

# Peoples, Territories and Empires: The Place of Frontiers in Imperial History

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**DRAFT VERSION**

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## Introduction

As the recent ‘Operation Troy’ in southern Iraq aimed at cracking down on cross-border smuggling indicates, control over territories matter to Empires.<sup>1</sup> Since the invasion occupation of Iraq, the USA and its allies have dedicated significant resources to regulating and securing the borders of that country. Speaking of the 28,000-strong Iraqi border police funded and trained by the occupying powers, Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, commander of the Multinational Forces explained how ‘One of the greatest advantages of secure borders is the ability to trade with your neighbors. So, although we want to stop all illegal things from being shipped over the border, we also want to create the type of environment that allows commerce to grow between Iraq and all of its neighbors.’<sup>2</sup>

The Lieutenant General’s understanding of territorial control is a peculiarly modern one. It assumes the neat (and enforceable) distinction between states and markets: that is, it conceives of a complementary division of labour between the political control over a well-defined and exclusive territory, and wealth-creation through economic exchange. This is not, however, a distinction that has obtained in most historical empires prior to the advent of industrial capitalism, and one which I therefore want to argue, has powerful implications for the way we understand imperial territorialities. I wish to investigate the changing nature of imperial rule by looking at empire’s edges, suggesting that there is a close connection between the spatial organisation of empires and imperial ways of generating wealth. Taking my lead from Ellen Wood’s recent work on the subject, I shall argue that whereas capitalist empires generally seek to rule over populations by controlling territory, other – chiefly tributary - empires tend to rule over territories by controlling their populations. The ‘double freedom’ of capitalism has historically required ‘closed frontiers’ (state sovereignty) precisely so that ‘open doors’ (capitalist social relations) can flourish. Pre-capitalist empires on the other hand have tended to rely extra-economic exploitative forms – be it through slavery, enfeoffment or tributary taxation – which are not structurally dependent on a clear and exclusive definition of territory. These divergent logics can help to explain the crises and contradictions of different imperial experiences, and in particular the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Troops close Iranian border and crack down on insurgents’, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, commander of the Multinational Forces in ‘Border Police Take on Mission of Securing Iraq’s Frontier’, American Forces Information Service [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/May2006/20060507\\_5048.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/May2006/20060507_5048.html). (Downloaded 26 February 2007).

current crisis of US imperialism. In essence, I suggest that neo-conservative military adventurism in Iraq and Afghanistan has forced Washington into experiments in direct occupation and exogenous state-building which are antithetical to the dominant logic of capitalist reproduction. To that extent, the USA under the Bush II administrations is arguably undoing the multilateral hegemonic order that served it so well for the past fifty years, premised on a 'pluriversal' system of states and capitalist markets. In order to elucidate these claims, the following section of the paper considers the notions of empire and frontiers, and their interaction. A second part offers some brief illustrations of how the competing logics of capitalist and tributary imperialism played themselves out in late nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century attempts at closing the colonial frontier, while the conclusion considers the implications of all this for the current analysis of US global power projection.

### Frontiers and Empires

The English word 'Empire' derives from the Latin *imperium* for 'command', 'authority', 'rulership' or indeed just plain 'power'. *Imperium* was, for the first three hundred years or so of Roman expansion associated to the power invested in magistrates to declare war and make law. It was only after the so-called Augustan revolution in the first century BC that the abstract noun 'empire' became a proper noun denoting the actual Roman Empire as a political entity. Since that time western conceptions of empire, and its much later, more active cognate 'imperialism' have referred back to the Roman template. Thus, an empire can be defined as an expansive polity which, with the assistance of military, economic and cultural instruments of order, dominates and exploits a subordinated population from a metropolitan centre. As I've suggested at greater length elsewhere, empires have historically been characterised by three broad impulses: expansion, hierarchy and order.<sup>3</sup> They sustain each of these dynamics in often radically different and contradictory ways. Yet, without falling into the trap of ascribing a trans-historical homogeneity, these features of empire can be usefully contrasted to those guiding the current international system of states where most nations seek to contain, not expand their borders; and where the formal, juridical hierarchy of imperial order has been replaced by an anarchical order of formally equal sovereign states. As I shall shortly indicate, this contrast is by no means absolute or definitive: plenty of the socio-economic, political and cultural features of historical empires live on in our post-colonial world. But I will also show how, with regard to the organisation of political space, there has been a significant shift from imperial to international territorialities.

This is especially clear if we consider the place of frontiers in the development of empires. Like other contested concepts, the notion of 'frontier' has varied enormously through time and in place. The currently accepted distinction in political geography is between frontiers, boundaries and borders. According to the *Blackwells Dictionary of Human Geography*: 'The terms border and frontier are sometimes used as if they were equivalents to boundary, which they are in popular English-language usage. But they seem more "matter of fact" referring to legal or official boundary lines and zonal areas respectively.'<sup>4</sup> Another historical-analytical survey contrasts

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<sup>3</sup> In Colás, *Empire* (Polity Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Johnston *et al* (eds) *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, Fourth edition (Cambridge: Blackwells, 2000). See also J.R.V. Prescott, *Political Frontiers and Boundaries* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

European notions of the *political frontier* ('a political barrier between states or peoples ... sometimes envisaged as linear, sometimes as a zone') with American conceptions of *frontiers of settlement* ('not a barrier but a zone of passage and a land of opportunity, involving conflict with the natural environment rather than neighbours').<sup>5</sup> Whatever their dominant tendency, or whichever their particular combination, political and settler frontiers can be said to be 'open' to the extent that their limits ebb and flow with changes in demographic, military, economic and environmental conditions, while they are 'closed' once a single political authority can exercise exclusive territorial control within well-defined borders.

With this distinction in mind, one of the remarkable features of most historical empires is that they are built on open frontiers. As expansive social formations, geared toward the absorption of subject peoples and territories, empires have historically been built on ill-defined territorial limits. They have certainly constructed sophisticated ideologies of domination premised on the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' or 'civilized' and 'barbarian', but these demarcations have rarely been permanently fixed in space. Instead, imperial conceptions of the world rely on the very existence of an 'outside', a region at the edges of the known world which may still be discovered, conquered or assimilated into an expanding imperial order.

Such conceptions of political space have concrete implications for the reproduction of imperial orders as the frontier itself becomes a site of wealth-creation. Two examples might be used to illustrate this. In his influential study on the sources of social power, Michael Mann identified the Roman Empire as a militarised state premised on two overarching structures: what he called 'the legionary economy' based on extensive, military power and the intensive authoritative power of a peculiarly Roman class system. 'The first was the major hierarchical distributive form of power; the second, the major horizontal, collective form. Through their conjunction, what Rome acquired, Rome kept.'<sup>6</sup> Characterised by a literate but strongly martial culture rooted in rural aristocratic principles of simplicity, sturdiness and the defense of the land, the early Romans developed a sophisticated system of military gradation which according to Mann, was to secure future victories: 'Roman success was based on fusing military and economic. The first is what Michael Mann called the Roman empire's 'legionary economy'. The reproductive logic of the Roman Empire was dictated by historically-bounded, pre-modern dynamics: it was the requirements of an essentially land-based, tributary and aristocratic state, sustained by a unique Graeco-Roman cosmology which gave early imperial Rome its militaristic and expansionist nature. Mann is certainly right to emphasise that the '[Roman] state was largely an army. The state-led economy was an army-led economy'.<sup>7</sup> But to this we must also add that such a martial state was buttressed by the extra-economic exploitation of both slave and free labour, legitimised through the historically unique mixed constitution, and culturally reproduced through peculiarly pre-modern forms political. All these structural features of the Roman Empire, I shall later argue, are absent from contemporary modes of social power; and indeed cannot but be absent given the deep historical rupture in the forms of political and social reproduction between the ancient and modern imperial forms. As we have seen, the Romans had relied on tribute, tax, slavery and private property in land as the chief

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<sup>5</sup> D. Power and N. Standen (eds), *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands 700-1700* (London: Palgrave 1999). See also H. Lamar and L. Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> M. Mann, *Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

sources of economic surplus. Roman legions buttressed and indeed lived off these forms of surplus extraction themselves, but they rarely sought to administer subject populations directly, preferring instead to devolve political authority to a variety of local intermediaries who ruled in the name of the Roman Empire.

Something similar can be said of one of the successors to the eastern Roman empire a millennium later – the Ottoman empire. The initial phase of Ottoman conquest over what were to become its imperial heartlands of Anatolia and Rumelia bore the unmistakable imprint of a frontier polity. During the better part of the fourteenth century Ottoman westward expansion was achieved in one of two ways: on the back of alliances or vassalage agreements with local Christian lords eager to protect themselves from rival princes in the context of a decaying and anarchic Byzantium, or by turning Ottoman frontier raiders (*akinji*) into marcher lords (*uc-beys* or *uc-emirs*) ruling over borderlands on behalf of the House of Osman.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, the existing institutions of rule based on tribute-taking and raiding remained relatively intact under Ottoman suzerainty during this period, as did the dynastic structures of the Christian vassal princes or the kinship ties of the *akinji*.

These arrangements of indirect rule were gradually replaced by a more direct and formalised administration of subject populations in the course of the fifteenth century as the Ottoman state itself developed a formidable military-bureaucratic infrastructure. To the powerful force of cavalrymen (*sipahis*) was added the a new elite corps of infantrymen made up of assimilated captives (the *Janissaries*) and specifically Ottoman administrative body geared toward centralising and standardising political and fiscal authority. Territorial conquest thus gave way to political consolidation as the military power of the cavalry and the political authority of the Palace combined to extract tax and tribute from subject populations. Two inter-related institutions, that of the *dirlik* (literally, ‘livelihood’ or ‘income’) and the *sanjak* (‘banner’ or standard’) encapsulate the Ottoman administration of empire at this time.

The term *dirlik* refers to state revenue collected by a class of tax-exempt military commanders (*askeri*) from their tax-paying subjects (*reaya* or ‘flock’). On falling under the Ottoman banner, newly conquered lands were declared property of the Sultan (*miri* lands), and their inhabitants his subjects. *Askeris* – overwhelmingly *sipahis* - were then granted non-hereditary rights to a *dirlik* of varying yields (the most widespread being a *timar* - literally, ‘horse-grooming’), conditional upon rendering military service to the sultan. Simultaneously, the Palace appointed a *sanjak bey* or district governor as military commander of diverse *dirlik*- or fiefholders within a given province. His chief responsibility was to mobilise *sipahis* and other fiefholders for the sultan’s military campaigns.

By way of buttressing this military-tributary complex and in particular, undermining the temptation of distant fiefholders turning into feudal lords independent from the sultan, there emerged a system of cadastral registration which allowed Palace officials to monitor at regular intervals the collection and transfer of tax revenues from subjects to rulers. This was gradually codified into a distinct body of Ottoman law – or *kanunname* – which, though drawing heavily on local custom, and despite its uneven application across the empire, did however become the major source of metropolitan authority in the provinces. Such a body of secular law was complemented by Islamic institutions, most notably *sharia* law applied to Muslims by *kadis* or judges who in many instances also acted on behalf of the Palace in secular matters of crime or property.

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<sup>8</sup> See the classic essay by Halil Inalcik, ‘Ottoman Methods of Conquest’, *Studia Islamica*, No.2, 1954, pp. 104-29.

The net result of these various overlapping layers of fiscal-legal authority, military power and mechanisms of surplus appropriation was a distinctly imperial organisation of space. The military extension of the frontier paved the way for a redistribution of lands and peoples along both social and geographical hierarchies: a class of fiefholders (be they *akinji* or local aristocrats) exploited direct producers while state officials appointed by the Palace – both secular and religious – administered the provinces and regulated the collection and transfer of revenues to the centre. In most respects, such structures point to the existence from the sixteenth century of a modern, centralised and bureaucratised national state, with its own standardised administrative norms, rationalised taxation, powerful standing armies and an extensive system of record-keeping. Yet in the crucial area of territorial administration, the Ottoman state betrayed its imperial character as even at the very height of its powers, the Sublime Porte was not always and everywhere willing or able to exercise absolute control over the full extent of its territories.

### **Great Britain as a Transitional Empire**

While the Romans encapsulated empire-building in western antiquity, laying the military, political and cultural markers of future empires west of the Euphrates, it was the British Empire which served as the touchstone for modern, capitalist imperialism. Other major empires of both west and east – Abbasid, Hapsburg, Mughal – certainly contributed to the definition of imperial rule and exploitation in the intervening years, but the overseas expansion of the first capitalist nation was to transform the modern understanding of empire and imperialism. The key to this transformation was the addition of capitalist property relations to the imperial equation, and with it the commodification of the forces of production – most crucially labour.

As we have seen, the Romans and Ottomans had relied on tribute, tax, slavery and private property in land as the chief sources of economic surplus. Roman legions generated and indeed lived off these forms of surplus extraction themselves, but they rarely sought to administer subject populations directly, preferring instead to devolve political authority to a variety of local intermediaries who ruled in the name of the Roman Empire. Something very similar was true of the British empire right into the early twentieth century. Capitalist England had exported agrarian capitalism via colonial settlement to Ireland from the sixteenth century, and subsequently to North America, southern Africa and Australasia. Prior to the capitalist industrialisation of the metropole, agrarian capitalism co-existed abroad with plantation slavery and long-distance trade as the principal mechanisms of wealth-creation. To this extent, the ‘first’ British empire of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was principally a mercantile empire built on the Royal Navy’s supremacy over the high seas and its strategic control of the world’s major straits. It certainly exercised control over significant territories, but this was done through indirect rule, unequal treaties and various degrees of self-government for the white settler colonies. Even in its most prized of imperial possession, India, the British Raj famously survived by employing a mere 50,000 (mainly Indian) troops and at most, a couple of thousand European officials in the policing and administration of this vast territory, right to the end of the nineteenth century (Fisher, 1999: 8; see also Porter, 2007). Thus, like its western precursors, the British empire was initially built on imprecise external boundaries and diverse internal administrative arrangements; unlike the Romans, Spanish or

Ottomans, however, it was the Royal Navy - not the legion, cavalry or infantry- which secured the imperial outposts.

Three inter-related developments of the latter nineteenth century were, in a protracted fashion, to force this first indirect seaborne British empire into a second, more directly territorial phase. The first of these developments was the consolidation of industrial capitalism in Britain and its accelerated growth across continental Europe and North America. This had a momentous impact on the socio-economic and political structures of the metropole which were soon to be extended to the colonial periphery in the form of massive investment in transport, communications, mining, agriculture, manufacturing and banking, not just by British, but now by European, US and to an increasing extent, Japanese capital.

Secondly, this growth and expansion of industrial capital coincided with the process of national unification and state-formation in these centres of metropolitan accumulation. Thus, the latecomers to industrial capitalism and state-formation soon sought to catch up on empire-building too, and so the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century took a violent, militarist and territorial turn with German, French, Belgian, Italian and even Spanish, Russian and Portuguese capitals competing for territorial control over different parts of Africa, Asia and the greater Middle East. As Martti Koskenniemi has so ably documented, this carve-up of the world's 'dark continents' and its human and natural resources was legitimised by an emerging international legal-diplomatic infrastructure quaintly described by some IR scholars as 'the expansion international society' (Koskenniemi, 2001).

Finally, such transformations unfolded in the context of a deep socio-economic and political convulsion in Europe and beyond. The economic depression of the 1870s was compounded by the rise in the following decades of mass socio-political movements in Europe and beyond. This latter development was crucial in the definition of the territorial state as the appropriate locus for addressing political grievances by mass movements of nationalist, socialist or other ideological persuasions. Although it was to be several decades before such organisations become politically decisive, the new imperialism of the nineteenth century (the British case included) engendered its own antithesis in the form of national liberation movements by increasingly seeking to not just control, but also *administer* colonial populations for the benefit of local and metropolitan capital. The mid-Victorian, non-territorial 'imperialism of free trade' had by the end of the nineteenth century been transformed into a more coherent system of territorial administration over subject populations. As the London Pall Mall Gazette editorialised in 1885

In times past ... we did what we pleased, where we pleased, and as we pleased. The whole of heathendom, to use a comprehensive term, was our inheritance, and the salt sea our peculiar possession. All that has changed. Europe has overflowed into Africa, Asia, America, Australasia and the Pacific. At every turn we are confronted with the gunboats, the sea lairs, or the colonies of jealous and eager rivals (Cited in Porter, 1996: 117).

The source of this European 'overflow' to other continents was unquestionably the pump of industrial capitalism. European settlers brought agrarian capitalism as they extended the frontier of imperial rule, subjecting local populations to 'internal colonialism' through land expropriation, enslavement and legalised racism. But they rarely achieved 'closure' of the frontier. It was industrial capitalism, with its reliance on the mobility of factors of production and a complex division of labour which

paradoxically affirmed the political authority of the territorially-bounded state. As Robert Sack reminds us

[t]he expansion and intensification of capitalism made the modern territorial effects of conceptually empty space and impersonal bureaucracy even more of an integral part of the geographical environment [...] Heightened geographical mobility and continuous commodification of place makes the public-economic meaning of space more and more a metrical system of locations and distances to which events are contingently connected. Within this context, political territories continue to be convenient molds for transient labour and capital. They are molds which can be conceptually emptied and filled, and these hierarchies of territoriality defined communities reinforce impersonal relations (Sack, 1986: 154-55).

Because the spatial logic of industrial capitalism tended toward the ‘molding’ or ‘fixing’ of political authority within a closed, bounded territory, the modern state increasingly became the depository of such power. Consequently, the ‘new imperialism’ of the late nineteenth century was characterised not only by the export of capital to the colonies, but also by its export of the territorially exclusive state as the dominant form of rule.

This budding expression of capitalist imperialism departed from previous imperial experiences but also set the structural foundations of future US global hegemony. Contrary to preceding imperial experiences, the later British empire (like its ‘new imperialist’ counterparts) was increasingly concerned with closing frontiers and guaranteeing a monopoly over the means of violence within delimited borders. The earlier historical mission of securing colonial outposts became increasingly complicated by the ‘horizontal’ challenge of rival imperial states and the ‘vertical’ mass mobilisation of indigenous populations against capitalist exploitation and colonial rule. To this we should add what John Galbraith called the ‘Turbulent Frontier’ factor – ie. fear of financially and militarily strategic colonies being engulfed by socio-political disorder - which increasingly preoccupied British ‘men-on-the-spot’ and indeed their superiors in London (Galbraith, 1960).

Although clearly differentiated through time and place, the response to such challenges across the British empire was, by the turn of the twentieth century, to extend direct control over colonial territories and their populations. In Africa alone, the myriad indigenous political communities which had existed prior to European encroachment were transformed at the Berlin Congress of 1884-85 into forty territorially exclusive states ruled by European powers, thirty of which fell under British domain. The multiplication of proconsular government through London-appointed Governor-Generals, Residents and High Commissioners was accompanied by campaigns aimed at pacifying and annexing frontier territories, concluding border treaties and alliances with competing imperial states, and securing law and order within these borders through an increased militarisation of imperial power and the policing of colonial rule (Anderson and Killingray, 1991). It was therefore the development of a properly capitalist imperialism which, paradoxically (given the geographically footloose tendencies of capital) delivered a modern, territorial form of colonial rule.

As Whitehall and Westminster increasingly committed resources to annexing, securing and policing bounded territories and their inhabitants on behalf of the

Crown, so the pressures of 'imperial overstretch' began to appear at the start of the twentieth century. British imperial power had from its origins relied on the marriage of naval supremacy and the compelling force of its markets. It had been ill-prepared, both materially and ideologically, to take on the task of administering extensive territories and their populations for the benefit of expanded capitalist reproduction. Decades of 'splendid isolation' and 'off-shore balancing' had moreover left Britain's political and military institutions vulnerable to socio-economic and geopolitical competition from its continental rivals - both at home and abroad. In the absence of industrial capitalism elsewhere in the world, British hegemony could be reproduced through 'informal empire' of influence and the 'imperialism of free trade'. But the need for industrial capital to exercise spatio-temporal control over both property and labour through the institutions of the territorially exclusive colonial state, coupled with the rise of mass politics which contested such control with reference to the authority of this very state, rapidly undermined London's capacity to hold on to its imperial primacy across the globe.

British imperial power therefore reached its apogee at the turn of the twentieth century with a spatial logic which was markedly different to that which had characterised its early expansion and mid-Victorian halcyon days. By the end of World War I, the aspiration to national self-determination became inscribed in the emerging inter-war international society while the colonial participation in the European civil war of 1914-1945 added even greater momentum to the nationalist movements of the colonies and their metropolitan supporters. Britain did attempt to revive its moribund empire during these mandatory years through the well-worn combination of coercion (principally through the newly-founded Royal Air Force) and consent (in attempts at establishing an imperial federation or 'commonwealth'). But the discrepancy between the British empire's reliance on the capitalist market for its social reproduction and its political incapacity to administer its vast territorial domains eventually led to the postwar retreat from empire (Jeffrey, 1984). The limits of British capitalist imperialism were therefore characterised by the structural contradiction between the socio-economic requirement to reproduce value at home and abroad, and the political inability to regulate and administer the territories and populations which generated such value. Like its ancient Roman predecessor, the later British empire was unable to reconcile *dominium* and *imperium*, except on this occasion the *dominium* was over capital and labour, and the *imperium* over populations which increasingly identified with a fixed and bounded territory: the national state. To that extent, the British imperial experience can - notwithstanding all its variations in time and place - be considered as transitional moment between pre-modern mercantilist, tributary or agrarian imperialism and the modern, capitalist system of states.

### **The USA and Global Capitalist Hegemony**

The USA emerged as the dominant global power after 1941 into a world dominated by closed frontiers. Its main task thereafter was to continue opening doors to capitalist markets. Wherever either of these two requirements of capitalist hegemony - closed frontiers and open doors - was threatened; whenever state sovereignty of an allied state was imperilled or democratic social forces challenged the extension of capitalist markets, there and then Washington projected its global power in an attempt to shore up territorial authority and capitalist social relations. The USA had various resources in the pursuit of such aims: as the largest capitalist economy, it had the compulsion of

the market on its side; as the leading capitalist state, it enjoyed the authority to coordinate other capitalist states; as a liberal democracy it could elicit the socio-political and cultural consent of its own and other populations; and as a military superpower it is able to deploy overwhelming lethal force by land, air and sea. Although these various expressions (though not necessarily 'sources') of social power were closely interlinked, they have since combined in different ways depending on the nature of the adversary, the political character of the incumbent Administration and the historical context under which such power is exercised. Clearly, the US Administration which responded to the Soviet-backed invasion of southern Korea in 1950 was motivated and conditioned by a very different set of domestic and international factors to those which drove the Reagan counter-revolutionary campaigns in Central America during the 1980s. In both these instances, however, it could be said that US foreign policy was geared toward upholding the integrity of allied states and at combating those who sought to undermine or simply curb the power of capitalist markets.

Such continuity in Washington's policy across the different phases of the Cold War was in turn structurally conditioned by the very specific character of American preponderance. Notwithstanding its own bloody imperial outings in the Philippines, central America and the Caribbean during the first decades of the twentieth century, the USA has since 1945 exercised a form of global hegemony which was absent in ancient and early-modern empires and only incipient in the British empire: one where the diffusion of political authority to independent national states acts as the principal mechanism for centrally accruing power through the workings of the global capitalist market. During this epoch David Harvey suggests 'It is the state that is the political entity, the body politic, that is best able to orchestrate institutional arrangements and manipulate the molecular forces of capital accumulation to preserve that pattern of asymmetries in exchange that are most advantageous to the dominant capitalist interests working within this frame.' (Harvey, 2003: 133). Moreover, under such a geopolitical configuration, global power can no longer be projected merely in an imperial fashion to secure outcomes unilaterally and through force, but instead increasingly relies on the multilateral coordination of hegemony principally through consensual means.

In his magisterial historical analysis of American Empire, Charles S. Maier identifies two places that embody this secret to postwar US primacy: Alamogordo, New Mexico - where the world's first atomic bomb was detonated in July 1945- and Highland Park, Michigan - where the mass production of Henry Ford's Model T automobile begun on the first day of 1910 (Maier, 2007). 'American ascendancy' he notes, 'was based in part upon a "Fordist" organization of economic activity as well as on the possession of weapons of mass destruction' (Maier, 2006: 145). Washington planners during and after World War II were acutely aware that both these expressions of the USA's relative power in world affairs had to be carefully coordinated and managed if they were to deliver continued American primacy. The system of regional and bilateral alliances fostered by Washington - most notably the Atlantic Alliance, but also the Baghdad Pact, SEATO or the 1951 US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty - was during the post-war decades harnessed to what Maier calls the 'politics of productivity' aimed at securing economic reconstruction, stability and growth across the parts of the post-war world that remained under capitalist rule. Thus, Fordism (as Antonio Gramsci had already presaged in the 1920s) came to represent not only a mechanism for generating productivity gains, but a whole regime of accumulation where all kinds of public and private dimension of social life - from

consumption patterns to sexual mores – were colonised and regulated by market forces. On this reading, the post-war American empire was reproduced as much through military ‘facts on the ground’ like air and naval bases and occupation authorities, as it was by way of ‘invitation’ from Social- and Christian democratic social forces fearful of communism (Lundestad, 1986), or indeed through the more surreptitious and disarming weapons of Mickey Mouse or Doris Day.

One key consequence of this new distribution of global power, for our purposes, was the reorganisation of the rules governing imperial space. Although Maier uses the term ‘frontier’ in a looser, metaphorical sense than I have in this article, he rightly emphasises how, like other empires, the USA extended its geopolitical reach to the points of contact with its Soviet rival - thereby demarcating a new imperial limes with a complex of military bases bordering the Eurasian rim lands. Yet these new Cold War frontiers were actually hardened into highly militarised *borders* (be it the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, or the Oder-Neisse line) which, in both Soviet and American cases were predicated a greater degree of political autonomy and territorial integrity of their respective satellites than in previous empires. Ecumenical ambitions of past empires now had to comply with the reality of a world where imperialism, to coin a phrase, was ‘at bay’ and where territorial sovereignty had been universalised as an international norm. Maier readily acknowledges this constraining factor in US imperialism after 1945: ‘Franklin Roosevelt, like Woodrow Wilson, had dreamed of an American leadership that was constrained by benevolent institutions and Christian precepts but not spatial boundaries. The postwar administrations traded that ambition for a less diffuse concept of exerting influence. Inheriting Wilsonianism, accepting the rivalry with Soviet and Communist ambition, they helped to construct a territorial domain and a post-territorial domain simultaneously’ (Maier, 2007: 149). This was, then, an empire fashioned out of the territorial logic of nuclear diplomacy (Alamogordo) and the post-territorial - or more properly, trans-territorial - dynamics of capitalist production (Highland Park).

As was indicated earlier, the later British empire had already recognised the need to conjugate territorial to post-territorial expressions of global power when reproducing an empire of capital. But despite calls for a ‘constructive imperialism’ which might unite the empire politically under the leadership of the British state (Green, 1999), neither Westminster nor Whitehall were in the event able to manage politically their socio-economic primacy – not least because they did not possess an equivalent to the atomic bombs. Americans on the other hand, had learned to do so by the end of World War II, albeit not purely through enlightened self-interest nor under the conditions of its own choosing. Postwar US-led hegemony was to be challenged by anti-capitalist forces inspired by, and sometimes emerging from the Bolshevik revolution, which combined revolutionary power and geopolitical force in ways not witnessed since the rise of Napoleonic France. The weakest link in the structure of postwar US domination paradoxically became its insistence on forcing open doors through closed frontiers: that is, in promoting the proliferation of *capitalist states*. The more Washington sought to impose capitalist social relations through the authority of allied states, the more its global hegemony was radically contested (both at home and abroad). By way of illustration, I shall briefly consider the history of US Cold War hegemony in East Asia, then to consider how this form of international power projection has survived into the period after the Cold War.

*Filling the Void: Enforcing Independence After World War II*

Scholars of war-time and immediate postwar US foreign policy have documented the internal tensions within the newly emerging and highly-complex national security state (Kolko, 1969; Leffler, 1992). Contending visions of how Washington should manage and project its newfound superpower status clashed at the heart of government. The War and Navy Departments (and the Joint Chiefs of Staff) generally favoured the immediate, tactical imposition of US military power against emerging Soviet threats, while the Department of State reports and Presidential statements emphasised the need for a more expansive, long-term strategy of multilateral allied 'containment' of communism. Clearly these opposing views were not always incompatible, but they do represent the central tension in the US foreign policy establishment between unilateralists and multilateralists which continues to this day. Yet there were at least two areas on which these opposing positions converged. The first was the need to occupy the geopolitical vacuum left by crumbling European empires and the defeated Axis powers with friendly but formally independent states. The second was to secure American supremacy through a system of defence alliances where the USA offered military protection in exchange for political allegiance (Leffler, 1984; Gowan, 2003). In many respects this was a perfect formula for 'informal empire'; but as opposed to the British experience, such an empire was built on the ever-present possibility that formal independence might be given some substantive content. As Michael Mann has suggested, '[n]ineteenth-century client rulers were much less troublesome than today's. They could not refuse or bargain with the British or French, or even Belgian imperialists. The Europeans overthrew them if they tried.' (Mann, 2003: 21) Contemporary US hegemony has had to manage clients with far greater political autonomy and socio-economic and military resources, which in turn have rendered this empire vulnerable in very different ways to its predecessors.

In the case of East Asia the realisation of such vulnerability became especially acute after the 'loss' of China to communism in October 1949. National Security Council document 48/1, penned a couple of months after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, affirmed that 'Asia is an arena of significant political power ... The development of this region of stable and independent countries friendly to the United States and seeking to direct their potential power into constructive channels would enhance the security of Asia and strengthen the world position of the United States [...] Our over-all objective with respect to Asia must be to assist in the development of truly independent, friendly, stable and self-sustaining states in conformity with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter.' (Etzold and Gaddis, 1978: 253).

An anti-colonial Roosevelt had insisted, right from the proclamation of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 that the 'respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live' enshrined in that document should include not just the territories and dependencies of the defeated enemy, but also European colonial possessions. Roosevelt's preferred replacement for imperial control was an international trusteeship which would oversee the socio-economic and political development of 'dependent peoples' toward 'self-government'. In the particular case of Korea, this would involve a tripartite supervision by the USA, China and the USSR. In the event, severe resistance to the idea in Washington and London, coupled with Roosevelt's death in April 1945 prevented the trusteeship idea from taking off. But the defeat of this multilateral response to the question of postcolonial vacuum in authority did not imply the restitution of imperial control; instead it reaffirmed the unilateral option of imposing national independence:

FDR's internationalism was a matter of means, not ends; the goal was American hegemony in the postwar world. Yet means make a difference, and with Roosevelt gone, the balance shifted to those who preferred classical nationalist methods: the use of military force and occupation, direct confrontation with the Soviets and the establishment of definite territorial boundaries. Trusteeship and other internationalist devices remained the preferred methods of an increasingly isolated set of foreign policy elite. In the case of Korea, this policy of containing the Soviets and anticolonial nationalism through multilateral means was put aside in the harried weeks after Potsdam in favor of a unilateral policy of rushing troops into a peninsula virtually conceded to the Russians in mid-July [1945]. The result was a divided nation, and the first postwar act of containment (Cumings, 1981: 131-2).

The ascendancy of 'unilateralists' under the Truman Administration paved the way for a direct American administration of Japan after its surrender in August 1945. Korea's former imperial masters were also to be ruled through military force (already lethally exercised in its atomic version) and occupation directed toward suppressing communist opposition and securing Japan's territorial integrity. In the course of the seven-year occupation, Washington's policy toward this 'Germany of the East' went through several phases, marked in large measure by the broader geopolitical developments in the region. John Dower has charted this shift from an initial commitment to 'demilitarization and democratization' in the first years of MacArthur's proconsular supreme command to the subordinate integration of Japan into a regional defence umbrella as part of the 1951 peace treaty which ended occupation (Dower, 1993; Halliday, 1976; Higuchi, 2001). In the course of these years, elements of socio-economic and political continuity (reconstruction of *zaibatsu*, restitution of the imperial office, limited purging of civil servants) combined with the implementation of radical changes (land reform, legalisation of the Communist Party, extension of labour rights). After 1947, the latter came under threat with the military suppression of trades union activism and the start of plans for Japanese remilitarisation. Yet by the end of occupation, the US had achieved its principal objectives with respect to Japan as set out by the 1949 NSC 13/3: to retain military bases in Okinawa and the Rkykyu islands, place political responsibility 'in the hands of the Japanese government' and secure 'economic recovery' through the 'revival of Japanese foreign trade, with provision for Japanese merchant shipping, and to facilitate the restoration and development of Japanese exports'. All this, the document clarified 'will in large part depend on Japanese efforts to raise production and to maintain high export levels through hard work, a minimum of work-stoppages, internal austerity measures and the stern combating of inflationary trends including efforts to achieve a balanced internal budget as rapidly as possible'. (*Foreign Relations of the United States 1949*, 1974: 730-736).

### *Enforcing Freedom: Limits and Contradictions*

While Japan is generally considered as the success story of postwar occupation and reconstruction in East Asia, the experience in Korea was of course the

opposite. Although leftwing anti-militarism has remained a persistent feature of postwar Japanese politics, in Korea the anti-colonial forces of the left were from the outset able to secure territorial control over the northern zone of the peninsula, to this day presenting geopolitical challenge to the US-led capitalist hegemony in the region. This contrast in the experience of US attempts at postwar state-building in east Asia serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the weakest link in postwar US hegemony, namely the possibility that revolutionary movements might give socio-political substance to the American promotion of formal sovereignty. In other words, that long-standing anticolonial social forces might reject capitalist models of national development and instead turn toward the Soviet or revolutionary forms of reconstruction and state-formation .

It is this insistence on reproducing a world of nation-states open to capitalist markets which has produced the ‘Tragedy of American Diplomacy’ in the postwar years. As Washington attempted to defend and promote friendly states and free markets it became engulfed in complex socio-political struggles which generally stemmed from this very support for friendly regimes and capitalist interest. The vicious cycle was often completed by military interventions, covert action or counterinsurgency campaigns which contradicted Washington’s aims at effecting hegemony through the consensual mechanisms of the market and the formal equality of state sovereignty. Thus, virtually every postwar US foreign intervention – from the 1953 coups in Guatemala and Iran, to the 1958 amphibious landings in Lebanon and the ten-year campaign in Vietnam, through to the support of counter-revolutionary forces in central America and Afghanistan during the 1980s- has resulted from the insistence on backing the forces of capital and state order in each of these allied countries. Highlighting the impact of social revolution in the dynamics of American foreign policy during the Cold War, Richard Saull documents how ‘Revolutions ... sparked American attempts to redraw local-regional political and economic realities to consolidate the power and stability of surrounding states, and prevent the spread of the political contestation of the wider existing political order. However, in doing so, American international relations were forced to focus not purely on the expansion and growth of American capital, but rather on the consolidation of state power in these regions ...’ (Saull, 2001: 179).

The specific limits of US global power, then, lie in its contradictory promotion of sovereign states and free markets. Unlike previous global hegemony, the US is neither interested in territorial acquisition nor in prolonged military occupations; it does not rely on tribute or the forcible control of populations for its socio-economic reproduction. Rather, American global power projects itself through the mediation of states and the trans-territorial dynamics of the capitalist market. Its preferred form of rule is through allies, not dominions; its source of wealth capitalist exchange, not tribute; and its political geography organised around a pluriverse of closed frontiers rather than a limitless universal *ecumene*. To be sure, such sources of power and wealth are policed through an extensive network of military bases and the US domination over air and sea through supreme firepower. But, as the concluding section of this essay will suggest, the unique organisation of political space under American hegemony prevents it from dominating on land. And in a post-colonial world of mass politics and exclusive territorial authority, controlling outcomes means controlling populations through the territorial power of the state.

## **Conclusions: Why America Does Not ‘Do’ Colonialism**

Asked by an al-Jazeera journalist in February 2003 whether the USA was in danger of becoming an imperial power by invading Iraq, the then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld replied negatively: ‘We’ve never been a colonial power. We don’t take our force and go around the world and try to take other people’s real estate or other people’s resources, their oil. That’s just not what the United States does.’ (US Department of Defense, 2003). This statement might come as news to native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos and other peoples whose forebears experienced American colonialism very directly. But, historical amnesia aside, Rumsfeld’s assessment, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, is broadly correct with regard to post-1945 American foreign policy. In contrast to its major western precursors, the contemporary American empire has not so much acquired other people’s ‘real estate’ and resources through forceful occupation and colonial administration, as it has accrued wealth and geopolitical power by combining a system of territorial states with a global, trans-territorial capitalist market. This in turn has limited Washington’s capacity to directly control the political fate of foreign peoples in a properly imperial style: America has ‘done’ overseas colonialism after 1945- just not very well. The failure of the US-led occupation of Iraq is perhaps the most notable recent example of such limits to American empire, crystallising a number of the peculiar features of US hegemony outlined in this paper.

The first of these is Washington’s reliance of the territorial integrity of other states for the reproduction of its own empire. The USA used its overwhelming military force in Iraq with three chief aims: to defeat an enemy regime and replace it with an allied one; to restore state legitimacy and internal order; and to guarantee Iraq’s territorial integrity whilst promoting a liberal version of the free market in that country and its neighbours. The first two of these objectives are broadly consonant with those pursued by other historical empires; but the last one is peculiar to the requirements of a properly *capitalist* empire. American imperialism in Iraq was no doubt triggered by a host of conjunctural developments – neo-conservatism in the White House, the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent defeat of the Taliban regime – combined with more longstanding strategic aims in the area – securing oil reserves and a regional order favourable to the USA and its allies. Yet for a capitalist hegemon operating under an international system of states, such imperial aims require above all the prior reconstruction of state sovereignty: without the stable, legitimate and exclusive territorial authority of the state, the profits flowing from the violent imposition of liberal governance and a market economy in Iraq remain elusive. To that extent, the invasion and occupation of Iraq follows the wider logic of US foreign policy after 9/11 outlined by Neil Smith in his outstanding book on American Empire: ‘[w]e can see the “war on terrorism” as something less, yet also more than, simply a war for oil. It is a war to fill the interstices of globalization. These interstices may be cast as entire nation-states (Afghanistan, Iraq) but also smaller regions (the occupied West bank) ... Viewed from the White House or Wall Street, the war against terrorism is a war to eliminate these interstices in an otherwise globalizing world in which the alchemy of “our values” has achieved a perfect fusion of freedom, democracy and capitalist profit.’ (Smith, 2003).

While the conjunctural dimensions of the post-9/11 world are by definition unique to this period, the ‘perfect fusion of freedom, democracy and capitalist profit’ invoked by Smith has been a feature of American imperialism since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Much has been made of the ideological motivations behind the decision to effect ‘regime change’ in Iraq. The role of ‘American nationalism’, ‘Wilsonianism on Steroids’ or ‘forward-leaning liberalism’ in the policy-making on Iraq has been well-documented by Washington insiders and officials (Halper and Clarke, 2004; Packer, 2006; Philips, 2006; Woodward, 2004). What is less-frequently observed is the broad continuity in Iraq policy across all post-Cold War US Administrations (Bacevich, 2002). It was after all President Clinton who coined the term ‘rogue states’ and his Special Assistant Martin Indyk who declared the Administration’s policy in 1993 was to ‘establish clearly and unequivocally that the current regime in Iraq is a criminal regime, beyond the pale of international society and, in our judgement, irredeemable’ (cited in Hiro, 2001:70). It was during Clinton’s second term that the screw of the sanctions regime was turned on Iraq and the disciplining mechanism of air strikes was intensified (most notably during the 1998 ‘Operation Desert Fox’); it was under his Presidency (albeit initiated by Congress) that the Iraq Liberation Act was passed authorising the training of insurgent forces in Iraq. The list could go on - the point is merely to underline how the invasion and occupation of Iraq was not simply the result of an accidental ‘imperial turn’ in US foreign policy, but rather the expression of a longer-term anxiety over the preservation of a world order through the territorial sovereignty of multiple (preferably allied) states.

During and after the Second World War American planners were above all concerned with the socio-economic and political reconstruction of states falling within their sphere of influence, thereby seeking to stave off communist subversion. As we saw above, this was achieved through the combination of massive overseas military deployments and an active cooperation of sympathetic social forces within allied states. This basic formula was applied by Washington throughout the Cold War with varying degrees of success, but the collapse of the Soviet bloc after 1989 gave it an almost unassailable quality as vast swathes of the world’s population previously isolated from global capitalism were by the start of the new century subsumed into the dynamics of the world market under the ideological mantle of a peculiarly Lockean liberalism. Under such post-Cold War conditions of absolute preponderance it is unsurprising that US officials sought to address the fresh challenges of failed and rogue states, and the attendant phenomenon of international terrorism by reverting to the strategy which fifty years earlier, during the previous moment of American postwar ascendancy, had transformed fascist Germany and Japan into stable and legitimate liberal-democratic polities. The then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice made the parallels explicit between the two moments when the USA has re-created a world order: ‘This is a period’ she proclaimed in 2002 ‘akin to 1945 to 1947, when American leadership expanded the number of free and democratic states – Japan and Germany among the great powers – to create a balance of power that favoured freedom.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Remarks by the National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice on Terrorism and

Foreign Policy’, 29 April 2002, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

It was this calculation that informed Washington's decision to invade and thereafter occupy Iraq in spring 2003: the notion that, like the Japanese and Germans in 1945, Iraqis would unambiguously welcome and support an American protectorate over their country. In fact, what we have witnessed since 2003 is the violent rejection of such tutelage and the accompanying autophagous dismemberment of Iraqi state and society. Such a reality points away from the post-war rehabilitation of Japan and Germany, toward a different historical parallel, namely that of the British mandate over Mesopotamia from 1920-1932 where the attempted short, sharp nation-building mission also delivered chronic socio-political instability (Dodge, 2003; Slugglett, 2007; Yaphe, 2003). Like the British High Commissioners, Ambassador Bremer arrived in Baghdad with the intention of founding a sort of polyarchy by the Tigris: a stable, unified, democratic and market-oriented state. As with mandatory Iraq, the current American occupation has provoked violent resistance which has largely been managed through an accommodation with, and indeed promotion of ethnic, sectarian and tribal networks of political and socio-economic patronage. Even the 150,000 allied troops on Iraqi soil and their supporting military –administrative infrastructure have been unable to deliver the pacification and unification of the country. The reasons behind this failure, I have suggested rest mainly on the fact that American imperial power does not issue from direct territorial control. Unlike the Roman 'legionary economy' discussed above, American economy and society have little to gain from conquering lands and subjecting whole populations to their rule. (If anything, such exercises in direct rule tend to cost the metropolitan taxpayer dearly – as both the British and now the American experience in Iraq indicate). To be sure, military bases and favourable access to Iraqi oil resources may in the distant future contribute to a continued US hegemony. But only if there is a correspondingly legitimate, territorially sovereign and market-friendly regime in Baghdad capable of managing such resources on behalf of the American empire. The current Iraqi experience indicates that such an outcome cannot be secured with recourse to the colonialism of old - through the violent imposition of social and political structures from the outside – but is only likely to succeed if it is enforced legitimately from within. And it is this changing but determinate territorial distinction between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of any given state that set the contemporary limits of American empire.

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