

## Guest editorial

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### ***Empire and the Bush Doctrine***

“People everywhere want to say what they think; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children—male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor. These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.”

George W Bush (2002)

There is a powerful historical imagination at play in the new, so-called Bush Doctrine. Staking their claim for a global right to preemptive war, the USA's new defense oligarchs have rendered for themselves a stark choice between alternative histories of the future: either we shall look back, like fools, at the history in which “we” failed to “act against...emerging threats before they are fully formed” (Bush, 2002), or we can look back at the same period in relative safety and security. “History will judge harshly”, we are warned, “those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action”. Although Bush asserts, as he did on 14 September 2001 (and again, quoting himself, in the Bush Doctrine), that “our responsibility to history is already clear”, it is only with the “distance of history”—one that has not yet been made—that anyone else's competence to judge between these alternate paths emerges, perhaps not even then.

But history teaches as well as judges in the Bush Doctrine. The “lessons of history”, it says, “are clear: market economies, not command-and-control economies with the heavy hand of government, are the best way to promote prosperity and reduce poverty”. And yet we require the heavy hand of government in other ways, including an ad hoc US global police power that now, trading on an already devalued currency of threat, claims to expand its authority because “We know from history that deterrence can fail; and we know from experience that some enemies cannot be deterred.” That there are few specific historical referents provided to support these framings in the 25-page document, formally Bush's (2002) “National security strategy of the United States”, is hardly surprising considering the situation into which the Bush Doctrine has been inserted: in taking historical behavior from the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War as a guide, the hoary doctrine of deterrence seems singularly applicable to understanding Saddam Hussein's decision not to use chemical or biological weapons in that conflict, short of an attack on Baghdad. History, for the Bush Doctrine, is a language of transcendence, not facts, a view of the future *as* the past that, ideally at least, excludes real political choices from contemporary political spaces. This transfer of agency to history ‘itself’ is made complete in the Bush Doctrine: history is not only judge and teacher but also, in its totality, a just, democratic, but vengeful actor, as “History has not been kind to those nations which ignored or flouted the rights and aspirations of their people.”

The politics of the Bush Doctrine appear obvious enough then: a cynical manipulation of the September 11 attacks to promote a triumphalist and activist US geopolitics, one first mapped out at least a decade earlier that, with less recourse to history, similarly called for a vigilant global engagement wherein “We must not

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stand back and allow a new global threat to emerge or leave a vacuum in a region critical to our interests” (Cheney, 1993).<sup>(1)</sup> In this sense, it is the sweeping geographies of US power announced in the Bush Doctrine, more than its uses of history, that suggest what may be at stake globally from this reactionary turn in US politics. What kind of leverage does a more or less permanent ‘war on terrorism’ provide for the USA, where, and under what conditions? And how does the language of policing terror at a planetary scale articulate with the longer-standing US pledge, reiterated in the Bush Doctrine, to “bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world” (Bush, 2002)? Left to the authors of the Bush Doctrine, of course, these are black-and-white questions, easily resolved into the spatial projects of US power: these range from what might be called the real Bush Doctrine—that states accused of harboring terrorists are to be held accountable for groups operating within their territory—to more conventional tinkering with regional balances of power, to several impassioned calls for the deregulation of markets as solutions to hunger and poverty (including *two* shameless plugs for the biotech food industry). In describing Africa, where these deprivations are represented in just such terms of conjoined threat and opportunity, the challenge is to “help strengthen African states, help build indigenous capability to secure porous borders, and help build up the law enforcement and intelligence infrastructure to deny havens for terrorists.” This vision of a localized, scaled, and preemptive global police power should of course not be mistaken for the thing itself, but still, in the politics in and surrounding the text, the Bush Doctrine provides the opportunity and necessity to reflect on the power of the US state, and, at the same time, on the nature of its limits.

In this way, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000), which glimpses a history of the future that is both radically different from and surprisingly resonant with that of the Bush Doctrine, can help to open the US-led (and UK-bolstered) ‘war on terrorism’ to critical new questions. This may seem an unlikely source for critique, given that, at the heart of Hardt and Negri’s argument is the ontological claim that we are entering, and indeed have already entered the first phase of, a new age of capitalist global sovereignty, “composed of a series of national and supra-national organisms united under a single logic of rule” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, page xii). But while *Empire* might be read, then, as another ‘decline of the nation-state’ thesis, it can also be read more constructively, in the present context, for its strong reading of the US role in the expansion of what Hardt and Negri call ‘Empire’, or ‘imperial sovereignty’. As the authors preface it, the book “was begun well after the end of the Persian Gulf War and completed well before the beginning of the war in Kosovo” (page xvii). Situating their argument “between those two signal events in the construction of Empire”, the authors describe the USA as a still essential guarantor of Empire—the “peace police, but only in the final instance” (page 181). Global governance and US power shade into one another in complex ways in *Empire*, producing new forms of sovereignty that seem to arise as needed, where needed, every case an exception and an object of crisis management. The Gulf War thus anticipates, for the authors, “one of the central characteristics

<sup>(1)</sup> This is not to exclude from such politics the obvious fact—recently tested in the 2002 US Congressional elections—that the Iraq war lobby distracted attention, among US voters, from economic recession, egregious corporate crime with close ties to the Bush Administration, and the failings of the war on Al-Qaeda.

of Empire—that is, it resides in a world context that continually calls it into existence” (page 181).<sup>(2)</sup>

Not far from such a world context is the one appealed to in the Bush Doctrine’s “common calling” to protect values that are “right and true for all persons, in every society” (Bush, 2002). But if universalist legitimation talk like this was perhaps to be expected in such a document, then its extension on behalf of “freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages” was perhaps more surprising, a phrase which would not appear entirely out of place on the pages of *Empire*. On its own, this shared language of love and war amounts to little more than a black comedy written into the Bush discourse. However, it is actually one of many odd affinities between these texts—the one a book *about* global Empire, the other, its unwitting counter-sequel, a bit of putative power/knowledge aimed at rebuilding an unequivocally *American* one—which prods us to explore the basis of what might be called *Empire’s* ‘American exceptionalism’, and in turn its relation to one of the more spirited but slippery theoretical claims of the book. For just as Marx argued that capitalism would create opportunities for radical social change that were unthinkable under feudalism, Hardt and Negri insist that the transition to Empire will produce conditions of possibility unthinkable under those of capitalism and the neoliberal state. The political task at hand, then, becomes “not simply to resist these processes but to reorganize them and redirect them toward new ends. The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, page xv). What is more, they insist that *this* possible future, though not at all guaranteed, is not something left up to the reactionary power of Empire, not entirely, and not necessarily in the long run. This is where the future histories of *Empire* and the Bush Doctrine split apart: if the aim of the Bush Doctrine is to render the future as an already *decided* past, then here, with a basis in the political philosophies of Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Marx (see also Negri, 1999), Hardt and Negri want to show how revolutionary futures, even in dark times, are contained in the present and in our histories—they are the “product of an internal and immanent social dynamic” (2000, page 161).

In this way, *Empire’s* account of US constitutional history, broadly conceived, is informed in important ways by two Machiavellian concepts. First is the notion that where “power is organized through the emergence and interplay of counterpowers”, as Hardt and Negri argue (page 162), social conflict becomes the *basis* of democratic sovereignty, and, at the same time, hinging on territorial solutions to the problem of scarcity, it becomes “the logic of the city’s expansion” (page 162). This “democratic expansive tendency” (page 162) is realized in a new form, they argue, in the US Constitution, the Jeffersonian utopia in which sovereignty is for the first time “defined as radically democratic within an open and continuous process of expansion” (page 169). And second, it is the very inclusiveness of this “democratic expansive tendency”, notwithstanding its many abuses and contradictions in US continental

(2) “Two distinct elements are combined in this concept of just war: first, the legitimacy of the military apparatus insofar as it is ethically grounded, and second, the effectiveness of military action to achieve the desired order and peace. The synthesis of these two elements may indeed be a key factor determining the foundation and the new tradition of Empire. Today the enemy, just like the war itself, come to be at once banalized (reduced to an object of routine police repression) and absolutized (as the Enemy, an absolute threat to the ethical order). The Gulf War gave us perhaps the first fully articulated example of this new epistemology of the concept” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, page 13). In this sense, it could be argued that the ‘war on terrorism’ provides the opportunity for a new kind of ‘permanent just war’.

and global expansion, that sets it apart from other forms of sovereignty, for: “when it expands, this new sovereignty does not annex or destroy the other powers it faces but on the contrary opens itself to them, including them in the network. What opens is the basis of consensus, and thus, through the constitutive network of powers and counter-powers, the entire sovereign body is continually reformed. Precisely because of this expansive tendency, the new concept of sovereignty is profoundly reformist” (page 166). At the same time, though, with its political and juridical basis in the policing and regulation of internal conflict, this sovereignty is continually and powerfully reinforced as it governs.

It was Woodrow Wilson’s idea of a “world order based on the extension of the US constitutional project, the idea of peace as a product of a new world network of powers” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, page 175) that initially promoted, albeit unsuccessfully, the historical “passage” to Empire in Hardt and Negri’s narrative. But it was later, during the Cold War, that Empire began to take shape in the networks of institutions, arrangements, and social relations of US globalism, as the “ambiguity between protector and dominator” for the USA “became more intense and more extensive. In other words, protecting countries across the entire world from communism (or, more accurately Soviet imperialism) became indistinguishable from dominating and exploiting them with imperialist techniques” (page 178). The 1991 Gulf War was a signal event, then, to the extent that it “presented the United States as the only power able to manage international justice, *not as a function of its own national motives but in the name of global right*” (page 180, emphasis original).

But in a political economy increasingly structured by communicative and cooperative social relations, and constituted in decentred networks of power and production, Hardt and Negri want to show that Empire’s policing of freedom and free markets under a single logic—let alone *preemptive* policing!—will not be possible forever. The genealogy of the internet provides Hardt and Negri with the perfect metaphor here for imagining both the spatiality of imperial sovereignty and that of a future transition from Empire: “The original design of the Internet was intended to withstand military attack. Since it has no center and almost any portion can operate as an autonomous whole, the network can continue to function even when part of it has been destroyed. The same design element that ensures survival, the decentralization, is also what makes control of the network so difficult. Since no one point is necessary for communication among others, it is difficult for it to regulate or prohibit their communication” (page 299). And yet the nature of these decentering transitions, including the perhaps more problematic earlier transition from a US basis to a fully imperial basis of global sovereignty, is scarcely fleshed out in *Empire*, leaving the transitions, to a certain extent, as articles of faith. This is a book, as Abdul-Karim Mustafa and Bülent Eken (2001, page 3) correctly put it, that “looks toward America; it addresses America in all its dispensations”; but what does it see? Does it help us to address the contemporary situation, taking the ‘war on terrorism’ as one key aspect, in which a particular constellation of resistances to US globalism appears, in the short term, to *strengthen* the hand of militarists on all sides, from Russia to Israel/Palestine to terrorist networks themselves? Does it help to address what appears, after the November 2002 US elections, as an increasingly entrenched defense and energy oligarchy, one that, moreover, continually attempts (with mixed success) to appeal to the national scale for its authority and legitimation (see Smith, 2001)?

I think so, as far as it goes, though at the same time, the emerging geopolitics of terrorism and antiterrorism reflected in the Bush Doctrine constitute a test of sorts for *Empire*. In a theoretical work of such breadth, developed in a style of philosophical exposition more than close historical argument, there will doubtless be mistakes of fact

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as well as prediction; but of greater importance, I want to suggest, are the kinds of historical imaginations that *Empire* may inspire, across disciplines and beyond academe. If, as Slavoj Žižek (2001, page 192) comments with a dose of skepticism, “The old formula of Marx is still valid [in *Empire*]: capitalism digs its own grave”, then that formula is nevertheless quite powerfully renewed by Hardt and Negri for the political, cultural, and technological contexts of the global informational economy, and it is rethought in suggestive ways. Built on ideas of inclusion—inclusion in the making of historical change and, in a more explicitly spatial sense, in networks of (after Foucault) biopolitical production—*Empire* might be seen as a fitting antidote to the exclusionary uses of history foisted on us by the likes of the Bush Doctrine, offering a historically dynamic and hopeful sensibility for raising questions about how the ‘war on terrorism’ may articulate with the tensions between US and global governance in five, ten, or fifty years. Despite some tantalizing hints, however, the *spatiality* of *Empire*’s historicized ‘passages of sovereignty’ lacks nuance at times. Indeed, the treatment of space in the book vacillates from an almost *determinist* absolute space—for instance, in the idea that there are no more ‘outsides’ because postmodern capitalism under US military hegemony has reached certain (largely unexamined) spatial limits, thus catalyzing political change as *Empire*’s networks turn inward on themselves—to the equally problematic concept of the ‘nonplace’ of power. Although this latter notion is made more productive when it is described explicitly in terms of ongoing processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, it nevertheless risks seriously underestimating the geographical *embeddedness* of US state power at a time when that geography needs to be more clearly understood. Notwithstanding these problems, though, it is worth giving Hardt and Negri the benefit of the doubt by taking seriously the possibility that dramatic, fundamental changes may be afoot in the nature of global sovereignty and governance. What richer insights then might be gained by extending their politically charged insights into the historical dynamics of sovereign power, with its basis in the policing of internalized social conflict, to the spatial production and reproduction of that power and its complex geographical outcomes?

When I first encountered *Empire*, I happened to be reading at the same time *An Essay on Liberation* by Herbert Marcuse (1969), a philosopher whom Hardt and Negri, for whatever reason, do not engage with. Written before (but prefaced and footnoted after) the political events of May and June 1968, the essay is marked by a surprising optimism, especially in contrast to Marcuse’s earlier *One-dimensional Man* (1964). Buoyed by the vibrancy of student activism, Marcuse (1969, page 22) describes the emergence of a “new sensibility that has become a political force. It crosses the frontier between the capitalist and communist orbit; it is contagious because the atmosphere, the climate of the established societies, carries the virus.” The parallels with *Empire* are evident, underscored by the total collapse of the frontier between capitalist and communist orbits that occurred in between the writing of these two books. But, despite his hopefulness, Marcuse was still troubled by what he called “The absurd situation: the established democracy still provides the only legitimate framework for change and must therefore be defended against all attempts on the Right and the Center to restrict this framework, but at the same time, preservation of the established democracy preserves the *status quo* and the containment of change” (page 68). Perhaps Hardt and Negri would find such a formulation hopelessly dialectical, and out of step with the new logic of power and capital. But if there *is* such a thing as *Empire*, then Marcuse’s “absurd situation” remains a vital problem for any present or future democratic governance at the global scale, particularly because our planetary political arrangements seem increasingly to be built around the construction

of a global police power that, together with the regulation of markets, tends to reinforce its own hegemony and to circumscribe, if not contain, the nature of political change. Perhaps *Empire* succeeds where it speaks to this problem: in a world of change, driven by a multitude of resistances, struggles, and desires, the status-quo powers are also reactive ones, and therefore limited in certain ways. Whatever the claims of the Bush Doctrine, histories are not written in reverse.

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