Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey highlight an emerging consensus that ‘empire’ is a neglected category of International Relations (IR), indeed of the social sciences. However, while the two authors are largely correct in their critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, this paper identifies limitations in their own argument. It develops a broader conception of the relevance of empire to contemporary IR than that of continuities in American power. It examines the scope of the concept and the transformations and reconstitutions of imperial forms in recent modern history. The paper argues that we must take seriously the post-imperial character of contemporary American and Western power, and recognise a much wider range of contemporary quasi-imperial forms. Its central argument is that imperial power relations are a common feature of many non-Western states, considered ‘Westphalian’ nation-states or ‘post-colonial’ states in previous IR classifications of contemporary statehood.

A consensus seems to be emerging that empire is a neglected category of IR, indeed of the social sciences. However, as Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey’s ‘Retrieving the Imperial’\(^1\) demonstrates, both positively in its critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire\(^2\)* and— I shall argue— through some limitations of its own, considerable care is needed in restoring this concept to a useful place in critical social thought.

The theoretical contribution of the greatly hyped *Empire* seems to me, even more than to Barkawi and Laffey, to be worth only modest attention. It is an eclectic brew, whose interest lies chiefly in a worthy but convoluted attempt to move radical thought beyond dated concepts of imperialism. The book’s success is indeed a minor cultural phenomenon, very much in keeping with earlier successes of the more opaque offshoots of Continental philosophy, especially Marxism, in the English-speaking world—the main difference being that this text is written directly in

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reasonable English. However, Barkawi and Laffey are certainly right in their damning conclusion:

despite 400-odd pages, Hardt and Negri’s description of an emerging political and social formation is notably threadbare and derivative, their historical periodisations highly questionable, and their lack of attention to the practical political, economic and military business of imperial governance, historical or contemporary, ultimately crippling.\(^3\)

More interesting, therefore, is how far Barkawi and Laffey succeed in proposing a more satisfactory basis for a new ‘imperial theory’. The two authors by and large deny that most classic Marxist concepts of imperialism have much to offer today. Managing to avoid the hackneyed versions of the ‘new imperialism’ offered by the anti-American left, their proposal develops in three main strands: first, that ‘the empire concept is one of the principal routes out of the “territorial” trap contained in the idea of a sovereign state system’; second, that empire captures the centrality of hierarchy in international relations; and third, that an analysis of contemporary world power relations needs to recognise ‘continuities with older histories of “modern” imperialism’.\(^4\) Moreover, they argue that empire helps us to understand international relations as a “thick” set of social, political, economic, cultural and military relations.\(^5\) In particular, they emphasise that ‘[i]mperialism in its many forms was essential in shaping the character of both Europe and the non-European world; it is their common history’.\(^6\) Understanding empire is thus also a way out of Eurocentrism for IR.

These are reasonable beginnings, but Barkawi and Laffey do not take them as far as we need to. Theirs is still an inexorable journey towards a restatement of American imperial dominance, albeit nuanced by ideas of the ‘international state’: there is no fundamental ‘break’, they argue, ‘between US imperialism and Empire’.\(^7\) I shall argue, however, that this argument is at best problematic and tends to undermine one of the few good things about Hardt and Negri’s book, i.e., its firm recognition that contemporary global power is quite a lot more than American empire.

**Empire and State**

In the remainder of this paper I shall sketch a view of how imperial concepts might indeed make the kind of difference that Barkawi and Laffey suggest

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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 112.
6. Ibid., 113.
7. Ibid., 124-25.
to contemporary international relations. To achieve this, however, we need a historical imagination able to transcend not only the nebulous and unrooted Empire of Hardt and Negri and but also Barkawi and Laffey’s focus on the reconstruction of Western imperialism as internationalised American dominance. We need, first, to remind ourselves of the broader historic scope of the concept of empire; second, to be sharper about what is really imperial and what is not in contemporary Western and American power; and third, to recognise a much wider range of contemporary continuities. In particular, this paper will argue that imperial relations have been transformed and reconstituted within a wide range of non-Western states, and that these contradictions are central to conflict in today’s world.

An essential starting point is a handle on the concept of empire itself. There seem to be three main conceptualisations that are important to IR. I will argue that all three ideas of empire identify important elements of the phenomenon in today’s world politics. The tendency to collapse the idea of empire into one of the three, to the exclusion of the others, has been central to the limitations of orthodox leftist approaches, from which Barkawi and Laffey do not entirely escape.

First, there is empire as a large-scale, hierarchically coordinated system of political authority. This idea can be counterposed to that of the competitive interstate system as an alternative pattern of international relations. However, as Michael Mann points out,

[in most ancient empires the mass of the people participated overwhelmingly in small-scale interaction networks yet were also involved in two other interaction networks, provided by the erratic powers of a distant state, and the rather more consistent, but still shallow, power of semiautonomous local notables.]

Imperial power was thus generally thin domination, and in this sense empires reproduced on a larger scale the remoteness of all state power, as a particularly concentrated, centred form of social power, from most everyday social relations.

Second, the modern concept of empire adds the idea of the systematic domination of one society over others. Thus, Michael Doyle offers a ‘behavioural definition’ of empire ‘as effective control, either formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial society’. This suggests

thicker domination, and is especially characteristic of modern (19th and 20th century) imperial powers, with their more developed bureaucracies and intensified communications and command systems. Crucial is the fact that modern empires have nation-state cores and that subordinated peoples, in their turn, are also incorporated into modern systems of political action and belief, coming themselves to aspire to nationhood. Indeed in this sense of empire, the core of the international system was not sovereignty but competitive domination. The modern interstate system was, as Craig Murphy calls it, an ‘inter-imperial system’.\textsuperscript{11}

Third, early 20th century ideas of imperialism added the linkages between modern political empire and the development of the worldwide capitalist economy. Although not originally or exclusively a Marxist idea, its development, advocacy and attribution has been associated primarily with figures like Vladimir Illych Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg.\textsuperscript{12} Since the end of the classic inter-imperial system in 1945, Marxists have generally stressed the economic drivers of domination, the importance of ‘informal’ empire without political regulation, and neo-colonialism. Justin Rosenberg has even written of ‘the empire of civil society’.\textsuperscript{13} In its classical formulation, however, there is no doubt that these drivers, which many theories now abstract from political power, were inexorably linked to the formal political empire indicated by the first and second concepts. The domination of world politics by the European empires was too central to ignore. Colonialism was not yet ‘neo’, and inter-imperial rivalry was producing world wars that shaped all world politics. Indeed the sharper Marxist theories actually identified military rivalry between imperial nation-states as the organising principle of world economy, rather than \textit{vice versa}.\textsuperscript{14}

\section*{Cold War and Global-era Empire}

My argument is that a useful contemporary revival of the idea of empire cannot afford to succumb to the neglect of formal political power that Empire, like earlier neo-Marxist thinking, perpetuates. At the heart of contemporary imperial theory must be the transformations of historic empire after 1945. Barkawi and Laffey refer to only one side of these changes: the replacement of European empires by American world power and its evolution into an internationalised Western system still centred on the USA. This both neglects the inter-imperial dynamics within the


\textsuperscript{13} Justin Rosenberg, \textit{The Empire of Civil Society} (London: Verso, 1994).

evolution of Western power, and takes the Western side outside the general Cold War- and global-era equations of empire. Let me try to suggest a more satisfactory general account of empire in the late modern world system.

The starting point must be to recognise that not only was the international system an inter-imperial system, but its explosive crises in the first half of the 20th century led to a crucial transition. Despite Ian Clark’s warning—in one of the few attempts to historicise globalisation in the frame of world politics—it is valid to see the 20th century as ‘a century in two halves’. The general crisis of the world wars led to decisive outcomes for the international system: the subordination of the European and the Japanese empires to the United States; the extension of Soviet power into Eastern Europe; the unification of China under the Communists; and the replacement of colonial power by new nation-states in many parts of Asia and Africa. There are important post-imperial elements in all of these developments, but there are also reconstructions of empire, and not only in the West.

Since the elaboration of Western power is central to Barkawi and Laffey and indeed also to Hardt and Negri, let me start with this. The globally dominant West is neither the centre of an ethereal Empire nor simply an internationalised form of historic American dominance—rather, it is a post-imperial constellation. Originating in the Allied victory of 1945 and the subsequent onset of the Cold War, the West can be considered an internationalised bloc-state that has evolved in the global era into a distinctive conglomerate of state power. Centred on the US, certainly, it has nevertheless been constituted by its international organisations (today NATO, the G8, the WTO, etc., and regionally the EU) as well as by extensive and intensive bilateral linkages of national entities. This West is post-imperial in important senses: despite the obvious power of big national entities (not just the US, but the other G8) vis-à-vis smaller ones, there is both substance and form to international decision-making. The negotiable character of intra-bloc power relations—and the real gains they have delivered for Europe and Japan as well as the US—were big advantages compared to the much more blatantly imperial character of the Soviet bloc.

Despite many echoes of classic imperialism in the West’s relationships to the non-West, which I will discuss below, the West’s strength remains the extent of its transcendence of classic imperial relations and forms. As Karl Kautsky suggested, in the only early Marxist assessment of imperialism to half-anticipate current developments,

[i]n the event that an accord of nations, disarmament, and lasting peace [between the major capitalist states] is achieved, then the

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worst of the causes which were increasingly leading to the moral bankruptcy of capitalism would recede. . . . ultra-imperialism would initially usher in an era of new hopes and expectations within capitalism.\textsuperscript{16}

Western power is much more radically post-imperial, more internationalised and more thoroughly democratised (at least at the national level) than any of the competing centres. In this sense its moral claims, though internally contradictory in many senses (not least in the clash, currently accentuated, between American nationalism and European internationalism), are much stronger than those of major non-Western powers like Russia, China and India.\textsuperscript{17}

The transformation of the West should not, however, be the sole or even main focus of imperial (or post-imperial) theory in contemporary IR. The political and military reach of Western-US world dominance is limited by the strength of other major independent centres. The prevalence of more or less imperial relations and forms within these other centres is as important today as it was during the Cold War.

Formally, the Soviet system was not an empire but (like the West) an internationalised state bloc—an alliance, a defensive pact indeed of like-minded ‘progressive’ nations. In reality, of course, the quasi-imperial character of the Soviet state was its Achilles’ heel. Not only was Stalin’s USSR a reconstitution, in modern form, of the old Russian ‘prison of peoples’—the Soviet bloc laid a thin veneer of internationalism over imperial domination. With deep irony, given Communism’s claims to internationalism, elites in the national state apparatuses of Eastern Europe sought mainly to restrict their international organisation by the USSR and to expand their economic relations with the West, as means of both political independence and economic development. The end result was that it was the quasi-imperial Soviet bloc that collapsed, while the post-imperial West has (more or less) held together into the global era.

Lest it be thought that this is of purely historic significance, consider the determinants of post-Soviet politics. As the wider bloc fell apart, the tensions of the old Russian empire re-surfaced, leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself—and a pattern of conflicts that have continued ever since. Resistance to quasi-imperial relations of dominance, and their reassertion by central powers not only in Russia but in other republics, are at the heart not only of the Chechnya conflict but of other wars across the former Union since 1991. Political empire, even if not formally


\textsuperscript{17} This contrast is developed in Shaw, \textit{Theory of the Global State}, 206-07, table 1.
constituted, remains central to the contradictions of global-era international relations in this region.

Nor is this a local phenomenon. Communist China, like Russia, was based on the reconstitution of historic empire. There were many echoes of imperial rule in the dictatorship of Mao Zedong, however much a modern totalitarian party and ideology gave them distinct characters. The godlike character of the emperor and the suppression of border regions (above all Tibet) were fairly traditional features. However, imperial power was indulged in terrible new ways, as earlier in Stalin’s Russia, such as the state-made famine of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and the assault on the educated in the ‘Cultural Revolution’. In the hands of a totalitarian party, the modern multinational state could reconstitute an old empire in an extreme form of imperial power.

Quasi-imperial relations and forms of power are not restricted, however, to the fading totalitarianisms of the 20th century. They remain general features of the non-Western state in the global era. Those who have tried to classify modern states, like Robert Cooper and Georg Sørenson, have termed the major non-Western states simply ‘modern’ or ‘Westphalian’.  

Western states have become ‘postmodern’ or ‘post-Westphalian’ and others, described by Cooper as ‘pre-modern’ and by Sørenson as ‘post-colonial’, do not reach the modern/Westphalian standard. However, none of these classifications has addressed the implications of the imperial character of ‘modern’ or ‘Westphalian’ states for analysing their trajectories.

What passes for the modern state in the non-Western world today is best described as a quasi-imperial formation. Many large and medium-sized states are reconstitutions of historic pre-European or European empires. India today is a vast state ruling more people than belonged to the entire British empire in the mid-20th century. The gap between rich and powerful and the village poor is huge, and the centre disposes its armies to hold on to rebellious Kashmir, even to the point of risking nuclear war with Pakistan, in a way that reminds us of how European empires blundered to war in 1914. It is of more than polemical significance to suggest that the British Raj was not abolished but Indianised and Pakistanised by the new national elites.

Similar phenomena can be found across the non-Western world, and their sharper forms are the key foci of many armed conflicts. Modern

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19. The late Queen Elizabeth, widow of George VI of England and mother of the reigning Queen Elizabeth II, is reputed to have claimed a state funeral on the basis that she was the last Empress of India. But this left out Indira Ghandi!
Turkey, which still cannot bring itself to acknowledge the Ottoman genocide of the Armenians in 1915, has pursued a residual imperial campaign against the Kurds. Indonesia, inheritor of the Dutch empire, has abandoned its murderous annexation of East Timor, but its army puts down rebellions in Aceh, Ambon and elsewhere. Quasi-imperial, revolutionary Ethiopia, under the Soviet ally Mengistu, fought a long war to keep Eritrea. Neither is ‘new empire’ the prerogative of such reconstituted old empires: in post-colonial creations—Iraq, for example—new elites have also forged quasi-imperial systems of domination of central states (and their ethnic-social constituencies) over other elements in the society.

It is clear from these and many other examples that quasi-imperial relations of rule are central to world, regional as well as national politics in the global era. The new upsurge of democratic protest and the advance of human rights politics have actually heightened the importance of imperial cleavages. Democratic movements affect both the central and subordinate regions of quasi-imperial states, but it is among nationally oppressed populations that democratic tensions with central power are sharpest. 1989-91 in Eastern and Central Europe was not just a moment of democratic upheaval but of national resistance to the quasi-imperial Soviet bloc. In focusing as many have on the ‘velvet revolutions’ we have tended to neglect the violent repression and armed conflict that Central Europe narrowly escaped, and which have been the norm elsewhere. Where the democratisation of authoritarian states leads to conflicts with secessionist movements they are most likely to result in violence. Such crises may even accentuate the imperial character of the state, as in Yugoslavia, where the challenge of democratisation led the Milosevic regime to try to reconstitute an imperial Serbianised Yugoslavia, suppressing the rights of groups like the Kosovo Albanians. In this way, (re)imperialisation is a strategy for elites threatened by secession.

The extent of the crisis in quasi-imperial relations has been deepened by the changing relationship of the West, especially the US, to local quasi-empires. Historically, the Cold War-West sustained many authoritarian and oppressive regimes, even seeming to license some of these as sub-imperialisms (as Fred Halliday referred to the Shah’s Iran). In the ending of the Cold War, the West has been more willing to countenance both democratic and secessionist movements, thus increasing the prospects of

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successful transformation. It remains to be seen how far the ‘war on terrorism’ has reversed this trend. 21

Seen in this context of a much more widespread pattern of changing quasi-imperial relations, the reassertion of post-imperial Western power appears in a different light. Considered by some as a ‘new imperialism’, Western interventionism has been in turn a response to crises in the quasi-imperial states of the non-West. Indeed, interventions have often responded to the appeals of oppressed groups, such as Bosnians, East Timorese and Kosovo Albanians. Western reluctance to intervene, even in clear cases of genocide like Rwanda, has been more widespread than interventionism. It is this context, and not only the humanitarian element in actual interventions, that renders suspect some of the simpler narratives of new imperialism. 22

Conclusion

I have argued that the imperial is an important element of state power, which has assumed distinctive forms in the late modern and global eras. The classic modern inter-imperial system was superseded in 1945, but the internationalised bloc-states of the Cold War era were partially imperial in form. This was especially true in the Soviet bloc and was part of the explanation for its downfall.

Modern nation-states and post-colonial states in the non-Western world are often quasi-imperial. The contradictions of quasi-imperial rule are at the heart of many armed conflicts and so central to global-era world politics. Many of the pressures towards neo-imperial Western intervention stem, ironically, from the demands of the victims of more direct forms of empire in the non-Western world.

Therefore, globalised power networks in the post-Cold War era do not constitute an amorphous Empire nor are they simple reconstructions of an earlier Western imperialism. The global system of power is centred on a post-imperial, internationalised Western state-conglomerate, which harnesses—although not unproblematically—the legitimate global layer of institutions to its own purposes, and responds to the contradictions of


Millennium

quasi-imperial power elsewhere. Global power networks are best understood, therefore, as frameworks in which the dominant West negotiates its relationships with the other major and minor state centres. It might be argued perhaps that in the hands of the Bush administration Western-centred global power tends to crystallise in a relatively imperial form. As I have tried to explain, however, this simple statement would leave out important parts of the story.

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