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DEMOCRACY AS IDEOLOGY OF EMPIRE*

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In his second inaugural address, George W. Bush told the world that the U.S. mission – a divinely inspired mission – was to bring freedom and democracy to the darkest corners of the earth and to abolish tyranny. Many people find something deeply incongruous between that mission statement and the realities on the ground. But the association of democracy with imperialist aggression is not just the madness of George W. Bush. George Junior is certainly not the first U.S. president to justify imperialist interventions on the grounds of a mission to defend and spread democracy. The association of imperialism and democracy seems to be a deeply rooted American idea, and many Americans firmly believe that this represents their country's manifest destiny.

FREEDOM, EQUALITY, IMPERIALISM

In the wake of 9/11, at the time of the war in Afghanistan, sixty U.S. academics issued a statement called “What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America.” The signatories included some of the usual suspects, like Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, but also others whom we do not automatically think of as right-wing ideologues – such as the social democrat Michael Walzer. It is probably fair to say that their statement represented the views of a reasonably wide intellectual and political spectrum – at least by U.S. standards – from mildly left liberal to more-

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or-less respectable conservatism; and it is probably as civilized a defense of U.S. military intervention as we are likely to find.

The letter opens with a statement of the fundamental values that, according to the signatories, represent the best of the United States, the values for which they went to war:

We affirm five fundamental truths that pertain to all people without distinction:

1. *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*
2. *The basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing.*
3. *Human beings naturally desire to seek the truth about life's purposes and ultimate ends.*
4. *Freedom of conscience and religious freedom are inviolable rights of the human person.*
5. *Killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God and is the greatest betrayal of the universality of religious faith.*

We fight to defend ourselves and to defend these universal principles.

Most of us would find nothing objectionable in this list. We might even find it thoroughly admirable. The question is how we can square it with U.S. military adventures. We may subscribe to the values in that list and for that very reason regard the war in Afghanistan, to say nothing of the war in Iraq, as clearly imperialist. We might find it hard to understand how these values could be grounds for an essentially imperialist war, especially the first principle about the freedom and equality of human beings. It is especially puzzling when considered against the background of actual U.S. foreign policy, which has generally shown little inclination to support democratic regimes in its dependencies, to say nothing of the Bush regime's assaults on democracy in its own backyard and at home. It becomes even more confusing when the letter goes on to argue that this war – and what its signatories say applies to the whole so-called war against terrorism – meets the conditions of “just war.” It is, they say, a just war first and foremost because it meets the condition that “wars of aggression and aggrandizement are never acceptable.”

This may seem more than a little tasteless, under the circumstances, with the Bush regime hardly disguising its intentions of maintaining U.S. hegemony in the region by acquiring strategic positions in Afghanistan and Iraq. But however incongruous it may be, it is worth asking why such incongruities seem plausible to decent and intelligent people. How is it that freedom, equality, and universal human dignity can seem a convincing justification for imperialism and war?

The answer begins with capitalism. This is a system of appropriation that does not depend on legal inequalities or the inequality of political rights. Appropriating and producing classes can be free and equal under the law; the relation between them is supposed to be a contractual agreement between free and equal individuals; and even universal suffrage is possible without fundamentally affecting the economic powers of capital. In fact, capital benefits from the disappearance of the old formal differences among human beings, because it thrives on reducing all types of people to interchangeable units of labour. (I should add here that this has had some paradoxical consequences, one of which is the emergence in the nineteenth century of a uniquely rabid form of racism, which made it possible to exclude some people from the natural universe of human freedom and equality by marking them out as something less than fully human.)

Capital's ability to dispense with non-economic powers means that its exploitative powers can coexist with liberal democracy, which would have been impossible in any system where exploitation depended on a monopoly of political rights. And the reason this is possible is that capitalism has created new, purely economic compulsions: the propertylessness of workers, which compels them to sell their labour power in exchange for a wage, and the compulsions of the market, which regulate the economy. Both capital and labour can have democratic rights in the political sphere without completely transforming the relation between them in a separate economic sphere; and much of human life is determined in that economic sphere, outside the reach of democratic accountability. Capitalism can, therefore, coexist with the ideology of freedom and equality in a way that no other system of domination can. In fact, the idea that capitalists and workers alike are free and equal has become the most important ideological support of capitalism. Formal democracy, with its ideology of freedom, equality, and classlessness, has

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become one of the most effective mechanisms in sustaining and reproducing capitalist class relations.

On the face of it, the separation of economic and political spheres should make class inequality more starkly visible by highlighting the tensions between formal equality in one sphere and substantive inequality in the other. But the disappearance of legally and politically defined class inequalities has actually made class relations in capitalism less rather than more transparent. In feudalism, for example, there was little chance of mistaking the exploitative relation between lords and their legally dependent serfs – not just because the serf was transparently giving his labour, its products, or rent directly to the lord, but because the inequality between them was explicit in law. In capitalism, not only does payment go from employer to worker, rather than the other way round, there is also no legal or political recognition of their inequality. In fact, there is a constant emphasis on their equality.

This is a real ideological advantage for capital, but it also creates its own distinctive problems. When capital finds itself having to justify exploitation and domination, it cannot really do it by invoking any principles of inequality, so it has to adopt some fairly complicated strategies. This is true of relations between capital and labour on the domestic front, but we are particularly interested here in what it means for imperialist ideology.

IDEOLOGIES OF CAPITALIST IMPERIALISM

In the early days of capitalist imperialism, when it was still mainly a question of outright colonial settlement, there was one particularly interesting theoretical development, namely justifying imperialism by means of a theory of property. At first, the idea was simply that when land was not already occupied, it was available to be claimed by colonists who would make it fruitful, even without the consent of local inhabitants. This idea appears, for instance, in Thomas More's *Utopia*. But soon the argument became more aggressive: even occupied land was not real property and it was available for expropriation if it was not being used fruitfully enough – which meant essentially that it was not being used to produce profitably in a context of well-developed commerce. Something like this argument already appears in the justification of English imperialism in Ireland in the early seventeenth century. But it gets its most

systematic theorization in John Locke's political theory, where the right of property is based on the productive and profitable use of property, in other words, on the production of exchange value.

So now it was possible to defend colonization in an almost impersonal way, entirely bypassing the question of rule and domination. It was just a matter of applying the same principles to colonial territories as the English were applying to property in their own domestic economy, where the principles of productivity and profit were beginning to trump all other property rights. Colonial territory was just like common or waste land in England, available to be enclosed by those engaged in profitable commercial agriculture. This was an application of capitalist principles, the principles of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization by means of increasing productivity. It expressed a wholly new morality, in which exchange value took priority over all other goods, making possible the justification of everything from exploitation and expropriation to ecological destruction – all in the name of freedom and equality.

But the justification of imperialism in the form of a theory of property represents a specific moment in the history of imperialism, and it would soon prove inadequate. Capitalism would eventually develop to a point where colonization was no longer necessary or desirable. The new imperialism – which really only emerged in the twentieth century, and really only in the second half – was, and is, a different story. There came a time when capitalism could impose its powerful economic pressures on the whole world, so that it had no need to impose direct colonial rule. It should be said that this took a long time. Even in the British Empire, the economic power of capital and market imperatives were never enough; and in India, the imperial power even had to return to something more like a pre-capitalist empire, a territorial empire ruled by a military dictatorship. The fully developed capitalist empire, which depends above all on economic imperatives, is basically the story of U.S. imperialism.

On the whole, the U.S.A. has preferred to avoid colonial entanglements and instead has maintained a so-called informal empire, imposing market forces and manipulating them to the advantage of U.S. capital. We all know that this would have been impossible without the support of military power, but that power has not generally been used for the old imperial purpose of capturing and holding colonial territories. Its job has been more diffuse and open-ended than that: to police the global system to make it safe for the movements of capital.

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I shall return to that point in a moment. The question here has to do with the ideological problems thrown up by this new kind of imperialism. How does one theorize and justify a non-colonial, non-territorial empire? How does one explain and defend exploitation of people and resources that requires no direct rule or territorial expansion, and where there is no need for personal rule or the seizure of property?

The objective of this new empire, first and foremost, is free access for capital, and U.S. capital in particular, to anywhere in the world – what is euphemistically called openness. This does not mean colonial occupation. It does not mean direct rule of colonial peoples. And, in spite of what we are repeatedly told by theorists of globalization, it does not mean the disappearance of more-or-less sovereign territorial states. On the contrary, it requires a stable global system of multiple states to maintain the kind of order and predictability that capitalism – more than any other social form – needs.

Open access for capital also does not mean a truly integrated global economy. It is true that the world's economies are interdependent, if that means that they are all subject to pressures imposed by global capital; but openness and so-called free trade are one-sided. Global capital actually benefits from the unevenness of national economies, which allows it to exploit cheap labour and resources, while at the same time blocking competition from those low-cost economies. It also benefits from controlling the movements of labour. What global capital needs is not a global state but an orderly global system of territorial states, which maintain economic and political order within territorial boundaries and at the same time permit and facilitate the penetration of those boundaries by global capital, without presenting any dangerous challenges or competition.

How, then, is this global empire described and justified by its proponents? The new imperialism is not easily amenable to any of the old imperialist justifications. For one thing, it depends not simply on justifying imperial domination but on denying its existence altogether. Up to a point, it achieves this effect in more or less the same way that capitalism disguises class domination. Class relations between capital and labour lack transparency, taking the form of consensual, contractual relations between formally free and equal individuals, mediated by the ostensibly impersonal forces of the market. Similarly, exploitation in the new imperialism lacks the transparency of colonial rule. But to say that

capitalist imperialism is not imperialism because it does not involve direct colonial rule is like saying that exploitation of labour by capital is not class exploitation. With capitalist market imperatives at its disposal, global capital can impose its domination without direct rule. Instead of using state power to impose direct dominion, it thrives in a context of many sovereign states. There is an analogy here between citizens in a capitalist democracy and states in a global capitalist empire. The democratic polity is made up of formally free and equal civic individuals, just as the global order is made up of formally free and equal sovereign states. And just as citizenship tends to mask class domination in capitalism, legal state sovereignty tends to mask imperial domination.

But this is not quite enough to justify the new imperialism. Because it depends on the imposition and maintenance of capitalist economic imperatives, it also requires a justification of this economic order itself. Since economic imperialism in this sense only really came into its own in the latter part of the twentieth century, the ideological strategy is still in a process of development. But its general outlines are by now fairly clear. The main strategy in recent years has been to treat the global capitalist economy as an impersonal, natural phenomenon and a historical inevitability, an idea nicely conveyed by conventional notions of globalization. Globalization, in the current capitalist and even U.S.-dominated sense, is conceived as the result of two inevitable natural processes: the impersonal, natural laws of the market and technological determinism. We are given to understand that the laws of the market will inevitably embrace the whole world, so there is really no point in fighting them; and the new information technologies have not only enabled that process but may even be its principal cause.

And yet even this is not enough to make the case for the new imperialism. There is a deep contradiction at the very heart of the new empire which makes its ideological needs rather more complicated. No matter how strong purely economic imperatives may be, no matter how much the imperialist power may benefit from purely economic domination instead of more risky and less profitable colonial ventures – or precisely because it does not dominate the world by direct rule – this empire cannot do without a global system of states to organize the global economy. A truly global state that could sustain global capital the way national states have sustained their domestic capitals is all but inconceivable. So

there is a real disjuncture between the economic reach of capital and the political force that sustains it.

A global system of multiple states presents problems of its own. It is not so simple to maintain order and a congenial environment for capital in the global state system. That requires political, military, and ideological supports that are not supplied by purely economic power. The irony is that it seems to require a military force more massive than any empire in history, despite the fact – or rather because of it – that its object is not territorial expansion or colonial rule. If it has any identifiable objective, it is something vague and all-embracing, like policing the world to make it safe for capital. In other words, its purpose is completely open-ended. So the new imperialism needs not only an ideology to help sustain the right political environment in the global state system but also a justification for massive military power. And it needs a justification of that military power not just for defence against real threats, or even for colonial expansion, but for open-ended objectives. To put it bluntly, it needs an ideology to justify what amounts to a state of permanent war.

At this point in history, more than ever, it is hard to invoke a discourse of inequality and hierarchy, so the available ideological strategies are more limited than ever. They are largely confined to ostensibly democratic and egalitarian ideologies – and, in any case, those ideologies do have real advantages for imperial capital. The concept of democracy covers a multitude of sins, and it has become especially useful now that the old postwar imperial strategies no longer work. For a while, it was possible to justify, or disguise, imperialism in the postwar projects of development and modernization, the idea that the so-called Third World would be lifted up to Western standards with help from the West. This would, of course, happen on Western terms, in accordance with imperial interests and demands; but at least this imperial strategy promised some positive advantage to “developing” countries.

But, as the long postwar boom in the advanced capitalist countries gave way to a long economic downturn, the development strategy gave way to neoliberalism, with its policies of “structural adjustment,” privatization, and the complete vulnerability of subordinate economies to foreign capital and financial speculation. At least behind the scenes, some prominent neoliberals are even admitting, perhaps even boasting, that the future we are looking forward to is one in which 80 percent of the world’s population will be more or less superfluous, that high-tech

agriculture and agribusiness will displace millions from the land, who will flock to the cities to populate huge slums, and so on. That vision of the future holds out little hope for the welfare of the millions; and even a less rabid neoliberalism promises much less than old development strategies did. But talk of democracy is cheap and makes a useful rhetorical substitute, at least for home consumption in imperial capitals.

THE U.S. IDEA OF DEMOCRACY

Now, it may seem that democratic rhetoric rules out most of current U.S. foreign policy. It certainly seems to make nonsense out of U.S. support for various oppressive regimes, now as before. It certainly seems incompatible with Guantanamo Bay, to say nothing of assaults on civil liberties at home. And it is very hard to square with the state of permanent war. But let us, for the sake of argument, set aside all those realities and consider how the Bush regime can justify its mission on its own terms.

The first thing we have to understand is that the new imperialists have at their disposal something that was never available to earlier imperial ideologues. They have a far less threatening conception of democracy to work with, something very well suited to class domination and imperial expansion. This is an idea of democracy invented in the U.S.A. very early in its history. Its main purpose – and we should have no illusions about this – was not to strengthen democratic citizenship but, on the contrary, to preserve elite rule in the face of an unavoidable mass politics and popular sovereignty. The object was to depoliticize the citizenry and turn democracy into rule by propertied classes over a passive citizen body, and also to confine democracy to a limited, formal political sphere. The founding fathers adopted various strategies to achieve that end, but what is most interesting from our point of view here is that they did everything possible to make democratic citizenship compatible with, or rather subordinate to, a hierarchy of economic interests.

History had already provided for a separation of economic and political power, and it was now necessary to reinvent the political sphere to make it subordinate to economic power. Politics was explicitly defined as a way of managing class inequality and differences of economic interest. In the face of already strong popular forces which emerged from the American Revolution, the idea was to neutralize democracy as much as possible.

The constitutional founders wanted to ensure that democratic citizenship did not mean democratic state power, power really in the hands of the people. On the one hand, the power of the majority had to be disarmed by fragmenting and diluting the majority as much as possible, to prevent its coalescence into an overwhelming force. That was, as James Madison pointed out, one great advantage of a large republic. On the other hand, the power of the propertied elites had to be protected by filtering popular sovereignty through a representative system designed to favour large landowners and merchants and through powerful institutions not subject to direct election – the Senate and above all the presidency (a strong executive presidency, instead of a parliamentary system, was itself another safeguard against popular rule).

So here was a democracy whose essential purpose was to leave class domination intact, while maintaining democratic suffrage and other democratic forms. Capitalism, even at that early stage of development, had made it possible by creating a separate economy and exploitative powers that no longer depended on exclusive political rights. There already existed a separate economic sphere, with its own principles of order and domination. But it was U.S. democracy that created the political sphere to go with it, a political sphere to suit the capitalist division of labour between political and economic power. Today, the U.S.A. represents the model capitalist democracy. It combines, in ideological conception and in practical reality, the formal sovereignty of the people with the substantive rule of capital. In the U.S.A. it is possible to distribute citizenship democratically without automatically and directly affecting class power in any serious way. Capitalism allows “democracy” to be confined within a limited sphere of operation.

But – and this is a big “but” – the division of labour between the power of appropriation and the power of coercion that makes this possible also makes the state a vital organ for the capitalist class. Capitalist exploitation can certainly go on in the economic sphere without interference, even where all citizens are juridically equal and even in conditions of universal suffrage. But capitalism relies on the state to create the conditions of accumulation and enforcement that capital cannot create for itself. So state power in the wrong hands is still a dangerous thing. The U.S. idea of democracy, for all its undoubted benefits, especially in the constitutional protection of civil liberties (now more than ever under threat at the hands of the Bush regime), is

designed to make politics subordinate to class inequality and differences of economic interest.

Up to now, U.S. democracy has served capital well by preserving the balance between “formal” democracy and capitalist class rule, both outside and inside the state. I shall suggest in a moment that the new world order may be threatening that balance. But first, just a few words about how the U.S. conception of democracy operates in support of imperialism.

DEMOCRACY AND IMPERIALISM

The essence of democracy as conceived in the U.S.A. is the coupling of formal democracy with substantive class rule, the class rule of capital. This involves a delicate conceptual balancing act between an assertion of popular sovereignty – government of, by, and for the people – and the dominance of capital, the subordination of politics to capitalist markets, and the imperatives of profit. Those of us who grew up in the United States are well primed to accept this tricky combination. We are well prepared to view class power as having nothing to do with either power or class. We are educated to see property as the most fundamental human right and the market as the true realm of freedom. We are taught to view the state as just a necessary evil to sustain the right of property and the free market. We are taught to accept that most social conditions are determined in an economic sphere outside the reach of democracy. We learn to think of “the people” not in social terms, as the common people, the working class, or anything to do with popular power, but as a purely political category; and we confine democracy to a limited, formal political sphere. As the founding fathers intended, we think of political rights as essentially passive, and citizenship as a passive, individual, even private identity, which may express itself by voting from time to time but which has no active, collective or social meaning.

So there is nothing immediately implausible to most Americans about applying this idea of democracy to imperialism. At the turn of the twentieth century, the U.S.A. pioneered a form of empire which has been called Open Door imperialism – with roots that go back to the foundation of the republic. The so-called Open Door policy was first explicitly stated in relation to China. This doctrine began by asserting the territorial integrity of China, in other words, its right to be free of foreign

domination. Yet the territorial integrity of China was intended to serve the interests of U.S. capital by giving it free rein to penetrate the Chinese economy. On the face of it, this was meant to create a level playing field, so that the U.S. could do what other major powers were already doing. But the calculation was – not unreasonably – that a world in which various existing states would maintain their territorial integrity while opening their economies to foreign capital would, given U.S. economic power, generally work to the advantage of the United States and U.S. capital. There is an obvious connection between this conception of the international order and the U.S. idea of the democratic republic, where democratic citizenship is coupled with the rule of capital through the medium of economic imperatives.

The U.S.A. was from the outset prepared to open those doors by military means – all in the apparently anti-colonial name of fairness, equality, and the spread of democracy. What made this plausible was the formal separation of political and economic power, which permitted the U.S.A. to support, at least nominally, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of subordinate states. Even people ostensibly on the left seem to have been persuaded by this ideological strategy. Consider, for example, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's fashionable book *Empire*, which describes the U.S.-dominated empire in terms that would have been entirely congenial to the architects of Open Door imperialism – talking about a U.S.-dominated empire which, for all its unfortunate consequences, is, unlike other forms of empire, an extension of an essentially benign democracy, with open, expansive, and inclusive tendencies.

Nevertheless, for all its democratic rhetoric, the U.S.A. has generally tended to prop up friendly autocratic regimes. No reader of this volume will need reminding of all the occasions when the United States has intervened, by military and other means, to prevent the accession of a democratic regime or to overturn a democratic election. But that is not always possible, and obstructing democracy in the name of democracy is another option, which has become more important in recent years. In the Middle East, for instance, it has become more difficult to prop up old friends. Islamist movements, which are challenging autocratic friends of the U.S.A., have been threatening to become truly mass movements; and in these circumstances the best available strategy is to replace these autocratic regimes with some kind of congenial democracy in which enemies of the U.S.A., Islamist or otherwise, are somehow sidelined,

while as many spheres of public life as possible are put out of reach of democratic accountability – for instance, by privatization.

The U.S.A. – reluctantly and belatedly – supported the election in Iraq. They had little choice. Bush says his mission is more of the same. But it goes without saying that his administration will not support any truly democratic transformation, a real transformation of class power. It will not support even the most limited democracy that endangers the interests of U.S. capital, and it is doing everything possible to prevent that in Iraq, as elsewhere. This can be achieved either by direct intervention, as in Iraq, or by supporting friendly regimes in their attempts to limit the damage of ostensibly democratic reforms, as in Egypt.

Here, the U.S. conception of democracy is particularly useful. It suggests two essential strategies. One is to find electoral processes and institutions that will thwart the majority in one way or another. The other – and this is ultimately the most important – is to empty democracy of as much social content as possible. On the first point, certain political groups can be excluded altogether – as the main opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, is excluded from the Egyptian electoral process. Or else it is possible to give an unfair advantage to a minority, to protect propertied, or pro-U.S., interests as much as possible. Consider, for instance, the confessional system of representation in Lebanon. Giving Christians an advantage incommensurate with their numbers also means giving an advantage to privileged middle classes over people from the Shia slums of Beirut and the impoverished south of the country. In Iraq, the U.S. occupation has meant much more direct interference with a truly democratic transformation, as the occupying power has limited the field of candidates as narrowly as possible and made every effort to ensure the continuation of the regime which it installed – even if its efforts to sustain a friendly regime and a suitable constitution in Iraq may finally be thwarted by internal opposition.

But when all is said and done the desocialization of democracy is the really crucial anti-democratic strategy, more important in the end than any electoral devices. The whole point of this strategy is to put formal political rights in place of any social rights, and to put as much of social life as possible out of reach of democratic accountability. That is exactly what has happened in Iraq, where the parameters of democratic politics were set long before the election by Paul Bremer's economic directives and privatization programme. More generally this is the effect, and to a

large extent the purpose, of neoliberal globalization. If globalization is preparing the ground for democracy throughout the world, as leaders of the advanced capitalist states would have us believe, it is doing so by ensuring that much of economic and social life will be beyond the reach of democratic power, while becoming ever more vulnerable to the power of capital.

I want, however, to conclude with a different point. The conceptual balancing act in the ideology of empire and democracy has depended on a particular division of labour between political and economic spheres, and up to now it has worked fairly well. But the old relation between political and economic power that made it possible for capitalism to tolerate formal democracy is being disrupted. The division of labour between the state and capital is being undermined. I suggested earlier that the separation of political and economic power, which has allowed capital to extend its reach around the globe and across political boundaries, has also produced a growing gap between the economic powers of capital and the political powers it needs to sustain the global economy. The consequence of a globalized economy has been that states have become more, not less, involved in managing economic circuits through the medium of inter-state relations, and capital has become more, not less, dependent on organization of the economy by a system of many local states. This means that the division of labour between the economic and political is less clear-cut than it was. We may, then, be entering a new period in which global capital's need for a congenial state system makes democratic transformations even more threatening than they were before. It may turn out that democracy now threatens to have a more substantive meaning, as it did when it was first invented in ancient Greece, before the U.S. definition emptied it of social content.

To manage the global economy, capital needs local states not only in the imperial centre but throughout the global system. In this new world order, democracy, even in its limited form, is likely to be under growing attack. Bush's mission to spread democracy at best means trying to ensure compliant regimes and to prevent genuinely democratic transformations. At worst, it means war. And in a state of perpetual war, even the formal democracy of capitalist societies is under threat. That was true in the Cold War, and it is true in the so-called war on terror. There has already been an assault on liberal democracy, an attack on civil liberties in the U.S.A. and elsewhere.

That's the bad news. The good news is that local and national struggles are more important now than ever. Global capital's dependence on local states may be its greatest vulnerability; and nothing could be more threatening than real democratic struggles, in every state, everywhere, but especially in the imperial homeland.