

ARTÍCULO INVITADO

The imperial present and the geopolitics of power

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ABSTRACT

In this article, it is posited that we are not, contrary to conventional wisdom, living in “post-imperial” times; on the contrary, it is suggested that we inhabit a re-imperialized terrain in the sense that imperial reason has been re-asserted, as clearly evident, for example, in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan —interventions that express a Western desire to control other key regions of the world. The parameters of imperial politics are still in place and the driving orientation of an imperial mentality has not been superceded. The argument is organised around three intertwined themes. First, there is an identification and differentiation of the key concepts that are to be found in discussions of colonial and imperial rule. Second, two contrasting theoretical approaches to the analysis of the imperial are considered, and an attempt is made to suggest ways in which the cultural and the Marxist political economy perspectives could be linked, even if only tenuously. Third the article examines the main components of what is termed the “imperial mentality”, within which it is suggested that a multi-dimensional contextualization of imperial power might well provide us with a more creative analytical opening. The author hopes to make clear that the imperial present and the geopolitics of power is a thematic which requires much more examination in what are acutely volatile times.

Key words: Imperial mentality; geopolitics of power; coloniality of power; imperialism; hegemony.

El presente imperial y la geopolítica del poder

RESUMEN

En este artículo se afirma que, al contrario de lo que se piensa habitualmente, no estamos viviendo en tiempos “postimperiales”; por el contrario se sugiere que habitamos un terreno re-imperializado, en el sentido de que se ha reafirmado la razón imperial, como queda patente, por ejemplo, en las invasiones de Irak y Afganistán —intervenciones que expresan el deseo occidental de controlar otras regiones clave del mundo—. Los parámetros de la política imperial están todavía vigentes y la orientación decisiva de una mentalidad imperial no ha sido desbancada. El argumento se organiza en torno a tres temas entremezclados. En primer lugar, se identifican y diferencian los conceptos clave que podemos encontrar en los debates sobre gobierno imperial y colonial. En segundo lugar, se consideran dos perspectivas teóricas contrapuestas, y se hace un intento de sugerir formas para unir, aunque sea tenuemente, la perspectiva cultural con la de la economía política marxista. Y en tercer lugar, el artículo examina los principales componentes de lo que se puede denominar la “mentalidad imperial”, a partir de la que se sugiere que se puede desarrollar una contextualización multidimensional del poder imperial, que bien podría proporcionarnos una apertura

analítica más creativa. El autor espera dejar claro que el presente imperial y la geopolítica del poder son una temática que necesita un examen más profundo en estos tiempos tan volátiles.

Palabras clave: Mentalidad imperial; geopolítica del poder; colonialidad del poder; imperialidad; hegemonía.

O presente imperial e a geopolítica do poder

RESUMO

Neste artigo, afirma-se que, ao contrário do que se pensa habitualmente, não estamos vivendo em tempos “pós-imperiais”. Ao contrário, sugere-se que habitamos um terreno re-imperializado, no sentido de uma reafirmação da razão imperial, como fica claro, por exemplo, nas invasões do Iraque e do Afeganistão – intervenções que expressam o desejo ocidental de controlar outras regiões chave do mundo. Os parâmetros da política imperial ainda estão vigentes e a orientação decisiva de uma mentalidade imperial não foi desbancada. O argumento do texto divide-se em três temas inter-relacionados. Em primeiro lugar, identificam-se e diferenciam-se os conceitos principais que podemos encontrar nos debates sobre governo imperial e colonial. Em segundo lugar, consideram-se as perspectivas teóricas enfrentadas, e propõe-se uma tentativa de articulação, ainda que ténue, da corrente cultural com a economia política marxista. Finalmente, em terceiro lugar, o artigo examina os principais componentes do que pode ser denominado como “mentalidade imperial”, sugerindo que é possível desenvolver uma contextualização multidimensional do poder imperial, que poderia proporcionar uma abertura analítica mais criativa. O autor espera deixar claro que o presente imperial e a geopolítica do poder são uma temática que necessita uma análise mais profunda nestes tempos tão voláteis.

Palavras-chave: Mentalidade imperial; geopolítica do poder; colonialidade do poder; imperialidade; hegemonia.

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SUMMARY: Introduction. 1. Exploring the conceptual terrain. 2. Constructing a theoretical frame. 3. Analysing the imperial mentality. 3.1. The Imperial Relation. 3.2. In Search of Hegemony. Concluding remarks. References.

Introduction

In the wake of the British Prime Minister’s speech concerning the events of “Bloody Sunday”, in which a formal apology was made for what the country’s soldiers had done in Northern Ireland, a Guardian journalist suggested that this was perhaps the most memorable of all Britain’s “post-imperial moments” (*The Guardian*, 16 June 2010, p 1). But are we living in “post-imperial times”? Have countries such as the UK and particularly the US worked through and gone beyond their imperial perspectives? Is the imperial moment something of the past and/or is it

correct to assert following some commentators that the United States, in contrast to European countries, has never been an empire?¹ In this article I want to argue that, in the specific context of the United States, imperial power is still very much part of contemporary world politics, and that we need to renew our critical take on the nature of the imperial present. Before going into some of the details of this phenomenon I want to discuss two interwoven and essential themes: a) the conceptual terrain and b) some of the different theoretical perspectives that inhabit the field of analysis.

1. Exploring the conceptual terrain

To begin with, it is worthwhile identifying the most pertinent concepts relevant to the topic of discussion. These concepts are: colonialism and coloniality; imperialism and imperality; empire; neo-colonialism and the post-colonial and de-colonial. What needs to be done here is to delineate and define these concepts, indicating at the same time why such differences in meaning might be significant. First one can distinguish imperialism from colonialism.

As one example, Said (1993: 8) defined colonialism as “the implanting of settlements on distant territory”, whereas imperialism was seen as the “practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory”. Colonialism, for Said, was almost always a consequence of imperialism, and as Marxist authors such as Magdoff (1969) have pointed out, US imperialism did not need colonies to effectively deploy its power, preferring, *inter alia*, an “open door” policy and the diffusion of “free trade” (see Williams, 2007).

In some of the relevant literature, one encounters a rather prevalent assumption that in the context of imperialism and colonialism, imperialism ended with decolonization. This supposition has been reinforced by the fact that international law recognises formally equal and independent states, whilst at the same time the system of independent states is often traced back to 1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia, thereby overlooking the last four hundred years of European empires and colonial rule. In this context, Tully (2008: 131-132) suggests that “the assumption that imperialism always entails colonies is false”, since “the major forms of imperial rule in the West have been non-colonial”; that is, the tradition of “informal” imperial rule over another people or peoples by means of military threats and intervention, the imposition of global markets dominated by the great powers and a host of other informal techniques of indirect legal, political, educational and cultural rule

¹ For a useful consideration of these issues see the chapter by the American historian Maier (2005); also relevant is the recent anthology edited by McCoy and Scarano (2009).

has transcended the mechanisms of colonial rule.² A key point of Tully's argument is that the term "imperial" is broader and more flexible than "the colonial" and I shall return to this distinction below.

One of the earlier concepts that should be included in our overview is that of "neo-colonialism" This term was used quite widely in the 1960s and 1970s and especially in an African context (Amin, 1973), being invented by the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah in 1965, to denote the "last stage of imperialism". It was meant to signify a situation in which, post-Independence, there was a continual hegemonic influence of the erstwhile colonial powers over the newly-emerging post-colonial societies through the application of a variety of economic, political and cultural pressures. One can argue that the term "indirect imperialism" (for a discussion, see Gallagher and Robinson, 1953: 1-15) covers much of the same ground as neo-colonialism, a term which perhaps has the potential disadvantage of overly circumscribing the relative autonomy of post-colonial societies in a global age.³

Turning now to the distinction between colonialism and coloniality, we need to refer to the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's original concept of the "coloniality of power". For Quijano (2000) what is described as globalization is the outcome of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Euro-centred capitalism. According to Quijano, one of the key dimensions of this model of power has been the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, whereby it is further argued that the racial axis has a colonial origin which has proven to be more durable than the colonialism through which it was brought into being. Hence, for Quijano the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes a pivotal element of coloniality (Quijano, 2007).

From Quijano's original conceptualization, which dates back to the early 1990s, a number of researchers have applied the term in their work, giving emphasis to the needed differentiation of colonialism from coloniality. Mignolo (2005), for instance, writes that while colonialism refers to specific historical periods and places of imperial domination, coloniality is the "underlying matrix of colonial power that was maintained in the US and in South America and the Caribbean after independence" (Mignolo, 2005: 69). Similarly, the Colombian philosopher Castro-Gómez demarcates the two concepts as follows: whilst colonialism refers to a historical

² For Lutz (2006: 594) in her detailed analysis of empire in its modern forms, imperial influences can be exercised through direct military and political intervention, the threat of intervention, the mediation of proxy states or through the power of multilateral institutions. For his part Golub (2007: 67) lists a number of imperial influences including a continuum of coercive expansionary practices, and the weaving of invisible constraints caging subordinate states and societies into dependency.

³ Clearly, the applicability of the term "neo-colonial" varies considerably within the global south and to put the point bluntly one can suggest that the neocolonial term would apply more appropriately to a country such as Haiti rather than to Brazil.

period, which in the case of Latin America largely ended in the early part of the nineteenth century, “coloniality” refers to a technology of power that persists today, founded on the “knowledge of the other” – “coloniality is not modernity’s ‘past’ but its ‘other face’” (Castro-Gómez, 2002: 276).

Whilst this distinction is useful and necessary, it can also be suggested that the term “coloniality of power” can be contrasted with what I would call the “imperiality of power”. Thus, whereas imperialism can be thought of in terms of the strategy, practice and justification of the invasive power of a Western state over other predominantly non-Western states, whose political sovereignty is thereby undermined, imperiality refers to the perceived right, privilege and sentiment of being imperial or of defending an imperial way of life in which geopolitical invasiveness is legitimized. In other words, Western societies harbour imperial discourses that are rooted in the history of their geopolitical relations so that a strategy of imperialist expansion can be discursively sustained through reliance on a direct appeal to a deeply rooted sense of imperial privilege. Part of this imperiality is reflected in the existence of an imperial ethos of care and posited reciprocity in which the imperial power expects the imperialized society to express its gratitude for, for example, being invaded, since it has been liberated and introduced to a superior way of life, expressed in terms of “civilization”, “modernization” or “democracy” (Perez, 2008: 4).⁴

As far as the term empire is concerned, it is worthwhile referring to the definition used by Doyle (1986: 45) in which empires are seen as relations of political control imposed by some societies over the effective sovereignty of other societies, and imperialism is the process of establishing and maintaining an empire. Whilst this is a useful approach it needs to be remembered that there are other perspectives on the concept of empire. One sees empire as a boundless form of political space characterized by political and economic relations of hierarchy and exploitation of a periphery by a core, in which there is an absence of an array of independent nation states (Saull, 2008) and a further approach to empire is to be found in the work of Hardt and Negri (2000) who argue that the fundamental principle of empire is that its power has no actual and localizable centre and is distributed through networks. For the purposes of this article I intend to broadly follow Doyle’s approach, not-

⁴ The imperiality of power is in many ways closely connected to the raciality and sexuality of power, and it can be argued that not one of these categories can be fully understood in isolation from the other two. Moreover, there is a significant connection here with the notion of an “imperial unconscious” whereby the history of colonial and imperial encounters have left behind deeply-sedimented attitudes, prejudices, values, and orientations which can help to legitimate newly-deployed imperial strategies. It is precisely because these attitudes of superiority lie beneath the surface, not having been openly discussed and critiqued in any detailed way, that they can influence events in concealed and unchallenged forms. For an interesting discussion of the imperial/patriarchal unconscious in the cultural context of US-Latin American encounters, see Burton (1992).

withstanding the fact that Saull raises a number of relevant issues, in particular the point that empires have an historical dimension that contrasts with the contemporary nature of imperial power which exists in a world of nation states. In the case of Hardt and Negri's thesis, their use of the term empire minimizes the central role of the United States in accounting for the current phenomenon of imperial power.⁵ Overall, I prefer to use the term "imperial" in contrast to empire since the former term carries with it less ambiguity. Clearly, this is a complex and on-going discussion and all I can do here is to highlight one or two salient points from the relevant literature (for some recent articles see Coronil, 2003; Dalby, 2008, and Parker, 2010).

Finally, it is necessary to distinguish the post-colonial from the de-colonial. The post-colonial can be used as a descriptor for a particular type of society, such as one that has freed itself from colonial rule, and also as an analytical sensibility. As an analytical sensibility, the post-colonial emphasizes, inter alia, the importance of colonial and imperial encounters in the formation of modernity and globalization, stresses the often marginalized significance of voices from the global south and underlines the crucial imbrications of West/non-West relations. The de-colonial represents a similar stance, as can be seen in Mignolo's (2005: 33) observation that the "de-colonial paradigm struggles to bring into intervening existence an-other interpretation that brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event and, on the other, shows the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the true (and total) interpretation of events". By choosing the term "de-colonial" Mignolo and others (for example, Grosfoguel, 2007, and Walsh, 2007) elect to stress the need to fundamentally challenge the residues of colonial reason, and this is a positive move.

2. Constructing a theoretical frame

Having identified some important aspects of the differentiation of concepts relevant to our analysis, it is now necessary to examine certain features of the theoretical background and this will be done through looking at the differences between the way cultural studies and radical political economy approaches analyse the imperial present. How do these analytical orientations vary and how might they be connected?

Said (1993: 8) reminds us that both imperialism and colonialism have not been simple acts of accumulation and acquisition, but rather that both phenomena have been supported and "perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations

⁵ In their book on the multitude, Hardt and Negri (2004: 323) state their position very clearly, asserting for example that "today imperial geopolitics has no center and no outside; it is a theory of internal relations in the global system".

that include notions that territories and people require and beseech domination". What we have here, in the context of Said's standpoint, is a culture of subordination where the imperial power projects a narrative of supremacy which includes the notion that the imperialized society, or at least important sectors within it, wants to be part of an ostensibly "superior" and expanding metropolitan core. In a related perspective, Amy Kaplan (2004: 7) suggests that imperialism is an "interconnected network of power relations which entail engagements and encounters as well as military might and which are riddled with instability, tension and disorder – as in Iraq today". Also in a cultural studies frame, Schueller (2007: 164) interprets US imperialism in terms of a militaristic empire, and also argues that this imperialism needs to be read in all its cultural complexity so that the neo-con masculinised vision of technological supremacy "makes for a definition of the national body politic as force, power, precision and control – a hypermodern, punitive empire – both causing and dependent on the paralysis and destruction of the Other". These and related ideas can be further explored in four imaginative anthologies stretching from the early 1990s to 2009 – see Kaplan and Pease (1993, eds), Joseph, Legrand and Salvatore (1998, eds), Dawson and Schueller (2007, eds) and McCoy and Scarano (2009, eds).

If we link up Said, Kaplan and Schueller, we have a basis for a flexible, open and multidimensional approach that does not banish the economic, but at the same time leaves space open for the analysis of the cultural, political and psychological factors of imperial politics, including feminist perspectives on empire (see, for example, Eisenstein, 2004, and Lutz, 2006). It is now necessary to contrast these studies with the Marxist political economy perspective. Briefly three examples will be mentioned.

First, Samir Amin (2004) writes that the global expansion of capitalism always brings with it the political intervention of the dominant powers in the societies of the periphery. Such expansion requires support from states in the service of dominant capital and in this sense the expansion is always entirely imperialist. For Amin (2004: 24) "the contemporary intervention of the United States is no less imperialist than were the colonial conquests of the nineteenth century".

Also writing within a Marxist frame, Harvey (2003) develops a more nuanced and perceptive approach in which imperial power is analysed in two interrelated ways: a) as a distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in a command of a territory and in a capacity to mobilise its human and natural resources towards political, economic and military ends, and b) as a diffuse political-economic process in which command over the use of capital takes a primary role. The central idea is to posit the territorial and capitalist logics as distinct from each other, while recognising that the two logics intertwine in complex and contradictory ways.

Finally, a third example can be taken from a paper by Panitch and Gindin (2006) on theorising US imperialism. In their version, what is needed is a theorisation of

imperialism capable of accounting for the central role that the US state has come to play in the global capitalist order. They emphasize the points that only the US state could arrogate to itself the right to intervene against the sovereignty of other states and that only the US state has reserved for itself the “sovereign” right to reject international rules and norms when necessary. They conclude by stating that capitalist imperialism needs to be explained in the context of the theory of the capitalist state.

Comparing these two broadly conceived perspectives, i.e. the cultural with the Marxist political economic, it can be suggested that the “cultural turn” in the analysis of imperialism offers a more open, less deterministic viewpoint which, whilst not erasing the significance of political economy does not anchor its interpretation of imperial power to a materialist foundation. In contrast, Marxist authors tend to be more assertive, adhering to a theoretical tradition that has an influential lineage. For many Marxists, there is a strong belief that their perspective provides the most effective explanation of imperialism, and not infrequently, the central thrust of analysis begins and ends with the economic (Smith, 2003).⁶

3. Analysing the imperial mentality

In finding ways to connect these two distinct perspectives, whilst at the same time not underestimating the differences between them, I want to argue that imperial power is a multidimensional phenomenon which can be contextualized around concepts of power relations, discourses of representation and political agency.

3.1. The Imperial Relation

The imperial mentality needs to be interpreted as a relational phenomenon, and this relationality has three main dimensions.

First, one can posit the existence of a geopolitical history of *invasiveness* that is expressed through strategies of appropriating resources and raw materials (Cairo, 2010, and Klare, 2002) and/or securing strategic sites for military bases (Johnson, 2004), which is accompanied by the laying down of new patterns of infrastructure and governmental regulation. Invasiveness, or processes of penetration of states, economies and social orders can be linked to what Harvey (2003) has called “accu-

⁶ Similarly, Agnew (2005) in his thoughtful work on US hegemony tends to anchor his treatment of power to the notion of an expanding market society, where economic factors are central. For his part, Glassman (2005) situates the “new imperialism” in an overarching framework of capital and class.

mulation by dispossession”, whereby the resources and wealth of peripheral societies are continually extracted for the benefit of the imperial heartland (Boron, 2005: 118). Such penetration and invasiveness must not be seen as only a matter of political economy, since the phenomenon of invasiveness is also cultural, political and psychological; it is in fact a multidimensional phenomenon whereby the determining decisions and practices are taken and deployed in the arena of the geopolitical. For example, the violation of the sovereignty of a Third World society is not only a question of international law (Anghie, 2007); more profoundly it reflects a negation of the will and dignity of another people and culture. In this sense the imperial relation is rooted in a “power-over” conception that reflects Western privilege and denial of the non-Western other’s right to geopolitical autonomy. Such Western projection of supremacy has been and continues to be the source of a sharply antagonistic relation and the generator of many anti-imperialist struggles, as we see in the current examples of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Second, as a consequence of the invasiveness of imperial projects one has the *imposition* of the dominant values, modes of thinking and institutional practices of the imperial power on to the society that has been subjected to imperial penetration. This is sometimes established as part of a project of “nation building” or geopolitical guidance, where the effective parameters of rule reflect a clear belief in the superiority of the imperial culture of institutionalization. Clearly, under colonialism such impositions were transparent and justified as part of a Western project of bringing “civilisation” to the non-Western other. But we should not assume that such a mentality belongs in the past, as, for example, British historian Ferguson (2005: 52) starkly observes that the US needs to be able to “impose democracy” in other parts of the world as a way of realising its project of expanding power. In the present era, and specifically in relation to Iraq, bringing neo-liberal democracy, US-style, has been part of a project to redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East (Achcar, 2004; Gregory, 2004). At the same time, this kind of imposition can be interpreted as a process of imperial governmentality which is concerned with installing new rules, codifications and institutional practices which are anchored in a specific set of externally transferred rationalities concerning “market-led” development and democracy, “good governance”, property rights, “open economies” and so on. Whether such projects can be successful or not is surely doubtful given the realities of their imposed nature but in the final analysis much will depend on the form, depth, extent and resilience of resistances to their power.

Third, it is important to emphasise that the imperial relation carries within it a lack of *respect* and *recognition* for the imperialised society. Thus, the processes of penetration and imposition are viewed as being beneficial to the societies that are being brought into the orbit of imperial power. The posited superiorities of Western “modernisation”, “democracy”, “development” and “civilisation” and so on are deployed to legitimise projects of enduring invasiveness that are characterised by a lack of recognition for the autonomy, dignity, sovereignty and cultural value of the

imperialised society (see Baker, Ismael and Ismael, 2010; Varea, Valverde and Sanz, 2009).

This is not a new narrative. If, for example, we go back to the time of the Second World War, we find an influential American political scientist writing that once the freed states of the world turn to equipping themselves with new constitutional instruments, the discipline of political science has a “mission to fulfil in imparting our experience to other nations and to integrating scientifically their institutions into a universal pattern of civilised government” (Lowenstein, 1944: 547). This is pre-modernization theory but it already acts as an example of an embryonic precursor for influential Western ideas from the late 1940s onward. If we now fast forward to 2008, and examine a NATO –commissioned report on a *Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World*, written by former defence chiefs from the US, France, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, we find the following: first, the presentation of a long-term vision of an alliance of democracies ranging from Finland to Alaska – the states of the north Atlantic – and second a guiding assumption that the north Atlantic is fundamentally civilised but that it is under threat from the forces of disorder such as the violent political ideology of radical Islamists, organized crime, international terrorism and the rise of the irrational. According to the authors, “what the Western allies face is a long, sustained and proactive defense of their societies and way of life” (The Noaber Foundation and the CSIS, 2008: 42). At no point is there any serious critical examination of Western policies and the non-Western world is portrayed in a wholly negative light, being the source of threats to Western security, and not even worthy of being integrated into the “civilised world” as Lowenstein argued just under seventy years ago.⁷

3.2. *In Search of Hegemony*

A key part of the imperial mentality is a continuing quest for global hegemony and such a quest is symptomatically manifested through a range of geopolitical interventions. In the case of the United States, interventions began long before the emergence of the Soviet Union. For example, the United States intervened 103 times in the period from 1798 to 1895 in a wide range of countries from Japan and China in the east to Nicaragua and Argentina in the west (Zinn, 1996: 290-291). These interventions can be seen as reflecting a discourse of expansionism and a

⁷ The interwoven nature of the projection of power and the deployment of subordinating modes of representation has been revealed in detail for US-Latin American relations by Schoultz (1999). Also see Slater (2004).

belief in the US having a global mission, perhaps best expressed in the Jeffersonian phrase “Empire of Liberty”.

The continuing nature of geopolitical interventions can be viewed in terms of the interconnections between desire, will, capacity and legitimisation. The will to intervene can be represented as a crystallization of a desire to expand, expresses for example in the nineteenth century notion of “Manifest Destiny” or in today’s idea that the United States is the global “steward” of the international system (Department of Defense, 2010: 13). Such a will can only be made effective when the capacities – military, economic, political – to intervene are sufficiently developed. Will and capacity together provide a force, but their effectiveness is only secured as a hegemonic power through the discourse of legitimization. A political will that focuses desire and is able to mobilise the levers of intervention seeks a hegemonic role through the ability to induce consent by providing leadership, political, cultural and moral, while retaining the capacity to coerce.

The desire to intervene, to penetrate another society and help “civilise” and “democratise” that other society is an emblematic part of any imperial project. The geopolitical will is provided by the agents of power working in and through the apparatuses of the imperial state. The processes of legitimization for that will to power are produced within the state, as reflected for example in National Security Strategy documents of the United States, but also within civil society, as exemplified with pressure groups such as the Project for a New American Century (see for example PNAC, 2000). In the case of the United States and its relations with the societies of the Global South and especially the Latin South the processes of discursive legitimization have been particularly significant in supporting its hegemonic ambition. Specifically in this context the aim of diffusing democracy, or one particular model of democracy, has been and remains a crucial element in the justification of geopolitical power (Barber, 2004).

It can be argued that today the United States is both a globally hegemonic power and an imperial democracy. This poses the question of whether the outward projection of US democracy is compatible with an imperial presence. For Brzezinski (2004: 179) hegemonic power can defend or promote democracy if it is applied in a way that is sensitive to the rights of others, but it can also threaten democracy if there is a failure to distinguish between national security and the “phantasms of self-induced social panic” (Brzezinski, 2004: 179). One of the most pivotal themes here concerns the question of democracy’s “inside” and “outside”. Dominating power at home can lead to the erosion of the democratic ethos that helps to sustain the consensuality of hegemonic power, just as the intensive deployment of what Nye (2002) has called “hard power” can corrode the seductiveness of the democratic promise abroad. War and militarisation, together with transgressions of international law, are inimical to the health of democratic politics in general as well as being a source of the undermining of the US-made image of democracy for export (Slater, 2009).

When the imperial and the democratic are combined, as in the case of the US, a number of contradictions and tensions emerge. The imperial relation, as noted above, entails processes of penetration, violation, imposition and ethnocentric universalism. At the same time, such a relation requires legitimisation to enhance its efficacy and, in this context, notions of promoting and sustaining a model of democratic politics assume their key relevance. While imperial power requires a discourse of justification, the effectiveness of a democratic projection is continually undermined by the subordinating practices of the actual deployment of such power. Moreover, the desire to be hegemonic is confronted by the emergence of different types of resistance which originate from the periphery or global south, and the imperial leadership which is such an important element of hegemony is continually challenged. In some cases, unable to secure consent to its projection of power, the posture of the United States is increasingly characterised by a brittle form of domination which is quite different from hegemony. Equally it has to be noted that some peripheral states in Latin America such as Colombia, Peru and Mexico, in contrast to Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, do accept US leadership so it is necessary here to underline the uneven effectiveness of imperial power.⁸

Concluding remarks

In this short article, it has been argued that we are *not* living in post-imperial times. In fact, it could be suggested that we are inhabiting a “*re-imperial*” terrain, in the sense that imperial perspectives have been re-asserted in the context of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, invasions which have been justified by invoking imperial reason, and which have led to the fortification of colonial and imperial modes of thinking. The parameters of imperial reason are still in place and the driving orientation of an imperial mentality has not been transcended. Thus rather than delude ourselves that we live in post-imperial times, it would be more appropriate to investigate the varied trends and issues of the imperial present.

The argument has been organised around three interwoven themes; first an identification and differentiation of the key concepts that are to be found in discussions of colonial and imperial rule; second, a consideration of two contrasting theoretical approaches to the analysis of the imperial, including an attempt to signal possible

⁸ In the case of Ecuador for example, an “anti-bases coalition” has been successful in helping to push the US base at Manta out of the country, and article 5 of the new constitution prohibits the location of foreign military bases on Ecuadorian soil. In contrast in Honduras, where the US spent \$18m on “democracy promotion” between 2004 and 2008, and where the 2009 coup was tacitly supported by the US, the popular sectors have had less influence in restricting the internalization of US power. For a discussion of the unevenness of imperial power in Latin America see Slater (2010).

links between the cultural and the Marxist political economy perspectives, and third an examination of the main components of what I have termed the “imperial mentality”, within which I have argued that a multi-dimensional contextualisation of imperial power might well provide us with a more fruitful pathway of analysis.

Traditionally, imperialism or imperial power have been treated within an economic viewpoint, whether Marxist or non-Marxist, and the imperial phenomenon has tended to be situated within an analytical schema where structures are seen as active agents. What is required is much more enquiry into the multiple forms of the imperial mentality, where ideas and political wills are given more explanatory status. At the same time, I would argue that a focus on the imperial is crucial to our understanding of the changing dynamic of global politics.

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