Empire, Imperialism, and Contemporary American Global Power

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I argue that American global power should not be considered as a case of empire, at least not in the way that we have come to define empires, historically. Rather, because it is consistent with and embedded in a postcolonial organization of political space that rests on upholding the legal-constitutional and political autonomy of states and promoting new sources of capitalist accumulation, the organization and realization of American global power is significantly different from other imperial experiences. The denial of empire, however, does not mean that the United States is not imperial or imperialist. The way in which American global power is organized and the socioeconomic and political relations that flow from it have reproduced enduring patterns of hierarchy, domination and exploitation, all of which highlight the enduring patterns of military power and geopolitical hierarchy.

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As the other contributors to this symposium have stressed, the “mainstreaming”—in both scholarly and popular discourse—of the idea of “empire” to describe the organization and relations of American global power has been closely associated with the so-called “neoconservative turn” in American foreign policy, which was given license after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Given the importance of the “9/11 conjuncture” on these debates, one might be tempted to think differently in the current circumstances of what appears to be—or soon will—a “retreat from empire” resulting from the ongoing problems of U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. If the idea and supposed reality of American empire is so tied up with the foreign policy of George W. Bush, then we may see it as a passing (or conjunctural) intellectual and popular fad in a similar fashion to the way in which the zeitgeist of “globalization” was associated with the foreign policy of the Clinton administration during the 1990s.¹

Evidently empires, or more broadly, imperial structures of power are not products of such momentary political events. Despite the changes unleashed by the Bush administration after September 2001 the United States has not fundamentally reordered the way in which it relates to the world, at least not in a manner comparable with the 1945–1950 period. The tactical dimensions

¹On the place of conjunctural analysis in IR see Rosenberg (2005).
of U.S. policy may have changed but the longer-term strategy of the United States and the policy instruments—political, economic, military, ideological, and cultural—deployed to realize its strategic objectives have not significantly altered.2

Thus, while the 9/11 attacks permitted a political space to emerge that saw neoconservatives seize the initiative to secure the compliance of the American public and their representatives for military attacks on Afghanistan and, more controversially, Iraq, the use of force by the United States against what it regards as “rogue” states is not new.3 The United States has a long history of using force to discipline states that it objects to (Bacevich 2002), based on their domestic political-economic orientation and/or international relations. The Cold War era was punctuated with such interventions and, prior to World War II, the United States was a systematic intervener using force in the Western Hemisphere. What is different today is the geopolitical context—one of unipolarity rather than bi- or multipolarity—within which this force has been deployed. United States military and geopolitical dominance after the collapse of Soviet power and the communist challenge is historically unique.4 It is this aspect of U.S. global power and its controversial deployment after 2001 that provides the leitmotif of contemporary debates about American empire.

To properly conceptualize contemporary American global power to determine whether or not it is a case of empire we need a more historically grounded discussion of the differentia specifica of the United States as a global actor.5 In particular, how it differs and conforms to the historical patterns of the spatial organization of empires and their political and socioeconomic reproduction over time. We also need to examine how its global power is constituted and the relationship between the different elements of its power.6 Finally, and where I tend to differ most from the other contributors to this symposium, is that we also need to situate the geopolitical and political dimensions of American power—its most obvious “imperialist” aspects based on the use of force and violence—within the broader context of capitalist socioeconomic development. Simply put, in what ways do the capitalist socioeconomic properties of the United States and the international relations associated with capitalism relate to the military and geopolitical “logic” of U.S. global power?

As a foretaste of what is to follow I will argue that American global power should not be considered as a case of empire, at least not in the way that we have come to define empires, historically. Rather, because it is consistent with and embedded in a postcolonial organization of political space (Bromley 2006:44–64) that rests on upholding the legal-constitutional and political autonomy of states and promoting new sources of capitalist accumulation (Colás and Saull 2006:5–12), the organization and realization of American global power is

2The key ones being the maintenance of its military-geopolitical preponderance over other major powers and any potential rival or coalition of rivals, and its continued leadership and dominance within the international capitalist economy, such that the United States (or, more precisely, significant social layers within it) secures disproportionate economic (and other) benefits from the organization and operations of this system.

3See also the contribution of Jennifer Sterling-Folker on this issue as well.

4For IR theorists, particularly Realists, such a unique geopolitical context questions the endemic logic of power-balancing within the international system arising from the dialectical tendency of imbalances of geopolitical power to trigger an attempt by another state or states to balance such power. The assumption, then, is that unipolarity is likely to be short-lived. See Kapstein and Mastanduno (1999) and Brown et al. (2000) for discussions of unipolarity and IR theory.

5In this sense I offer a slightly different methodological approach to conceptualizing imperial structures to both Nexon and Spruyt in this symposium.

6For a recent attempt to do this see Mann (2003).
significantly different from other imperial experiences.\footnote{Thus, although the term “informal empire”—associated with the work of Gallagher and Robinson (1970) on the British Empire—captures something about the nature of post-1945 American imperialism, because Britain’s informal empire combined with a territorial logic of (formal) empire it does not quite encapsulate the historically singular anti-territorial imperialism of the postwar international order and the United States’ role in upholding such an order.} The denial of empire, however, does not mean that the United States is not imperial or imperialist. The way in which American global power is organized and the socioeconomic and political relations that flow from it have reproduced enduring patterns of hierarchy, domination, and exploitation.

As already stressed, the United States has consistently used force against certain types of states that appear to challenge the political and socioeconomic structures upon which American global power is based. The key point here is that the use of force has not been about destroying these autonomous political units—as classical empires tended to—but rather as a prelude to reconstituting states internally organized to better realize the reproduction of global structures of American power. Secondly, the organization and relations of international economic exchange are not only centered around the United States but also tend to disproportionately benefit the United States—or at least certain social layers within it (Brenner 1998; Harvey 2005b). It is the relationship between and the contradictions that have emerged between these two “logics” of imperial power—geopolitical and capitalist—that have determined the evolution of American imperialism (Arrighi 2005; Harvey 2005a; Panitch and Gindin 2003, Wood 2003) and which are highlighted by recent events. As recognized by Lake, Nexon, and Spruyt in this symposium, the legitimacy and actuality of American global power rests on reducing the deployment of its geopolitical dimensions especially in a post–Cold War context without the deus ex machina of a geopolitical threat that the USSR provided.

The rest of the paper is organized to address these issues. It begins with a discussion of how we might identify some generic properties associated with the idea of empire. This is followed by a discussion of the way in which the emergence of an international capitalist economy over the nineteenth century conditioned the development of empire. Finally, having provided a historical sociology of empire, the paper concludes by assessing the nature of American global power highlighting the relationship between the contradictory logics of geopolitical and socioeconomic power.

\section*{Defining Empire}

The first thing to note is that empires have taken a number of different forms exhibiting diverse political and socioeconomic features.\footnote{See also the contributions of Hendrik Spruyt and Daniel Nexon on this point.} Consequently, if we are to deploy the term “empire” analytically we need to recognize that not all empires are alike.\footnote{Two excellent recent additions to the literature on empire that are sensitive to these historical distinctions are Colás (2007) and Maier (2006).} However, we can identify some generic attributes that tend to be associated with imperial forms of polity.

At a basic level the idea of empire, as recognized by other contributors to this symposium, refers to “a particular authority relationship between two polities constituted by extreme forms of both security and economic hierarchy” (Lake), which sees the imperial center exploit the economic resources of its periphery and institutionalize relationships that rest on iniquitous patterns of economic exchange and deprive people in the periphery of their political subjectivity. This relationship of hierarchy and dominance is located at one end of a spectrum of...
power relations with the other end characterized by political relations defined by equality and autonomy. Spruyt adds to this in that while there is an obvious stress on hierarchy and the role played by force in the maintenance of imperial rule, the long-term preservation of empire requires not only an ideological justification (civilization, democracy, development, and progress) but also the provision of public goods (particularly law and order) accessible and beneficial to at least some (elite) groups in the peripheral zones of empire. Thus, while all empires have a center or metropole, imperial structures of power, authority and, ultimately, obedience tend to be realized through local intermediaries.

The degree to which imperial rule is determined through coercion and violence, how the political relationship between core and periphery is organized and what factors account for the dynamic in the relationship varies within different empires across time. Further, we can also recognize heterogeneous structures and patterns of authority within the same empire as highlighted by the evolving character of the British Empire through the nineteenth century with the autonomy accorded to the white dominions contrasting with more intrusive forms of governance in other parts of the empire, as well as the political consequences that flowed from the economic linkages established with a number of states in South America.

In this regard, the analytical clarity and practice of empire can coalesce with the idea of “hegemony” as in those cases where the hierarchical relationships that define empire are accepted as legitimate and beneficial by agents in the periphery to such a degree that those structures are not contested or challenged. However, following Charles Maier (2006:63) we might regard hegemony as a state of “potential empire” where attempts to increase autonomy in peripheral zones are likely to trigger imperial responses exposing the iron first of empire.

As much as empires (and some states) are defined by hierarchical and coercive political relationships and exploitative and iniquitous forms of economic exchange, they also reflect a very particular way of organizing political space in contrast to sovereign states or federations. This is significant for any contemporary discussion of American Empire in that the spatial character of empire is at odds with the fragmented and anarchical character of the states-system. While the sovereign-states system is founded on the principle of territorial integrity and the reciprocal legal and political acceptance of the permanence of sovereign borders, empires—from Rome to the British Empire—have tended to assume the absence of permanent and fixed territorial borders. Further, because borders are not fixed they tend to expand highlighting the boundless potential of empires.

In recognizing this we also need to identify and compare the different sources and the reasons propelling expansion among different empires. This not only draws us to analyzing the dynamics in the core-periphery relationship, but also the socioeconomic and political constitution of the metropole. Thus, the liberal and capitalist characteristics of the British Empire from the mid nineteenth century onwards in contrast to its earlier mercantilist and illiberal nature help us to understand not only the historical evolution of the British Empire but also the changing character of core-periphery relations and the sources and consequences of expansion.

Empire, then, can be understood to be a boundless form of political space characterized by political and economic relations of hierarchy and exploitation of a periphery by a core. However, the key point—to be expanded upon in the following section—is that despite these generic characteristics that may conform
to an ideal-type of empire we need to historicize the concept such that we examine the specificities of different imperial experiences and the way in which the constitutive aspects of empire identified—hierarchy, exploitation, the organization of political space and expansion—are institutionalized and realized across time. In the next section I will do this by historicizing the concept of empire by examining the historical specificities of capitalism and empire to highlight the political and spatial consequences of capitalist forms of socioeconomic reproduction and how this contrasts with earlier and other forms of imperial experience.

Capitalism and Empire

The significance of capitalism to how we think about and historicize empire is twofold. First, it was through the internationalization of capital under nineteenth century British imperial hegemony that the world market emerged as a distinct domain of social activity mediating the geopolitical relations among states (Colás 2007:72). Secondly, the emergence and spread of capitalist socioeconomic relations of production and exchange transformed the relationship between the control and expansion of territory and the extraction of an economic surplus. Thus, whereas territorial expansion—empire building—was driven by an economic motive of accessing and exploiting the economic resources located within conquered imperial peripheries—in effect fusing the logics of economic reproduction and geopolitical competition—with the advent of a “capitalist economic logic” they became separated (Brenner 1986; Rosenberg 1994:129).

Capitalism, then, leads to a historically specific mode of surplus extraction in the production process through an economic relationship located within the market between independent economic agents rather than economic exploitation being mediated through explicitly political relations of hierarchy and domination associated with colonialism and slavery. Thus, the uniqueness of capitalism—which bears directly on our discussion of empire and imperialism—is that unlike earlier/other forms of imperial power the spread of capitalist relations of economic exchange tends to accomplish an increasing domination of areas of social life located within other separate political jurisdictions. The expansionary drive, then, is primarily for social rather than territorial expansion and control. We could go further still by recognizing that this drive toward social expansion across borders is conducive to a more hegemonic or politically coordinated form of governance, particularly because of capitalism’s dependence on the private realm for its socioeconomic reproduction.

It is not the case that capitalism erases the geopolitical logic of security and competition among separate political entities. Rather, it tends to remove the drive for territorial expansion from within the logic of economic production and growth. However, because socioeconomic relations become “transnationalized”—permeating the borders of states—and in the absence of a single common power to manage these processes, the question of uneven geopolitical power necessarily impinges on capitalist development, especially so during moments of economic crisis as occurred during the late nineteenth century, the interwar period and the early 1970s. In short, international economic crises can have geopolitical consequences.

Capitalism’s (relatively) autonomous socioeconomic logic was apparent in the latter part of the nineteenth century as British capital exports and trade relationships—that had originated from within the structures of power associated with the British Empire—were becoming increasingly removed from the geographical domains of the empire. The economic logic of capital, then, is to a significant degree at odds with the logic of empire understood as the absorption of political space into a singular politically determined socioeconomic domain where economic exchange is politically mediated by imperial structures and authorities.
Consequently, with its operation through private economic agents pursuing economic ends capitalism tends to flourish within different political and geopolitical arrangements than those associated with territorial empires.

The emergence of and international spread of capitalism through the nineteenth century was obviously uneven, contradictory, and conflict-ridden as empires remained and the geopolitical competition and tensions between rival imperial and capitalist forms of state persisted. Ultimately, Britain—in part because a significant dimension of its global power was also constituted through political and economic relations of dominance and exploitation of formal empire—was unable to integrate other developing capitalist states into a singular system of international capitalist economic exchange based on common rules and equal treatment for different national capitals within domestic locales (Panitch and Gindin 2003). It would only be after the two world wars and the emergence of the United States and its deterritorialized form of capitalism and with the geopolitical and economic resources to reorder the world economy, assisted by the “favorable” geopolitical context of the Soviet threat, that such an integrated system could emerge. One key, if not defining element, of that system was the dissolution of territorial empire and the emergence of a pluriverse of sovereign states.

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In highlighting the significance of capitalism we draw attention to the specific social structures associated with particular imperial forms and the way in which these structures relate to the patterns of geopolitical domination and socioeconomic inequality associated with empire. In this respect, whereas earlier forms of imperial power were infused with a precapitalist socioeconomic character, that is, founded upon and concerned with reproducing different social structures of hierarchy and exploitation, American imperialism is quintessentially capitalist. The domestic political economy of the United States rests on the separation of the political and economic realms and American global power has tended to be concerned with internationalizing such social arrangements. It was this that highlights the historical uniqueness of the Cold War as an episode of international conflict where the bipolar geopolitical conflict was consequent on the overthrow of capitalist forms of social rule and the construction of alternative and antagonistic social forms, and the way in which these different—“communist”—forms of society had geopolitical consequences (Saull 2007).

In recognizing the capitalist character of the United States and the way in which this relates to the geopolitical logic of American power—the nonrequirement of territorial empire—we also need to give due historical recognition to the way in which the creation of the continental United States through westward expansion and settlement that witnessed the destruction of preexisting indigenous political forms had strong echoes of empire about it. The paradox in this regard as that although the United States is a product of a strategy of empire—an empire organized around private property rights and a liberal-republican form of government—its international relations have tended to be concerned with preserving the borders and functioning of sovereign states. It is this which defines the nature of American imperial power even if we accept the gross disparities of wealth and power that typify the American-led international order.

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12John Agnew (2005) has highlighted how this liberal-republican form of governance and the wider legal-constitutional structure of the United States has also been adverse to American empire building in that such a domestic polity (and wider political culture) has tended to be suspicious of “big” government and the administrative and military capacities required for empire building.
Organizing its imperial power through the sovereign states system and the way in which this permits varying—but significant—degrees of internal political autonomy for those states associated with the American imperium highlights the requirement of local intermediaries in the sustaining of these arrangements.\textsuperscript{13} It also exposes a paradox in the nature of American global power and how we conceptualize it. Such autonomy can only result in the reproduction of American global power if the local intermediaries—political and socioeconomic elites and wider populations (especially in democratic states)—accept prevailing arrangements upon which American imperial power is institutionalized. Herein lies the paradox; such acceptance, particularly if it is deep-rooted and organic would seem to dispel any notion of imperium let alone empire. How can there be an imperial relationship if the supposedly subordinate units that form part of it willingly accept hierarchy?\textsuperscript{14} It would suggest that the defining pattern of an imperial relationship—the reproduction of political and socioeconomic inequality—is absent.

Of course, the reality of American global power is somewhat different. As much as all empires and imperial forms of power rest on iniquitous socioeconomic structures \textit{within} the metropolitan center (Maier 2006) so such structures of inequality are present in the peripheral areas and this is particularly the case within capitalist forms of imperialism realized—as they are—through the permeation of sovereign borders and, under the American imperium, the gradual infusion of national with transnational forms of capital (Robinson 2004). In this regard, unlike empires of the past, and in spite of the overwhelming military power and geopolitical reach of the United States, American global power—at least in the socioeconomic realm—has no final instance, no final decisive location or moment of authority, but is reproduced through a sequence of coordinated and mainly consensual actions of a range of actors—public and private (Colás 2007:162–171).

Yet, in highlighting the transnational and decentered dimensions of American global power—features that help sustain its legitimacy and reproduction—we can also identify the fact that the United States has consistently promoted the adoption of particular political and economic arrangements and social interests best able to uphold such arrangements and benefit from them. It has been when such political and economic arrangements have been challenged from within those spaces of domestic autonomy that the imperial qua coercive character of American global power has been brought out in bold relief. Although most pronounced in the third world after 1945—where the political and socioeconomic structures and social forces most able to institute American imperium have either been absent or most vulnerable—the deployment of coercive and other political instruments and interventions to prevent certain—undesired—political outcomes, has occurred more widely as highlighted by covert—CIA-led—U.S. interventions in Western Europe in the early Cold War (Paterson 1988). While such (revolutionary) political challenges to existing socioeconomic and political arrangements—upon which American global power is institutionalized—from within capitalist states triggered coercive and militarized U.S. responses, these were also geopolitical in orientation because these revolutionary challenges were associated—in some cases rightly—with the USSR and its geopolitical expansion (Saull 2007).

\textsuperscript{13}We might say (as Michael Cox 2005 has done) that empires in the past—such as the British Empire—also included areas of significant internal autonomy, but this ignores the fundamental constitutive principle of sovereignty and the legal and political problems associated with breaking with such principles through using force against another sovereign state.

\textsuperscript{14}This is encapsulated in Geir Lundestad’s (1998) seemingly self-contradictory term “empire by invitation” in accounting for the postwar relationship between the United States and Western Europe.
The Cold War period—the era within which the contemporary structures of American imperial power were constructed—clearly highlights the relationship between the twin logics of American global power and how—for the most part—such logics were mutually reinforcing. Economically, the United States promoted the proliferation of new sources of capitalist accumulation—not only because this was the most efficient way of seeing off (at least within the advanced capitalist states) any threat to private property rights—but also provided the best means for institutionalizing the social and political basis of American global power through incorporating social elites and wider strata into the American political-economic model (Latham 1997; Maier 2006; Rupert 1995). Geopolitically, the postwar conjuncture of U.S. military supremacy, the geopolitical vulnerability of other capitalist states combined with the Soviet threat facilitated the crafting of an American protectorate over the advanced capitalist world.

However, this synchronized configuration was not to last as the mutually reinforcing aspects of the postwar American imperium came apart in the late 1960s. Economically, rival sources of capitalist accumulation began to emerge that came to erode the productive dominance of the United States, helping to precipitate the crisis that saw the collapse of the postwar—Bretton Woods—framework for the management of the world economy. This raised not only the prospect of economic constraints on the application of U.S. geopolitical power but also the distribution and impact of the costs of any economic restructuring within the United States in response to this new economic dispensation. With the defeat in Vietnam and the hemorrhaging of popular support for containment, the domestic political basis of the geopolitical pillar was severely weakened. The United States response to these developments—the reconstruction of a new imperial order—and the consequences of these changes are still significant for how we think about American global power today.

The United States continues to be the center of the world economy, not as the source of capital exports but as the destination of capital flows. Paradoxically, this is a sign of its continued imperial strength. More economies (notably China and India) have become integrated into a U.S.-centered world economy and many of these states have strong political and economic interests in the maintenance of such arrangements—at least for the moment while such arrangements are seen as contributing to their own economic growth and political strengthening. While during the Cold War such an awkward economic relationship was assisted by the geopolitical context of the Soviet threat, today it is sustained more by a pristine economic logic of growth. The upshot of this is that continued U.S. economic dynamism and the costs of meeting its geopolitical posture are externally assisted by other states.

The challenges to this arrangement and with it the basis of the American imperial order comes from two sources. First, is that the United States has had to find new justifications for maintaining its geopolitical posture in the absence of a geopolitical threat. In this regard, liberal humanitarian war and the war on terror have provided the United States with the opportunities to deploy its military power to reorder those areas—like the Middle East—not susceptible to reordering through the institutions and processes of liberal governance, which have helped replace the domestic and international legitimizing function of the Soviet threat. The problem here—exposed by the current Bush

15The United States has continued to try and extend the territorial reach of its military power after the Cold War evidenced by NATO expansion and the quest for bases in central Asia and elsewhere, which indicates—even if one accepts the geopolitics of oil—a continuing geopolitical dynamic within its global power projection. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for emphasizing this point to me.
administration—is not only the way in which the use of force against other states threatens to undermine the legal and political foundations upon which the American imperium is founded, by making unipolarity more imperial like, but that the United States gets embroiled in conflicts—such as Iraq right now—where not only its diplomatic credibility is damaged, but the utility of its military power is severely undermined.

The second challenge concerns developments within the world economy and for how long the current U.S.-centered economic order continues and with it—the disproportionate flow of benefits to the United States. Here, the spotlight is on China and, more widely, East Asia as an alternative pole of regional capital accumulation. Thus, should East Asian economic development shift toward a more regionally centered dynamic reducing its external dependence on the United States market, then not only will the United States lose external sources of credit, which is likely to have consequences for the domestic U.S. financial economy, but also its economic dynamism and dominance within the world economy may be eclipsed—a fundamental challenge to the American imperial order. Such a prospect seems highly unlikely right now and in the near future. However, this does not remove the problem of the increasing exposure of the economic basis of American imperial power to developments outside of its political control. Further, whereas the geopolitical logic of American imperial power was in harmony with its economic pillar during the Cold War, this is much less so with China today. Thus, while the Pentagon may view China as a threat—real or potential—significant sections of the American capitalist class see it as an economic opportunity, the economic consequences of which have helped increase the geopolitical reach of China. The long-term future of the American imperial order, then, rests on the degree to which it is able to integrate China into its geopolitical framework as much as it is able to do so economically.

References


16This has had a significant impact on the perceptions of U.S. power among the populations of some of its key allies in western Europe—weakening the democratic and popular sources of American global power.
17Such militarized tendencies have also been revealed through the way in which the United States has tended to rely on militarized means (providing military aid and counter-insurgency training)—thus fusing the logics of geoeconomics and military power—to secure access to energy sources in Columbia, parts of west Africa and central Asia. This has contributed to dynamics of conflict and violence in these regions, as well as resulting in widespread human rights abuses in those countries in receipt of U.S. military aid. See Stokes (2007).
18See the excellent work of Arrighi (2007) on this point.