IMPERIALISM AND GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY



ALEX CALLINICOS

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To Sam, again, with love

Imperialism and Global Political Economy

Alex Callinicos

polity

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Imperialism, to many people's surprise, survived the Cold War. More to the point, it has also survived the presidency of George W. Bush. So it is an important subject. I have been fortunate enough to write about it during what can only be considered a great renaissance of the Marxist theory of imperialism. This has allowed me to develop my own ideas in dialogue – and sometimes in confrontation – with many of the leading contributors to this revival. Thanks to a variety of social forums, congresses and conferences, mostly generated by the contemporary movements against neoliberal globalization and imperial war, I have been able to debate with, and learn from, Gilbert Achcar, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Daniel Bensaïd, Bob Brenner, Frank Deppe, Peter Gowan, Michael Hardt, David Harvey, David McNally, Toni Negri, Leo Panitch and Claude Serfati.

I have also benefitted from being allowed to present the thought that forms the subject of chapter 2 of this book – that there is a necessary relationship between capitalism and the international state system – in various forums, including the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. I am grateful to the editors of this journal, and particularly to Alex Anievas, who has both orchestrated and contributed to a much more extensive debate about Marxism, the international, and uneven and combined development in the pages of *CRIA*. It has also helped to have had the opportunity to present my ideas to seminars at Birmingham, Cambridge, London Metropolitan, and Nottingham universities, and at Goldsmiths College, to the Historical Sociology Group of the British International Studies Association, and to the 7th International Relations Conference of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. My thanks to all involved, and perhaps especially to Gonso Pozo-Martin for his searching criticisms both in print and in discussion.

Sam Ashman, Chris Harman, Nigel Harris, Justin Rosenberg, Andrew Wright and an anonymous reviewer all read this book in draft and made very helpful comments. Both Sam and Andrew are engaged in research of their own, some of whose findings overlap with my arguments; I am very grateful to the intellectual support their work has given me. My correspondence and conversations with Justin have provided enormous stimulus and pleasure. Chris and Nigel wrote at once the most detailed and much the rudest comments, showing that old comrades may diverge politically without losing the robust intellectual training all three of us received from the late Tony Cliff. I particularly appreciate Nigel's patience and kindness in sticking with a train of thought that he regards as thoroughly misguided.

At Polity David Held suggested that I write a short book about imperialism and has taken this much longer one on the chin. I am grateful to him and also to Clare Ansell, Helen Gray and Sarah Lambert for guiding the book to publication.

My biggest debt, however, is to Sam Ashman. We have talked non-stop about many of the topics that I have ended up writing about in this book. My debt to her is enormous, not just intellectually, but also for the support she has provided in what have proved to be quite stressful times. It is in token of what I owe that I am dedicating this book to her.

INTRODUCTION: EMPIRE OF THEORY, THEORIES OF EMPIRE

Empire is back with a vengeance.[1] This is largely because the thing imperialism has increasingly obtruded itself on us all over the past few years, till now all the blood and clamour, the colonial expeditions and the grand financial and commercial manoeuvres are quite inescapable and undeniable. But, as historians have noted, empires have often disavowed themselves, and here there was a marked discursive shift in the United States, most notably during the administrations of George W. Bush. The journalist Ron Suskind reports a remarkable conversation with 'a senior adviser to Bush' during the summer of 2002, when the drums of war against Iraq were beating ever louder:

> The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.[2]

These remarks reverberate with a hubris that was soon enough to meet its nemesis at the hands of the armed resistance to the occupation of Iraq by the US and its allies. But the willingness to conceive America explicitly as an empire is by no means confined to the right-wing nationalists and neoconservatives who drove US global policy under the younger Bush. In the 1990s, Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter, an influential figure in

Bill Clinton's administrations, and a ferocious critic of the Iraq adventure, was also willing to view the world in explicitly imperial terms:

> America's global supremacy is reminiscent in some ways of earlier empires, notwithstanding their more confined regional scope. These empires based their power on a hierarchy of vassals, tributaries, protectorates, and colonies, with those on the outside generally viewed as barbarians. To some degree, this anachronistic terminology is not inappropriate for some of the states currently within the American orbit.[3]

But the willingness to perceive the present through the grid of empire is also a marked feature of the contemporary academy. The energetic and ambitious Tory economic historian, Niall Ferguson, has now devoted two books to the theme of what he calls 'Anglobalization'. The first celebrates the British Empire as 'an agency for imposing free markets, the rule of law, investor protection and relatively uncorrupt government on roughly a quarter of the globe'.[4] The second reiterates the case for 'liberal empire' (which Ferguson describes as 'the political counterpart to economic globalization'), namely that the 'only hope' for the 'failed states' of the world 'would seem to be intervention by a foreign power capable of constructing the basic institutional foundations that are indispensable for economic development'. Ferguson considers the US to be the sole candidate for resuming the burden once borne by Britain of 'imperial globalization', even though he has doubts whether American political culture has the resources necessary to sustain such a role.[5]

Ferguson is by no means alone in articulating the nostalgia for the British hegemony, deeply embedded in the unconscious of the Anglo-American ruling classes, that often merges with more current preoccupations. How else can we explain that Peter Clarke, a clever, middle-of-the-road historian of the modern British centre-left (subject and object mirroring each other in a satisfactorily Hegelian way), should in retirement mimic Gibbon with a grand tome entitled *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*? But the high-profile monographs of Clarke and Ferguson are the tip of a much larger academic iceberg. In recent years: the English-speaking humanities have experienced a remarkable explosion of scholarship devoted primarily to the study of the European colonial empires and their aftermath, which has rescued colonial studies from what Frederick Cooper has called 'the doldrums of imperial history' and transformed

them into a cutting-edge form of interdisciplinarity in the contemporary academy.[6]

0.1 Marxism and imperialism

So empire and imperialism have become an acceptable topic again. But this begs the question of how they are to be understood. Imperialism can be defined very broadly or very narrowly. Thus historians and sociologists conceive it as a specific form of political domination. Michael Doyle, for example, succinctly defines empire as 'effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial society'.[7] Cooper offers a looser 'family description' that seeks to emphasize that the differences between dominant and dominated are reproduced and institutionalized by this kind of 'political unit that is large, expansionist (or with memories of an expansionist past), and which produces differentiation and inequality among people it incorporates.'[8] Such broad definitions are of transhistorical scope, designed to cover ancient Rome and China, the Ottomans and the Mughals, as well as more modern candidates. By contrast, imperialism is also sometimes equated with a very specific historical episode, namely the policy pursued during the nineteenth century by the European Great Powers, and later by the United States and Japan, of formally subordinating most of the rest of the world to their rule.

The classical Marxist conception of imperialism, formulated above all by Lenin, is more specific than the broad definition, more general than the narrow one. Imperialism is neither a transhistorical political form nor a state policy, but 'a special stage in the development of capitalism'.[9] Oddly enough, despite the rise of colonial studies and postcolonial theory, for quite a long patch of my own intellectual life, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, this approach to imperialism was not an academically respectable one. As Fred Halliday has complained, the debate on globalization that became obsessive in the social sciences in the latter decade suffered from 'the absence, or suppression, within orthodox discussion of the two analytic terms central to the analysis of this process' – namely capitalism and imperialism.[10] Even on the Marxist left, the theory of imperialism suffered the indignity of being ignored or relegated to the past. 'Whatever happened to imperialism?' asked the Indian Marxist economist Pratap Patnaik in 1990:

> An outsider cannot help noticing a remarkable transformation in the Marxist discourse in America over the last decade or more, namely,