Some Thoughts about the Empire, Global Power Centres, and People's Alliances

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Have we stepped into a new distinct (historical) era with 9-11 and the American war on terrorism? Yes and no. Yes, because this seems to represent the emergence of a persevering 'war-is-peace-peace-is-war' period under the single global American Empire (post-Cold War, certainly, but definable beyond 'post'). No, because this is also (1) the culmination or completion of American hegemony since 1945 (which stayed flawed and partial because of the Cold War), and (2) the logical consequence of the neoliberal globalisation processes since the 1990s. Simple 'yes' views could imply (as do the dominant US discourses) justification for the Bush action, while simple 'no' views could miss the signs of the times, thus justifying passive and reactive approaches (business-as-usual, responding to particular crises and injustices only individually and on the basis of the established framings, typically national, e.g. Japan: peace constitution, Philippines: national democracy; Korea: national unification; Taiwan/China: Strait). These national framings are certainly the necessary starting points but not sufficient because the Empire is global, its particular strategies intended instrumental to its global concerns (for instance, US policy toward the Palestinian issue is geared to the creation of conditions allowing the US to launch war against Iraq, and so has little to do with the resolution of this historical conflict). It is therefore needed to establish a shared, global framing vis-à-vis the whole logic, structure, discourses, and practice of the Empire, encompassing its socio-economic and military aspects. Such a global popular movement basis is yet to be established. In other words, we (social movements working in different national settings and on different issues) are urged to work together to be able to come to share a common understanding of the overarching Empire, take a common stand against this monstrous rule, resist and overturn it while envisioning and promoting another world organized democratically and ecologically sustainably. The acquisition of this common context would certainly facilitate our struggle on individual issues and for national solutions as well since we then would be working for new globally shared standards of justice.

Is the imperial rule attributed only to the Bush administration's particular and peculiar behaviour? Will, say, Al Gore, if successful in the next presidential election, get things back to 'normal'? Like in the Cold War period, tense and lax phases may alternate in the new era too. But the general imperial frame set by Bush will stay just as the anti-communism and the East-West confrontation stayed the key tone of the Cold War period throughout its tensed and lax phases. We need to differentiate what is particular to Bush from the persevering characteristics deriving from the evolution of the American global hegemony. We need to address the overdetermined structure as the single reality confronting us in the foreseeable future of this century.

Bush's unilateralism

Using 'terrorism' as Aladdin's lamp, Bush has claimed, and in fact succeeded in practising, the right to militarily destroy and dispose of any states in US disfavour. ("You go with us or you go with the terrorists"). The second stage of the 'war on terrorism' declared by Bush in his 2002 state of the union address – the axis of evil labelling followed by the Nuclear Posture Review, among others – discarded the original 'self-defence' and 'retaliation' logic, justifying the US right to carry out 'holy war' on a general basis. Bush has washed away the UN principles that made war illegal except for immediate self-defence, by bringing in the notion of pre-emptive defence. The notion of 'just war' (against evil) has been reintroduced, with the US as the supreme privileged body to judge who are the evil to be destroyed. US national decisions are to be simultaneously and automatically global decisions. All constraints on US sovereignty should go or be simply ignored. (Bush: 'some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And

make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will.')

One of the defining features of the imperial era is the overwhelming military power of the US rivalled by none. In the Cold War period, the US was countervailed by the Soviet military power. The two empires were symmetric in military terms, the Soviet Union serving as a humbling element relativising the US as one of the contending parties. The Soviet military power, so to speak, was a measure to gauge the American military stature. Now this external measure is gone, and America has to gauge its stature only with its own stature. This means that there is no external factor to delimit America's military buildup. The US gears its military directly to its cravings for an absolute and single-handed control of the whole world where no American rivals are allowed to emerge. The US strategic documents produced since 1995 have made this posture clear (Shape, Respond, and Prepare; full-spectrum dominance etc.). Now Bush is enforcing these strategies in his permanent war on terrorism.

Anti-terrorist alliance: Why has this alliance of almost all states built paradoxically around American unilateralism?

- The globalisation regime has already enmeshed almost all states which came to have heavy stakes in it, each finding it more advantageous and less risky for its self-interest to act within the US Empire, imbibing its logic, for fear that turning their back on it would cause terrible problems, or in the hope of maximising their immediate interests by striking favorable deals accepting the Empire (e.g. US-Russia deal on Caspian oil development);
- US effectively blackmailed and silenced Southern countries with complaints about the Washington consensus with 'with-us-or-with-terrorists' threats (such as what transpired at the WTO Ministerial in Doha);
- Northern core countries, already promoting globalisation as their recolonisation project, find the Bush scheme a new framework that facilitates their collective global domination and that protects Northern citadels from migrants and other intruders from the South. The American logic of civilisation vs. evil strengthens their deep-rooted conviction that western values and standards of living are supreme;
- The Imperial logic of military prerogative and the claimed 'emergency' needs to boost the military and curtail freedom and democracy, in many cases, enable the ruling political groups to put into practice their reactionary schemes hatched for long but which could not be implemented (e.g. Japan, abolition of the war-renouncing constitution);
- The US logic of anti-terrorism is useful for some states to justify their oppression of minorities by violent means without the fear of being accused of human rights violation by outside (Russia, China, Philippines, and most blatantly by Israel).

The heterogeneous motivations would make this alliance ad hoc and fragile. Anyway this is a peculiar and even paradoxical alliance built around American unilateralism. But the overwhelming American military capability and readiness coupled with the horror of ostracisation should not be minimised. The US needs an alliance, but only tactically. The alliance is important but can be dispensed with. Forestalling its failure, Bush already declared his go-it-alone posture. This in itself works as a deterrence to dissent. Only pressure from below (popular movements) can unloose the states from this alliance (as can occur in Arab countries).

US hegemony: Continuity and discontinuity

American hegemony, unlike the preceding British hegemony, was originally meant, when its design emerged toward the end of WWII, to integrate the whole world as the single American market and domain of direct and indirect political control. The Bretton Woods system was so designed, and the Marshal Plan was proposed to cover Eastern Europe too. But the Kremlin disrupted this wholeness, and the Chinese revolution failed it in Asia. The Cold War set in. The

world was divided territorially, politically, and ideologically by the two antagonistic Empires. American hegemony was functional in the 'free world' only, though the economic empire deeply penetrated the other imperial domain and increasingly undermined its social and economic basis. That was the Cold War, a long period of crippled American hegemony. There, the real issues in each of the two Empires were blamed on instigated subversion by the other Empire (Vietnam and Nicaragua as products of Moscow, and Gdansk and Warsaw a product of Washington).

The Cold War was ended and the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, sending America back to its long dreamed-of full hegemonic position. From then on, America has had to face the real problems of global capitalism. As Communism was gone, it now had no alien body to blame the world's hot, knotty, and very serious problems on. The choices were either to tackle them seriously to resolve them, or complete the American empire on a bulldozed ground under whose surface the real problems were to be buried and stay buried. America definitely refused to take the first choice. The bulldozer used is neoliberal globalisation, lubricated by plausible-sounding slogans of free market, free competition, free trade, deregulation, privatisation, etc. (which have been carried out) as putative guarantees of democracy and human rights (which never materialised).

Neoliberal globalisation had been promoted by, and also created in the process, a composite global power centre, whose core was the Northern states, multi-national corporations, private and inter-governmental financial interests etc. The utterly undemocratic nature of the world structure was exposed and resisted already in the 1980s, through issues such as the debt crisis and structural adjustment, environment degradation, etc. The full American empire came back as the crudest machinery imaginable to keep this structure imposed on the majority of the world population who suffer from the destructive consequences of neoliberal globalisation.

The United States certainly has been, and is, the core of this whole process. But that it has come back as the full-fledged Empire means something in addition. It relates to the internal relationships of this global power centre. The US, without ceasing to be a nation-state, has appointed itself, even within the global centre, an entity beyond nation-states and claims its right as such. Of course in practice this is not new. Unilateralism wedded to isolationism has been one of the politico-ideological traditions of the United States, as American history shows us. In recent decades, American military forces unilaterally intervened in so many countries and ignored international criticisms, including even the International Court's ruling on Nicaraguan intervention. But these were, so to speak, America's private affairs.

Now the rule has been changed. The world is forced to accept that America's private affairs (America's private decisions, for that matter) are automatically the world's public affairs (public decisions). International laws, the UN Charter, the Hague and Geneva treaties and conventions do not apply as America is the law. And America enforces the law with its nightmarishly colossal military machinery, by far out of proportion to the capacity of any possible adversary. There has been a major power shift in the composition of the global power centre.

George Bush (papa) dreamed of a similar post-Cold War setup and fought the Gulf War. But looking back, even he looks a dove. At that time, the war had a definite proclaimed purpose of driving away invading Iraqi forces from Kuwait, and Bush organised a multinational force somewhat on the basis of the UN resolution, and fought the war as a regular state-to-state war. Now George Bush (son) launched a war against an unidentified enemy no one has clearly defined, whose whereabouts are not clear. Bush said, 'Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch, yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch.' If so, 911 triggered an Orwellian situation into which we are slipping, where war is synonymous with peace and peace synonymous with war and the line of

demarcation between military and police operations is obliterated under intended ubiquitous systems of surveillance.

Challenges and our alliances

We need to squarely face this whole situation.

We, as progressive movement, face the full American Empire for the first time and therefore we are still to work out our shared position and strategies to cope with this historical situation. The postures and strategies we established vis-à-vis the Cold War structure fall short of the needs we face. On the other hand, the American Empire has no capacity, nor intention, to address the real problems of the world today. The world inevitably becomes increasingly violent because the Empire has taken on itself the impossible task of suppressing the expressions of the fundamental problems of the world today.

But we have the basis on which we can work out our strategies. Popular resistance to the varied aspects of neoliberal globalisation, especially since Seattle in 1999, certainly is a major base. But the popular resistance has been focused mostly on socio-economic and environmental aspects of the imperial design, staying indifferent to the military aspects. Now that the American Empire has fully emerged through the current 'war on terrorism,' the nexus between the neoliberal globalisation and the war of this peculiar nature should be brought into our full view. This will enable broad alliances to emerge to confront the multi-faceted expressions of the imperial realities. In other words, the current war is not one of many issues, but it should be seen as the defining element of a whole period we have stepped into.

There is a crude revival and spread of the 'civilisation vs. evil' discourses, including racism, jingoism, and various fundamentalisms. The people's alliances we envisage entail very serious efforts to overcome these discourses and practices. In intellectual fields, we have for decades accumulated knowledge and analyses in terms of multi-culturalism, post-colonial identities, etc. in fact to a very sophisticated degree, and we almost believed that these have become established norms of our societies. But now we see in many parts of the world that these are washed away by crude racist arguments. We need to recognize the fact that we are now being tested. And we must reflectively examine how we can intellectually cope with this.

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