoming 'harder to sustain'. He continues that to protect itself against 'terrorists, drug smugglers and other international criminals' that find refuge in 'failed states', the USA must now acknowledge its 'reluctantly' imperial role in world order, and self-consciously adopt a 'logic of neo-imperialism' when dealing with Third World failed states.⁹

Some analysts have even suggested that the lack of US Empire was the reason for the 11 September attacks. The *Wall Street Journal's* features editor, Max Boot, argued that 'the Sept 11 attack was a result of insufficient American involvement and ambition; the solution is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation. . . US imperialism—a liberal and humanitarian imperialism, to be sure, but imperialism all the same—appears to have paid off in the Balkans'. He continued that the solution for 'troubled lands' in the developing world is a 'sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets'.¹⁰ According to Stratfor, one of the USA's leading corporate intelligence firms, 'Sept 11 created an unintended momentum in US foreign policy that has led directly to empire-building. . . The United States. . . is an imperial power, not in the simplistic Leninist sense of seeking markets, but in the classical sense of being unable to secure its safety without controlling others.'¹¹ The US state is thus seen as an imperial state overseeing a global empire which brings benefits to both other Western states and also the inhabitants of war-torn states and regions via the

US Empire's core mission of forcible humanitarian interventions, democracy promotion, and the elimination of global terrorism.

These themes have been echoed by US planners themselves. The pre- 9/11 draft 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DFG) paper drawn up by then Under Secretary for Policy Paul Wolfowitz and US Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney was sent to military leaders and Defense Department heads to provide them with a geopolitical framework for interpreting the US role in the post-cold war era. The DFG argued that the USA's 'first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival' in the post-cold war era. In so doing the USA should 'endeavour to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia'.¹² Under the office of the current US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, private studies of past great empires have been conducted so as to ascertain 'how they maintained their dominance' and what the USA could learn from the 'successes and failures of ancient powers'.¹³ Richard Haass, the director of policy planning at the US Department of State, and the USA's lead co-ordinator for post-Taliban Afghanistan, openly called for the re-conceptualisation of the USA as an imperial power within world order: 'building and maintaining such an order would require sustained effort by the world's most powerful actor, the United States. For it to be successful would in turn require that Americans re-conceive their role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power.'¹⁴ Perhaps the clearest indication of this new imperial discourse, however, was the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy, which echoed the earlier 1992 DFG paper. In it the Bush administration committed itself to building up its military forces to deter any potential rival for world supremacy: 'Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build up in the hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States'.¹⁵

However, US Empire has not been without its critics. Among the most perceptive, Ikenberry fears that the USA's new 'imperial grand strategy', which seeks to utilise its current preponderance of global power into a 'world order in which it runs the show' could ultimately lead to other states seeking to 'work around, contain and retaliate against US power'. Moreover, this 'grand strategic vision' could potentially leave the world 'more dangerous and divided—and the United States less secure'.¹⁶ In sum, a new imperial discourse has developed when analysing the US state and its role within world order, with the USA increasingly seen as a relatively benign empire as a result of the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Periodising American Empire

These arguments, however, have a number of problems. Inherent within this new imperial discourse is the periodisation of US Empire to the post-cold war or post-9/11 era, or to the election of the Bush administration and the ideological orientation of its key neo-conservative members.¹⁷ Yet this

assertion is operationalised by an inherently orthodox historiographical reading of US foreign policy during the cold war period that overestimates the geopolitical centrality of anti-communism as the primary motivation for US cold war grand strategy. Importantly this orthodox historical narrative erases entirely the long-term commitment of the US state to the policing and reproduction of world capitalism, in which it enjoys a predominant position. As Andrew Bacevich argues, a reading of ‘US grand strategy from the late 1940s through the 1980s as “containment”—with no purpose apart from resisting the spread of Soviet power—is not wrong, but is incomplete’. He continues that the USA has long sought to ‘open up the world politically, culturally, and, above all, economically’ and, as such, the USA has long been an empire.¹⁸

The US role as the lead state within world capitalism became increasingly apparent with the bankrupting of Great Britain, the custodian of global capitalism before the end of World War II. US pre-eminence was underwritten by its unrivalled military, political and economic power. At the end of World War II, for example, the USA had almost half of the world’s manufacturing capacity, the majority of its food supply and nearly all its capital reserves.¹⁹ The centrality of the USA in underwriting a capitalist world order was recognised early on by US planners. In 1942 US Secretary of State Cordell Hull argued that leadership ‘towards a new system of international relations in trade and other economic affairs will devolve largely on the United States because of our great economic strength’. He went on to assert that the USA ‘should assume this leadership and the responsibility that goes with it, primarily for the reasons of pure national self-interest’.²⁰ In this new role, the postwar US national interest was articulated around a dual vision; the maintenance and defence of an economically open international system conducive to capital penetration and circulation coupled with a concomitant global geo-strategy of containing social forces considered inimical to capitalism, including but extending far beyond alleged Soviet-aligned communists.²¹ National Security Council Document sixty eight (NSC 68) was one of the central documents outlining the USA’s policy of containment. Within it was a very clear statement of intent on the part of the USA. NSC 68 argued that the USA’s ‘overall policy at the present time’ is ‘designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish’. NSC 68 went on to assert that even ‘if there were no Soviet Union we would face the great problem of the free society...of reconciling order, security...with the requirement of freedom’.²²

This reconciliation of order, security and freedom and the role that the US state would play in underwriting world order was encapsulated by the ‘Grand Area’ strategy which served as a blueprint for US policy in constructing the postwar international system. The Grand Area strategy was developed by the influential Council on Foreign Relations and senior US policy makers,²³ and emerged from an analysis of what caused World War II. It was attributed to the disintegration of the inter-war international order and the emergence of rival spheres of influence and protectionist blocs among capitalist powers. The Grand Area strategy sought to eliminate the potential for inter-imperial

rivalry between the leading core states and called for the opening up of hitherto closed territories for investors and traders and the incorporation of rival capitalist nations under US economic, political and military hegemony.²⁴ Moreover, it required the break-up of the old European empires and included not only what had been formerly under British imperial control, but also the Western Hemisphere, the Far East and the Middle East.²⁵

This postwar strategy was designed to 'solve the internal problems of Western industrial capitalism' argues John Ikenberry, and to ensure the long-term 'economic and military viability' of the USA by securing 'markets and supplies of raw materials in Asia and Europe'.²⁶ George Kennan, one of the central architects of US postwar policy cynically captured the role of the US state in a top secret planning document in 1948. Kennan argued that the US has

about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population...In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships that will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.²⁷

In devising 'a pattern of relationships' US planners constructed a liberal international economic order integrated with (and largely beneficial to) other leading capitalist powers under the tutelage of the US state, or what Geir Lundestad has termed 'Empire by invitation' in relation to the major European capitalist powers.²⁸ The massive levels of postwar US foreign direct investment into Japan and Europe further integrated the leading powers into a common 'informal American Empire',²⁹ and it was in this way that the US state was internationalised in its global relations and subsequent obligations. Henry Kissinger captured this new reality in the early 1970s when he argued that the 'United States [had] global interests and responsibilities' while 'our European allies' merely 'have regional interests'.³⁰ Importantly, US hegemony relied upon consent as well as force, and its forms of highly successful capital accumulation based on Fordist industrialisation and Taylorist modes of workplace control provided attractive models for other capitalist states keen to recover from the devastation of the war.³¹ The emulation of these modes of 'Americanism' coupled with US domination of the Bretton Woods institutions and its security alliances such as NATO and the Japan-US security pact further entrenched US Empire and pulled hitherto rival states within its relatively benign imperium.³²

If the 'soft power'³³ and forms of multilateral co-ordination of US Empire were felt most keenly among the Japanese and European states, in the Third World it was another story entirely. Given the ferment developed as a result of rapid decolonisation and massive class disparities, coupled with the often narrow social base of a number of third world states, American Empire frequently fell back on tried and trusted modes of coercive statecraft more reminiscent of conventional notions of imperial rule. However, unlike earlier empires that sought to 'physicalise' their rule through territorial acquisition and control, the US state principally sought to act through pre-existing state structures and local ruling classes. Indigenous pro-US elites both ensured

internal 'stability' through the containment of potential inimical social forces and were externally responsive to the wider requirements of the US imperial state and the capitalist global political economy.³⁴ Third world militaries, trained and funded by the USA, became central conduits through which US power extended to underwrite and police the burgeoning US Empire in the Third World. These forces provided a bulwark against varying forms of internal reformism, with a wide range of oppositional social forces refracted through the lens of cold war anti-communism.

In Latin America alone one of the USA's counter-insurgency training academies, the School of the Americas (SOA) had trained over 40 000 Latin American military personnel by the end of the Cold War.³⁵ Kennan explained that, in dealing with dissent during the Cold War, the final answer 'may be an unpleasant one' but the USA 'should not hesitate before police repression by the local government'. Kennan considered this repression not only to be strategically necessary but also to be ethically correct, as 'the Communists are essentially traitors'. He continued that it 'is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists'.³⁶ The human cost of this support was enormous, with all but 200 000 of the 20 million people who died in wars between 1945 and 1990 dying in the Third World.³⁷

Throughout the Cold War US coercive statecraft encompassed a number of modalities ranging from overt support for allied states' counter-insurgency campaigns to 'containment and rollback' of inimical social forces, to covert support for coups to unseat insufficiently pro-US governments that threatened to pursue non-capitalist forms of development and thus provide an example to other third world states.³⁸ For example, in one of the earliest postwar US coups justified under the rubric of US anti-communist containment, Charles R Burrows of the US State Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs declared that the democratically elected government of Guatemalan nationalist leader Jacob Arbenz 'has become an increasing threat to the stability of Honduras and El Salvador. Its agrarian reform is a powerful propaganda weapon; its broad social program of aiding the workers and peasants in a victorious struggle against the upper classes and large foreign enterprises has a strong appeal to the populations of Central American neighbours where similar conditions prevail'.³⁹

Similar examples of imperial logic ran throughout US-backed campaigns to maintain pro-US regimes in the face of either democratic or revolutionary forms of popular resistance to authoritarian rule. Soviet expansionism (real, imagined, or used as a pretext for intervention) was merely one of a number of threats to the generic interests of capitalism within the Third World and, given the increasingly global nature of US commitments, the US Empire itself. The primary threats were indigenous nationalisms that looked likely to terminate the incorporation of markets on terms favourable to Western capital or to present potentially alternative models of non-capitalist development.⁴⁰

In essence then, analysts who posit the supposed new US Empire that has emerged from the post-cold war or 9/11 era adopt an implicit assumption of

discontinuity in relation to US objectives when in fact there are major *continuities* between US cold war and post-cold war policy objectives (and between different administrations).⁴¹ In short, the USA has long been an empire, both informally, through its commitment to maintaining global free trade within a world system of ostensibly sovereign states in which it enjoys market preponderance, and in the more formal aspects of empire, including ongoing military interventions and covert statecraft to unseat governments considered to be potentially inimical to imperial interests.⁴² Michael Cox captures this well when he observes:

many of the broader objectives sought by the United States since 1989 actually bear a strong resemblance to those it pursued before the end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR...the underlying aim of the US, to create an environment in which democratic capitalism can flourish in a world in which the US stills remains the dominant actor, has not significantly altered.⁴³

The occlusion and presentist bias inherent within the new US imperial discourse is possibly a result of the fact that IR as a discipline has long avoided the interrelated concepts of imperialism and capitalism, and the explanatory power they afford when analysing international politics and the role of leading capitalist states within an asymmetric global political economy.⁴⁴ As Fred Halliday has argued, while 'IR has recognised the importance of structures of power and inequality' it has treated these structures as 'self-standing entities, separate from, or at best contingently related to, the world market and the global organisation of production'. He continues that the twin analytical concepts of imperialism and its relationship to capitalist globalisation are 'two absent terms' in the IR canon and affirms the usefulness of historical materialist theorisations on imperialism and their relevance for IR.⁴⁵ Interestingly, one could add that imperialism as a world analytic had also dropped off the historical materialist radar until very recently. This was possibly because Lenin's zero-sum theory of inter-imperialist rivalry and the likelihood of war between core capitalist powers (which has long enjoyed the running in historical materialist debates on imperialism) is increasingly redundant in the face of the pacific reality of US Empire. Given the largely positive-sum political and economic structures established between leading capitalist states under the aegis of American empire, combined with the massive levels of foreign direct investment between America, Europe and Japan, Lenin's theories of inter-state war between competing capitalist powers serves as an increasingly ineffective road-map in charting the nature of international politics and contemporary forms of capitalist globalisation.

In this paper so far I have sketched and defended an alternative periodisation of 'US Empire' and have attempted to locate contemporary US foreign policy trends within the longer-term role that the US state has played within a capitalist global political economy. I have argued that notions of inter-imperial rivalry between core capitalist powers are not sufficiently attentive to the largely liberal international order constructed under the aegis of US Empire in the postwar period. However, a number of

leading historical materialist theorists, while also rejecting Leninist accounts of zero-sum rivalry, would also reject the notion of an 'American Empire' as too bounded to a nation-statism that is not fully attentive to the transnational nature of contemporary capitalist globalisation and statecraft. William Robinson's seminal contributions to debates on contemporary empire and imperialism are perhaps the best exemplars of this trend. His work rejects the earlier historical materialist theories of inter-imperial rivalry and, while working clearly within a historical materialist ambit, instead proposes a 'global-capitalist' approach that rejects territorialised conceptions of empire. In the place of a conceptualisation of American Empire Robinson proposes a theory of a transnational state and transnational capitalist class and argues that we have entered an era of deterritorialised transnational empire. After outlining Robinson's theories on contemporary capitalism and empire I critique his position and argue for the continued relevance of the analysis of 'US Empire', albeit one sensitive to the abiding continuity of a logic of national and transnational interest.

Globalisation and the transnationalisation of empire

William Robinson's work represents the most cogent body of historical materialist theorisation on transnational trends under globalisation and the ways in which the transnationalisation of capital is affecting forms of contemporary statecraft and global class formation. For Robinson, economic globalisation marks a decisive shift from a *world* economy to a *global* economy. A world economy is characterised by national markets linked together by international trade with nation-states mediating 'the boundaries between a world of different national economies'.⁴⁶ In contrast, the new global economy has allowed an increasingly transnationally based capital to reorganise production relations that supersede national economies and national states, with national systems of production becoming fragmented and integrated into a new global configuration. Crucially, the 'determining distinction between a world economy and global economy is the globalization of the production process itself, or the rise of globalized circuits of production and accumulation'.⁴⁷ This is important as Robinson draws a distinction between the qualitative difference between an earlier *internationalisation* of trade, which took place between nationally based systems of production, and the central feature of contemporary economic globalisation characterised by the *transnationalisation* of production of goods and services. It is this qualitative difference that foregrounds Robinson's periodisation of capitalist epochs, the latest of which (and the most important for Robinson's analysis) is the era of neoliberal globalisation. Out of this account Robinson draws his central thesis: the emergence of a powerful new transnational state (TNS) and a transnational capitalist class (TCC) that is not bound to any one state.

Robinson argues that much of the literature on globalisation works with a Weberian conception of the state as a political apparatus with an external relation to markets. That is, markets and states are 'separate and even,

oppositional, spheres, each with its own independent logic' with 'nation-states' interacting externally with markets. Robinson rejects this and instead argues that the state is characterised as both a political apparatus but also as the 'institutionalization of class relations around a particular configuration of social production'. Importantly, this implies that the economic and political are fundamentally conjoined and assume an internal (rather than external) relationship. For Robinson's analysis this means that 'the economic globalization of capital cannot be a phenomenon isolated from the transformations of class relations and of states' because of this internal relationship.⁴⁸ In short, Robinson argues that:

A state is the congealment of a particular and historically determined constellation of class forces and relations, and states are always embodied in sets of political institutions. Hence states are: (a) a moment of class power relations; (b) a set of political institutions (an 'apparatus'). The state is not one or the other; it is both in their unity.

By extension Robinson contends that we are witnessing the increased transnationalisation of the state as a class relation as capital becomes increasingly transnationalised. This nascent TNS comprises transnational institutions that 'maintain, defend, and advance the emergent hegemony of a global bourgeoisie and its project of constructing a new global capitalist historical bloc'.⁴⁹ Importantly, this does not entail the withering away of national states, but rather the transformation of nation-states as primarily transnationally responsive units within a *global* configuration.

Transnationally orientated states provide the national infrastructure that is necessary for economic activity, adopt policies that assure internal economic stability and maintain social order through both coercive and consensual means.⁵⁰ In short, transformed nation states adopt and implement neoliberal reform which is the primary policy modality of capitalist globalisation. This in turn integrates them as circuits within the transnational circulation of capital. The TNS thus encompasses both the transformed and transnationally orientated neoliberal nation-states *and* supranational economic and political forums such as the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO) which, as yet, do not have any 'centralized institutional form' reminiscent of a formal state but which nonetheless provide a co-ordinating mechanism necessary for global capital accumulation.⁵¹ Concomitant to the rise of this TNS is the emergence of a new global bourgeoisie: in Robinson's terms a newly transnational capitalist class (TCC). This new global class is directly related to the changes in the global organisation of production and the rise of a nascent TNS and it is the TCC that provides the agentic moment in Robinson's account of capitalist globalisation. The TCC is made up of the owners of transnational capital, and is 'tied to globalized circuits of production, marketing, and finances unbound from particular national territories and identities and because its interests lie in global over local or national accumulation'.⁵² Importantly, this reconfiguration of global class relations changes the dynamics of competition between nation-states with the potential for inter-imperialist rivalry and war shifting from competing

nation-states to new global oligarchies competing within a transnational environment.⁵³ Robinson's portrait of contemporary globalisation has clear implications for the analysis of contemporary imperialism and US Empire insofar as the analysis of the USA as an empire foregrounds the nationally bounded nature of the imperial project. How does Robinson deal with the obviously disproportionate power of the USA within world capitalism?

Deterritorialising empire

Robinson argues that to analyse the USA as an imperialist power misses a crucial nuance in contemporary capitalist globalisation. That is, rather than involving competing nation-states, or indeed, competing blocs (for example East Asian versus European capital) the age of transnational capital now means that there is a diffusion of capitalist interests so that one can no longer territorialise interests within a bounded nation-state. Robinson takes the example of East Asian economic success and its alleged threat to US economic preponderance.⁵⁴ He contends that:

East Asian dynamism is inseparable from the massive entrance of transnational capital and local elites have sought, not a regional circuit of accumulation in rivalry with circuits elsewhere, but a more complete *integration* into globalized circuits. 'US' investors have hundreds of billions of dollars invested in Asia. Economic dynamism benefits those investors as much as it benefits local elites.⁵⁵

As such, Robinson echoes Hardt and Negri's work on empire⁵⁶ by arguing that we have entered an era of decentred empire whereby the national dynamics of capital accumulation that preceding ages of imperialism embodied have been superseded by a new deterritorialised form of empire. He thus rejects outright a theory of world order as characterised by the potential for inter-imperial rivalry between rival capitalist states. Importantly, this does not mean that leading capitalist states are no longer central to the maintenance of global capitalism and Robinson contends that the US state continues to be the global hegemonic capitalist state. However, and this is the crucial point for this paper, for Robinson the US state now acts as the central agent of *transnational* capital, rather than having a nationally grounded US ruling class. US military preponderance thus acts not to secure *American* hegemony *vis-à-vis* potential geopolitical rivals, but for the interests of transnational capital as a whole. Therefore to talk of US empire is inaccurate as it foregrounds an imperial project bounded by a nation-state and *national* capital. Instead of US empire, Robinson argues that the USA has 'taken the lead in developing policies and strategies on behalf of the global capitalist agenda' because globalisation 'has emerged in the period of worldwide US dominance, and the concentration of resources and coercive powers within the US national state allows it to play a leadership role *on behalf of* a transnational elite'. Accordingly, the US state seeks not to intervene to secure the interests of *American* capital *per se*, but to underwrite and police the world for transnational capital.

Robinson is unequivocal about this and he argues that 'US military conquest does not result in the creation of exclusive zones for the conquerors' exploitation...but the colonization and recolonization of the vanquished for the new global capitalism and its agents...the US military apparatus is the ministry of war in the cabinet of an increasingly globally integrated ruling class'.⁵⁷ In sum, Robinson argues that we have thus entered an era of decentred and deterritorialised transnational empire that escapes the territorialised logic of earlier imperialisms and the geopolitical conflict inherent within inter-imperial rivalry. Robinson's work provides one of the most nuanced accounts of contemporary Empire and its allegedly deterritorialised form under contemporary globalisation. Needless to say, his conclusions also have major ramifications for the analysis of the USA as an empire. I now turn to consider some problems with Robinson's account, and argue for the continued relevance of a nationally foregrounded form of transnational 'US Empire'.

Retaining statism: the continued relevance of *American Empire*

While I agree with Robinson's analysis of the increased trend towards transnationalisation within contemporary globalisation, I think he has 'put the cart before the horse' in his analysis of the role of the US state. Robinson argues that world capitalism is now so transnationalised that the leading capitalist state, the USA, is now intervening and pursuing a transnational capitalist agenda. Put simply, the US state is now acting at the behest of the TCC and the structural power of transnational capital.

However, when one analyses the data it is clear that the US headquarters the vast majority of transnational corporations. For example, in 2003 the USA headquartered 192 two of the world's 500 largest businesses. The second largest was Japan with 88.⁵⁸ Similarly, of the world's richest members of the TCC, the majority are American, with eight of the world's 10 richest people holding US citizenship. Instead of arguing that the US state now acts to secure a transnational outcome for transnational capital, I would argue that when the US state acts it is because of the structural power of the US economy within world capitalism, with transnational outcomes primarily benefiting US capital through the USA's preponderance of global market power. Thus, the US state acts to secure the generic global conditions for transnational capital accumulation less at the behest of a TCC, but rather because, in so doing, the US state is, by default, acting in the generic interests of its national capital because of its high level of internationalisation. In short, the USA is the first state among capitalist equals.

If we take the concrete example of Latin America, US foreign policy has been instrumental in implementing neoliberalism both through its multi-lateral agreements with Latin American states and its domination of the international institutions that are implementing neoliberal reforms. The Free Trade Area of the Americas act (FTAA) builds upon the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed by the US Congress, Canada and Mexico in 1993. NAFTA sought to integrate the economies of North America,

Canada and Mexico into a single trading bloc, to dismantle trade barriers, to privatise state-owned industries and to loosen the restrictions on the movement of capital.⁵⁹ Like NAFTA, the FTAA seeks to link the economies of all the Latin American nations (with the exception of Cuba) into a single trade bloc. The FTAA is based on a corporate-led model of development that will accelerate post-cold war neoliberal reforms of national economies throughout Latin America, and would presumably, in Robinson's terms, be a classic case of the US acting to effect a transnational outcome. However, the FTAA contains a number of provisions that will strengthen the power of *American* capital thanks to the sheer preponderance of US market power. The GDP of North, Central and South America was \$11 000 billion in 2000. However, the USA's share of this GDP was 75.7%, with Brazil, which was the next largest, at 6.7%, Canada's was 5.3%, while Mexico's was 3.9%. The other 31 nations comprised only 8.4%. Per capita GDP in the USA was \$30 600 in 2000 while the lowest figure, in Haiti, stood at just \$460.⁶⁰ The FTAA will serve to deepen the already overwhelming power of US capital by dismantling national trade barriers to allow easier penetration by US capital and US-subsidised exports, through the increase in the privatisation (and consequent foreign ownership) of state-owned industries, and the more rigorous enforcement of the intellectual property rights of (mainly US) corporations.⁶¹ What we have then, is, subject to resistances, the US state acting to secure a transnational outcome which *will* benefit a number of capitals and the transnationally orientated bourgeoisies of the respective nations. But because of both the US preponderance of market power and capital internationalisation, it will primarily benefit US corporations and capitalists.

Similarly, I think Robinson underplays the geopolitical dimensions of a continued US global military hegemony, and the 'over-determining' nature of these dimensions upon contemporary globalisation, including the interactions between different capitals. Robinson provocatively declares that the US 'military apparatus is the ministry of war in the cabinet of an increasingly globally integrated ruling class'.⁶² The US remains the global military hegemon, and spends more than the rest of the G7 countries combined, with its military budget eight times larger than the Chinese budget, which is the second largest.⁶³ The US is thus *the* dominant military power within capitalist globalisation, and it is this military preponderance that reinforces US hegemony *vis-à-vis* potential rivals. For example, Robinson rejects analysts who saw the recent US intervention in Iraq as a case of *American* imperialism. Instead he argues that the Bush administration's plan was in fact a 'blueprint for the transnational agenda in the region' and not a 'US imperialist plan to gain the upper hand over French, German, and Russian competition' by monopolising Iraq's natural resources, including its crucial oil reserves.⁶⁴ In the case of oil this is of course correct insofar as US policy has long favoured an open world oil market which has mutually benefited the leading capitalist powers, and through which the USA has acquired crucial energy sources via world markets. Robinson is thus correct to point out the transnational outcome in the case of the equality of

access to oil on international markets by other capitalist powers. However, what Robinson's account misses is the fact that, while US military hegemony serves the wider interests of global capital by (potentially) stabilising a region so geostrategically crucial to industrialised economies, it also entrenches US hegemony over other leading capitalist powers. In short, US political and military dominance in the Middle East has been a key plank of postwar US hegemony over other leading capitalist states within the global political economy because the US derives enormous structural power through its (and its proxies) capacity to play 'cop on the beat' in a region where democratic, nationalist or radical Islamist social forces threaten a stability geared towards the generic interests of the West as a whole.⁶⁵ The USA also derives huge economic benefits from these arrangements not least of which has been the ongoing recycling of huge Middle Eastern petrodollar reserves into the US economy and the continued use of the dollar as the currency of choice for world oil markets (which in turn allows the USA to run a huge budget deficit and finance its imperial adventures overseas).⁶⁶ Thus, while US intervention in the region does benefit a number of capitals (by ensuring security of oil supply to *world* markets) Robinson's analysis does not extend far enough to interrogate the kinds of derivative power that US dominance in the region affords the US state in relation to other core powers. Robinson's transnational argument, while correct to pinpoint the redundancy of conceptions of contemporary world imperialism as characterised by overt rivalry and zero-sum competition between capitalist powers, is not sufficiently attentive to the enduring nature of a US Empire that is still subject to a logic of 'national interest' while conjugating this interest with those of other leading capitalist powers. In short, Robinson fails to capture the dual national and transnational logics that have long operated at the heart of US Empire.

The dual logics of American Empire

Because of the structural position of the US state as both the core hegemonic capitalist state within global capitalism and the state to which other capitalist powers have looked to ensure world order, it has long occupied a dual role that has been subject to both a 'national' logic seeking to maximise US national interests and a 'transnational' logic whereby it has played a co-ordinating role that has sought to reproduce a global political economy conducive to other core capitalist states. Importantly, these two logics have long complemented each other insofar as, by reproducing and defending world capitalism, the USA has also reinforced its own position as the core hegemonic state within the international system. As Gowan argues, US Empire has worked principally because 'the US state has not just been pursuing its own interests at the expense of all its rivals, but securing the general conditions for the expansion of capital as a system, in which they have an interest too'.⁶⁷ During the Cold War these two logics were mutually complementary in part because the potential for Soviet power projection in Europe and revolutionary ferment in the Third World threatened capitalism

as a whole, with no core state apart from the US possessing the capacity to check these threats. This geostrategic reality, coupled with the USA's successful interpenetration of other core states through the internationalisation of American capital and modes of multilateral co-ordination, meant that other capitalist powers were happy to shelter under the umbrella of American Empire (to the chagrin of a number of contemporary neo-conservative analysts).⁶⁸ In short, the threat of Soviet power and various forms of third world oppositionism served to corral the 'West' under US leadership, while the internationalisation of American capital served to underwrite the recovery of shattered capitalist economies and the hegemony of European elites.

However, in the post-cold war absence of the Soviet threat and especially after the 11 September terrorist attacks, the tensions between the American Empire's role of positive-sum transnational co-ordination and its pursuit of more peculiarly *American* interests is becoming more fraught. While previous US administrations have preferred what Robert Kagan has called the 'unilateralist iron fist inside the multilateralist velvet glove'⁶⁹ (for example, Clinton's Secretary of State Madeline Albright's declaration that the USA will act 'multilaterally when we can, unilaterally as we must'⁷⁰), the more overtly unilateralist orientation of the Bush administration reflects a crude, but realist desire for policy autonomy freed from the constraints and permission-loops intrinsic to multilateral forms of strategic co-ordination. This impulse has become even more pressing given the nature of the threats directed specifically at the American imperium. As Charles Krauthammer has aptly captured, transnational forms of multilateral governance and security co-ordination between the USA and other core states has served to reduce 'American freedom of action by making it subservient to, dependent on, constricted by the will—and interests—of other nations'. By succumbing too heavily to this logic, the American Empire is gradually becoming a 'Gulliver' tied down 'with a thousand strings'.⁷¹

This tension between the dual logics at the heart of American Empire places the USA in a bind in many ways. On the one hand, given the USA's economic and military preponderance, the imperial temptation is very strong and the events of 11 September have hastened the USA's desire to attain strategic manoeuvrability for its war on terror unencumbered by the often burdensome requirements of multilateral forms of governance. As Richard Perle, the former chairman of the USA's Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee, argued:

I think it is time for us to say to the world if necessary that we have been attacked, a war was initiated against us, and we are going to defend ourselves, and we're not going to let the decisions to do that, the manner in which we do it, the targets we select be decided by a show of hands by countries whose interests cannot be identical to our own and who haven't suffered what we have suffered.⁷²

On the other hand, as the USA becomes more *overtly* imperialist by succumbing to the logic of national interest, it also begins to undermine the

legitimacy that it derives through the more transnationally orientated forms of multilateral co-ordination under the aegis of American Empire. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin pointedly observe ‘an American imperialism that is so blatantly imperialistic risks losing the very appearance of not being imperialist’ that has ‘historically made it plausible and attractive’.⁷³ Alongside this potential loss of legitimacy inherent within a more overt unilateralism driven by the logic of national interest is the very real potential for other states to balance against an American Empire that is so obviously pursuing its own interests to the detriment of key allies (or minimally, failing at least to pay lip-service to the sensitivities of ‘old Europe’). This is multiplied by the fact that other core states need to conjugate the needs of the imperial centre with their own domestic requirements of consensual rule, with the task of legitimation become even harder when core democratic states are threatened by popular pressures to resist the vagaries of American Empire.⁷⁴ (To date Bush’s doctrine of pre-emptive war is proving a much harder sell than previous imperial interventions justified under the pretext of humanitarian intervention).⁷⁵ These processes, combined with the failure of leading capitalist powers even to agree on whether Bush’s pre-emptive wars or international terrorism constitute the primary security threat to Western interests, also increase the tensions within the US imperium. In a sense, then, in their singularity neither theorists of inter-imperial rivalry who emphasise the inherent geopolitical rivalry between the USA and other core capitalist states or Robinson’s more transnationalist arguments capture in their entirety the complex sets of pressures, constraints and temptations inherent within contemporary American Empire and world order. In the place of these opposed visions I have both argued for the continued salience of the analysis of American Empire as a world analytic but with a sensitivity to the dual and conjoined national and transnational logics at the heart of this imperium. What conclusions can be drawn from this account?

Conclusion

This paper has rejected the periodisation inherent within the new imperial discourses that link the emergence of American Empire to either the post-cold war or post-9/11 eras and has instead called for an alternative historicisation of the role of the US state within a capitalist global political economy. In a similar vein, historical materialist analysts who posit the continued geopolitical and economic rivalry between US Empire and other advanced capitalist states are not sufficiently attentive to the largely benign and pacific imperium constructed by the USA in the postwar period which has incorporated hitherto potential rivals to US hegemony. Alongside the construction of this imperium has been a concomitant internationalisation of capital that has served to further cement a relatively cohesive Western bloc under the aegis of American Empire. Concomitantly, I have argued that ‘global-capitalist’ theorists who critique a conception of American Empire as too heavily bounded to a lingering ‘nation-statism’ are not sufficiently attentive to the abiding logic of national interest inherent within con-

temporary imperialism. Instead, because of the US state's unique position within the global political economy, I have argued that it is subject to both a national and transnational logic.

It is obvious that the unilateralism of the Bush administration and its re-election have generated a remarkable degree of hostility not only from the left, but also from significant sections of America's foreign policy elite. In a recent piece John Ikenberry paints an optimistic picture for the future of inter-state relations and argues (while resisting the term itself) that the American Empire will have to return to multilateral forms of transnational co-ordination largely because of the economic interdependence of US, European and Japanese capital. Ikenberry also emphasises that by doing so the USA will 'signal restraint and commitment to other states thereby encouraging the acquiescence and cooperation of weaker states'.⁷⁶ One could also add that the ongoing failure of the USA to indigenise its rule in Iraq or even convincingly sell the intervention to its own domestic population underlines the folly of relying solely on its overwhelming military superiority to undergird its global empire.

Importantly, within contemporary international politics, the USA's overwhelming military power does not translate into an enhanced capacity to coerce key allies (however, with the militarisation of a number of third world states under the rubric of a war on terrorism, the potential for 'blowback' against the West as a whole is considerable).⁷⁷ In many ways the Iraq intervention represents the most prominent *national moment* of the American Empire. Crucially, Iraq has rendered that moment still-born. How long the USA takes to learn this will perhaps be the single most important determinate factor for the hegemony of the American Empire in relation to other core states. Importantly, however, outside the relatively benign capitalist core, there is no reason to expect that forms of imperial statecraft and their articulation to local sub-imperialisms will prove any less costly for the vast majority of the global South.⁷⁸

Notes

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