

Confronting the Empire

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From the 1980s on, and with the collapse of the Soviet system, the ruling class in the United States, whether Democrat or Republican, began drawing up a hegemonic program. Carried away by its military power, and without any competitor able to temper its fantasies, the United States chose to reinforce its domination by deploying a military strategy aiming at “planetary control.” An early series of interventions—in the Gulf, Yugoslavia, Central Asia, Palestine, and Iraq—introduced this strategy for endless wars to be “made in the U.S.A.,” planned and decided unilaterally by Washington.

The political strategy that accompanied this program defined the pretexts for it, whether these had to do with terrorism, the fight against drug trafficking, or with accusations of producing weapons of mass destruction. These are obvious pretexts when one recalls the CIA’s invention of convenient terrorist adversaries, whether the Taliban or Bin Laden.

Accusations of producing dangerous weapons—made today against Iraq and North Korea, but tomorrow against any convenient state—pale beside the actual use of these weapons by the United States. The United States used nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and chemical weapons in Vietnam, and it is threatening the further use of nuclear weapons in future conflicts. Such pretexts are only propaganda tools, in the sense that Goebbels gave that term: they are useful perhaps to manipulate U.S. opinion but less and less credible elsewhere.

The idea of “preventive war,” now claimed as a “right” by Washington, does away with any notion of international law. The United Nations Charter forbids the recourse to war except in cases of legitimate self-defense, and it allows military intervention only under strict conditions, any response having to be measured and provisional. All specialists in international law know that the wars undertaken since 1990 have been completely illegitimate, and therefore those who bear the responsibility for

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them are also war criminals. Indeed, the United States, with the cooperation of other countries, is already treating the United Nations as the fascist states treated the League of Nations.

The abolition of the common rights of all peoples is already underway. The principle of the equality of all peoples has been replaced by the distinction between a “master race” (*Herrenvolk*)—the people of the United States, and, behind them, those of Israel—and other peoples. The existence of those peoples that do not belong to the U.S. master race can only be tolerated if they do not constitute a threat to the ambitions of those who consider themselves the masters of the planet. This master race reserves the right to conquer whatever living space it judges necessary for itself and for those peoples it supports.

What are the national interests that the U.S. ruling class considers as giving it this right?

This is a class that recognizes only one objective—that of making money. The North American state is openly at the service of satisfying the demands of the dominant segment of capital made up of U.S. multinationals.

We, therefore, have all become “red skins,” the contemptuous name reserved for the Native Americans, in the eyes of the Washington establishment—that is to say, peoples who have the right to exist only in so far as they do not frustrate the expansion of U.S.-based multinational capital. We have been promised that resistance to the United States will be crushed using any and every means, even extermination if necessary. If it is a question of making an additional fifteen million dollars in profit for the American multinationals at the expense of 300 million victims, then there will be no hesitation. The “rogue state” par excellence, to borrow the language used by Presidents Bush Senior and Junior, as well as by Clinton, is none other than the United States itself.

The U.S. program is certainly imperialist in the most brutal sense of that word, but it is not “imperial” in the sense that Antonio Negri has given the term, since it does not aim to manage the societies of the planet in order better to integrate them into a coherent capitalist system. Instead, it aims only at looting their resources. All this is part and parcel of the reduction of social thought to the mantras of vulgar economics, the single-minded focus on maximizing the financial profitability of dominant capital in the short term, putting the military at the disposal of this capital, and delinking this capital from any system of human values. Such capital is behind the barbaric expansionism capitalism carries within itself, substituting a demand of absolute submission to the so-called laws of the mar-

ket for human values.

Throughout its history, U.S. capitalism has shown itself to be readier than European varieties to take such steps. Politically, the U.S. state is designed to serve the economy and nothing else, abolishing the contradictory and dialectical relationship between economy and politics. The genocide carried out against the Native Americans, the enslavement of the blacks, the successive waves of immigration into the United States leading to the predominance of ethnic and racial conflict, as manipulated by the ruling class, at the expense of the maturation of class consciousness—have all combined to produce the political monopoly of U.S. society by the single party of capital. Both segments of this party share the same strategic global vision, though addressing their rhetoric to different “constituencies,” themselves drawn from the less than half of U.S. society that believes sufficiently in the system to bother voting.

Not benefiting from the tradition by which the social democratic worker’s parties and the communists marked the formation of modern European political culture, American society does not have the ideological instruments at its disposal to allow it to resist the dictatorship of capital. On the contrary, capital shapes every aspect of this society’s way of thinking, and reproduces itself by reinforcing the kind of deep-seated racism that allows U.S. society to see itself as constituting a master race. “Playboy Clinton, Cowboy Bush”: this slogan from India rightly emphasizes the nature of the single party that manages the so-called American democracy.

For this reason, the North American program is not the kind of simple attempt to attain hegemony familiar from other hegemonic attempts in ancient and modern history, involving a vision of problems having coherent answers, whether based on economic exploitation or political inequality. Instead, it is infinitely more brutal in its simple and extreme unilateral conception, and it is close to the Nazi program, which was also based on the principle of a master race. The U.S. program has nothing whatsoever to do with the beliefs of certain American liberal academics, who see U.S. hegemony as “benign.”

If it should continue, this program can only lead to growing chaos, which will continually call for increasingly brutal management, with no strategic long-term vision. Finally, Washington will not even attempt to support its real allies, something which always requires knowing how to make concessions. Fake governments, like that of Karzai in Afghanistan, will manage things better as long as military power supports a belief in the “invincibility” of the United States. Hitler did not think any differently.

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An examination of the connections between the criminal U.S. program and the realities of dominant capitalism made up of the countries of the Triad (the United States, Europe, and Japan) will allow us to understand its strengths and weaknesses.

General opinion, as promoted by the unreflective media, has it that U.S. military power only constitutes the tip of the iceberg, and that it represents the extension of American superiority in all areas, notably economic, but even political and cultural. Therefore, such opinion believes, submission to the hegemony that America pretends to is inevitable.

However, an examination of economic realities undermines this view. The U.S. production system is far from being the most efficient in the world. On the contrary, almost none of its sectors would be certain of beating competitors in the truly free market dreamt of by liberal economists. The U.S. trade deficit, which increases year by year, went from 100 billion dollars in 1989 to 450 billion in 2000. Moreover, this deficit involved practically all areas of production—even the surplus once enjoyed by the United States in the area of high-technology goods, which stood at 35 billion in 1990, has now turned into a deficit.

Competition between Ariane rockets and those of NASA, as well as between Airbus and Boeing, testifies to the vulnerability of present American advantages. U.S. producers must compete against high-technology products from Europe and Japan, and manufactured goods from China, Korea, and other Asian and Latin American industrialized countries, as well as agricultural produce from Europe and the southern cone of Latin America. The United States probably would not be able to win were it not for the recourse to extra-economic means, a clear violation of the principles of liberalism the United States imposes on its competitors.

In fact, the United States only enjoys comparative advantages in the armaments sector, precisely because this sector largely operates outside the rules of the market and benefits from state support. This may bring some benefits to the civil sphere, the Internet being the best-known example, but it also causes serious distortions that handicap many sectors of production. The North American economy lives parasitically to the detriment of its partners in the world system: “the United States depends for 10 per cent of its industrial consumption on goods whose import costs are not covered by the exports of its own products” (Emmanuel Todd, *After Empire*).

The economic growth of the Clinton years, vaunted as the result of a “liberalism” that Europe was unfortunately resisting, was in fact largely fake, and was, in any case, not generalizable because it depended on cap-

ital transfers that meant the stagnation of partner economies. For all sectors of the real production system, U.S. growth during this period was not better than that of Europe. The “American miracle” was fed exclusively by a growth in expenditure produced by growing social inequalities (for example, in financial and personal services and the legions of lawyers and private police forces). In this sense, Clinton’s liberalism prepared the conditions for the reactionary wave and the victory of Bush Jr. Moreover, as Todd writes, “blown up by fraud, American GNP begins to resemble, in terms of statistical accuracy, that of the Soviet Union.”

The world produces, and the United States, which has practically no funds in reserve, consumes. The U.S. advantage is that of a predator whose deficit is covered by loans from others, whether obtained by consent or force. The means put in place by Washington to compensate for deficiencies are of various kinds, including repeated unilateral violations of liberal principles; arms exports (60 percent of the world market) largely imposed on subaltern allies, such as the Persian Gulf countries that never use these weapons; and the search for greater profits from oil, which presupposes greater control over the producers—the real reason for the wars in Central Asia and Iraq.

The essential part of the American deficit is covered by contributions of capital from Europe, Japan, and the South—from oil-rich countries and comprador classes in every country of the third world, the poorest included—to this are added the additional sums brought in from servicing the debt that has been forced on practically all the countries on the periphery of the world system. The reasons behind the continuing capital movements that feed the parasitism of the U.S. economy and society, and that allow this superpower to live from day to day, are certainly complex. But they have nothing to do with the supposed laws of the market that are at once rational and unchangeable.

The solidarity between the dominant segments of transnational capital and the members of the Triad is real, and it explains their rallying to globalized neoliberalism. The United States is seen as the defender, militarily if necessary, of common interests, though Washington hardly intends to share fairly the profits of its leadership. On the contrary, it seeks to make its allies into vassals, and is only ready to make minor concessions to its junior allies in the Triad. Will this conflict of interests within dominant capital lead to the break-up of the Atlantic alliance? This is unlikely, but not impossible.

The real conflict is situated on a different terrain, that of political culture. In Europe, a left alternative is still possible that would force a break

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with neoliberalism. However, this would require abandoning the vain hope that the United States will submit to the same neoliberal discipline it enforces on others, competing with European capital on a level playing field and permitting Europe an independent foreign policy. The capital surplus that Europe has until now been happy to place in the United States could then be used to launch a European economic and social renewal, which would be impossible without this capital surplus. However, were Europe to give priority to its own economic and social growth in this way, the artificial health of the U.S. economy would collapse, and the American ruling class would be confronted by its own social problems. That is what I mean by saying that Europe will either be on the left or it will not be at all.

To get there, however, we must dispense with the illusion that the liberal game should, or could, be played honestly by all and then things would get better. The United States cannot give up the asymmetric practice of liberalism, since this is the only way that it can compensate for its deficiencies. U.S. prosperity comes at the price of others' stagnation.

Why, therefore, do capital flows to the benefit of the United States continue? Probably because for many the United States is a country for the rich and the safest refuge for them—this is the case for investments made by the comprador bourgeoisie of the third world. But what explains European attitudes? The “liberal virus,” together with a naïve belief that the United States will end up accepting market rules, has a certain power over public opinion. The principle of the free circulation of capital, made sacred by the IMF, enables the United States to cover its deficit by pumping in financial surpluses generated elsewhere as a result of neoliberal policies, while submitting only very selectively to neoliberal discipline. However, for dominant capital the advantages of the system overcome its inconveniences—this is the price that it must pay to Washington in order to ensure the permanence of the system.

Countries described as “indebted poor countries” are forced to pay, but there is one indebted powerful country that will never pay its debts. The militarist program chosen by the U.S. establishment should be seen in this perspective, being nothing other than an admission that the United States has no other means at its disposal to impose its economic hegemony.

The causes of the weakening of the U.S. production system are complex. They are certainly not conjunctural, and they cannot be corrected by the adoption of a correct rate of exchange, for example, or by putting in place a more favorable balance between salaries and productivity. On the contrary, they are structural. The poor quality of general education and

training in the United States, the product of a deep-rooted prejudice in favor of the private to the detriment of the public sector, is one of the main reasons for the profound crisis that U.S. society is currently going through.

One should, therefore, be surprised that the Europeans, far from drawing the logical conclusions from observing the deficiencies of the U.S. economy, are actively going about imitating it. Here, too, the liberal virus does not explain everything, even if it fulfills some useful functions for the system in paralyzing the left. Widespread privatization and the dismantling of public services will only reduce the comparative advantages from which "Old Europe" still benefits. However, whatever damage these measures will cause in the long term, they offer dominant capital, which lives in the short term, the chance of making additional profits.

The militarist program adopted by the United States now threatens all peoples. It is the expression of the logic adopted by Adolf Hitler—to change social and economic relations by military force in favor of the master race of the day. This program, now filling the foreground, over-determines all political circumstances, since the pursuit of such a program weakens advances obtainable through social and democratic struggle. Halting the U.S. militarist program becomes, therefore, a major aim and responsibility for all.

Success in this struggle will depend on the capacity of people everywhere to rid themselves of liberal illusions, since there will never be an authentically liberal globalized economy. This is the case despite all the means used to make us believe otherwise—while the World Bank discourse operates as a sort of ministry of propaganda for Washington extolling democracy, good governance, or the reduction of poverty, it has no other function. Joseph Stiglitz, made the subject of considerable media buzz for rediscovering some elementary truths and asserting them with an air of authority, has nevertheless been unable to draw the simplest conclusions calling the prejudices of vulgar economics into question.

The reconstruction of a Southern Front capable of giving the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America together in solidarity across three continents, the capacity to make their voices heard, will require liberating ourselves from the illusion that a globalized liberal system without asymmetry would help the peoples of the third world. Is it not ridiculous to watch the countries of the South insist upon "putting liberal principles into practice without discrimination," thus gaining the applause of the World Bank? When was the World Bank ever concerned with defending the third world against the United States?

The struggle against U.S. imperialism and the U.S. militarist program is

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a struggle shared by all peoples, from its major victims in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, to the peoples of Europe and Japan who are condemned to subordinate positions, and also to the people of North America themselves. We should salute the courage of all those at the heart of the beast who have refused to submit, as their predecessors refused to submit to the McCarthyism of the 1950s. Like those who dared to resist Hitler, they have merited all the praise that history can heap upon them.

Will the dominant class in the United States be able to carry forward the criminal program behind which it has rallied? This is not an easy question to answer—little or nothing in the history of U.S. society prepares it for it. The single party of capital, whose power in the United States is not contested, has thus far not given up on military adventure, and therefore the responsibility of this class as a whole cannot be downplayed. The power of Bush Jr. is not that of a clique of armament and oil producers. As has been the case in the entire modern history of the United States, the dominant power has been that of a coalition of the sectoral interests of capital, falsely described as “lobbies.”

However, this coalition can only govern if other segments of capital accept it. Clearly, political, diplomatic and even military setbacks could encourage the minority in the U.S. establishment who are ready to renounce the military adventures the country is engaged in. To hope for more than this seems to me to be as naïve as to have hoped, at the height of the Nazi regime, that the assassination attempts against Adolf Hitler would succeed.

If the Europeans had reacted in 1935 or 1937, they could have stopped the Hitler regime. The failure to react until September 1939 cost the lives of tens of millions. Let us act together in the hope that a response to the present Washington neo-Nazis will come sooner.



This is the first time that dividends have been taxed at lower rates than salaries. As recently as 1981, high-income taxpayers were expected to pay higher rates on “unearned income” than on other income. There was a hint of derision for “coupon clippers” who made lots of money without much effort.

The consensus used to be that high-income people should pay plenty, whatever the source of income. When Dwight Eisenhower was president, the top marginal rate—for those making more than \$400,000 a year—was 91 percent. Times have changed.

—Floyd Norris, business page columnist, *New York Times*, May 30, 2003

