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# IMPERIAL POWERS
# & DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATIONS
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# IMPERIAL POWERS & DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATIONS

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The thematic nucleus of this paper is formed through an exploratory analysis of some primary aspects of the interconnections between a resurgent imperialism and a contested terrain of democratic politics. There are three sections: in the first part an initial examination of important elements of the contemporary literature on imperialism is developed, and this includes a brief discussion of the significance of the relationality of imperial power, as well as the differentiation between imperiality and imperialism. The second section attempts to tease out some of the specificities of the United States as an imperial democracy which leads into a final discussion of the geopolitics of democratization. The paper takes the form of a preliminary exploration of what is an extensive conceptual and political terrain.

## Conceptualising Imperialism Today

As a way of beginning the first part of the analysis, it would seem to be useful to consider the forms in which key concepts have been defined and deployed. In this case, it is necessary to discuss the delineation of the term 'imperialism' especially as it has been used in the last few years to describe an apparently new phenomenon of globalising power. In fact, the apparent 'newness' of the phenomenon is frequently captured in the phrase the 'new imperialism'. The Marxist geographer Harvey is a good example of someone who has attempted to theorize the 'new imperialism' and it would seem appropriate to begin with a brief signalling of Harvey's (2003a) interesting perspective.

   Harvey stresses the point that he is defining 'capitalist imperialism', whereby imperialism is seen as both a 'distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of a territory and a capacity to mobilize its human and natural resources towards political, economic and military ends', whilst also imperialism is a diffuse political-economic process in which command over the use of capital takes primacy (Harvey 2003a, p 26). The central idea is to posit the territorial and capitalist logics of power as distinct from each other, whilst recognizing that the two logics intertwine in complex and contradictory ways. Harvey notes for example,

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that whereas the Vietnam War or the invasion of Iraq could hardly be solely explained in terms of the 'immediate requirements of capital accumulation', conversely, it would be difficult to understand the general territorial strategy of containment of the Soviet Union without taking into account the 'compelling need' felt on the part of US business interests to keep as much of the world as possible open to capital accumulation (Harvey 2003a, p 30). This sense of two intertwined but often dissonant logics finds an echo in the work of Arrighi (2005) and Callinicos (2003), and may be contrasted with a definition given by Chalmers Johnson (2004) in his book on *The Sorrows of Empire*. Here, Johnson suggests that the simplest definition of imperialism is the 'domination and exploitation of weaker states by stronger ones', and he adds that imperialism is the 'root cause of one of the worst maladies inflicted by Western civilization on the rest of the world – namely, racism'. Quoting Abernethy, he writes that 'it was but a short mental leap for people superior in power to infer that they were superior in intellect, morality and civilization as well' (Johnson 2004, p 28-29).

What we have here are two perspectives whereby one prioritizes a political economy framework, based in Marxist theory, and another privileges questions of culture and power. At the same time, the perspective signalled by Johnson underlines the asymmetry in global power relations between weaker and stronger states. This approach can be seen as related to Said's (1993, p 8) suggestion that imperialism may be defined as the 'practice, the theory and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory'. With these various takes on imperialism, it is possible to highlight a distinction between the conceptualization of imperialism as a specific system of rule and an emphasis on the unevenness of imperialist relations in the sense that it is in the context of North-South relations rather than intra-West relations (i.e. US-European relations) that the gravity and central significance of imperialism can be discerned. In an initial attempt to link the above-noted perspectives, I want to suggest that the imperial relation may be thought of in terms of three interrelated elements where the geopolitical context is formed by North-South relations.

First, one can posit the existence of a politics of *invasiveness* that is expressed through strategies of appropriating resources and raw materials and/or securing strategic sites for military bases, which are accompanied by the laying down of new patterns of infrastructure and governmental regulation. Invasiveness, or processes of

penetration of states, economies and social orders (Panitch and Leys 2004, p vii), can be linked to what Harvey (2003a and 2003b) has called 'accumulation by dispossession' whereby the resources and wealth of peripheral societies are continually extracted for the benefit of the imperial heartland (see, for example, Boron 2005, p 118). But 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 multi-dimensional phenomenon whereby the determining decisions and practices are taken and deployed in the realm of the geopolitical. For example, the violation of the sovereignty of a third world society is not only a question of the transgression of international law but more profoundly it reflects a negation of the will and dignity of another people and another culture. Violations of sovereignty negate the autonomous right of peripheral societies to decide for themselves their own trajectories of political and cultural being, or as the Zapatistas express it, sovereignty can be conceived as a nation's right to decide where it is going (EZLN 2005). In this sense the imperial or more categorically the imperialist relation is rooted in a power-over conception that reflects Western privilege and denial of the non-Western other's right to geopolitical autonomy. This aspect of imperialism has been sometimes neglected and yet as Ahmad (2003) has recently reminded us it is in the third world that the effects of imperialism are so clearly visible.

Second, as a consequence of the invasiveness of imperialism, 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 'civilization' to the non-Western other. In the contemporary era, and specifically in relation to Iraq, bringing democracy and neo-liberalism, US-style, have been imposed as part of a project to redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East (Ali 2003, Gregory 2004 and Ramadani 2006), a project which has seen both resistance, especially in the Sunni triangle, and partial accommodation, especially in the Kurdish region of the country. Whilst the violation of sovereignty can be more appropriately considered under the heading of invasiveness, the related imposition of cultural and

governmental norms constitutes an effect of that violation but here the process of geopolitical guidance can be better interpreted in terms of an imperial governmentality (Rajagopal 2004). Such a governmentality may include the establishment of ground rules for democratic politics with an outcome that might not follow the imperialist's preferred route, but crucially governmentality 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, effective states, 'good governance', property rights, 'open economies' and so on. The imposition is thus rather a project for societal transformation that aims to leave behind an imperialized polity which is 'owned' and run by the indigenous leaders. Whether such projects can be successful is surely doubtful given the realities of their imposed nature but in the final outcome much will depend on both the form, depth, extent and resilience of resistances to their power as well as on the efficacy of the domestic leaders who take on the externally-designed political mantle, acting as introjecting agents of externally-initiated authority. Again, in both instances, with resistance and accommodation, the crucial significance of relationality is clearly evident. In addition, such situations are further complicated by the diverse kinds of resistance and accommodation and by the dynamic of change inherent in both processes.

Third, it is important to stress that the imperial relation carries within it a lack of *respect* and *recognition* for the colonized or, expressed more broadly, imperialized society. Hence, 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 'progress', 'modernization', 'democracy', 'development' and 'civilization' and so on are deployed to legitimize a project of enduring invasiveness that is characterized by a lack of recognition for the autonomy, dignity, sovereignty and cultural value of the imperialized society. Overall, there is a mission to Westernize the non-Western world, and resistances to such a mission, especially in their more militant forms, are seen as being deviant and irrational and in need of repression and cure.

This third element is often neglected by Western scholars and yet it is rather crucial. Let us briefly refer to a resonant passage from Arundhati Roy's (2004) essay entitled "Come September". She writes, 'loss and losing…grief, failure, brokenness, numbness, uncertainty, fear, the death of feeling, the death of dreaming…the absolute

, relentless, endless, habitual unfairness of the world…what does it mean to whole cultures, whole peoples who have learned to live with it as a constant companion?" (Roy 2004, p 20).What does loss mean to *whole cultures, whole peoples* of the global South who have seen their societies penetrated, worked over, re-structured, modernized and made more 'civilized'. What does it mean to experience a bloody military takeover, the overthrow of a democratically elected government, or the violent seizure and occupation of a people's land as has taken place in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, with so many far-reaching social, economic, political and psychological consequences? The actual *violence* involved in such interventions is not infrequently ignored in accounts of imperial power, and yet, as Davis (2001), Mbembe (2001) and more recently Boggs (2005) remind us, it is a pervasive part of colonial and imperial power.

Imperial relations, seen as the most acutely asymmetrical form of geopolitical encounter, can be discussed in terms of the three above-outlined features but other issues need to be brought on to the analytical agenda. At this juncture, two questions need to be posed. First, why might it be useful to distinguish imperiality from imperialism and secondly, how might we account for the imperialist drive in the current conjuncture?

In the specific context of global politics, imperialism may be broadly defined as the strategy, practice and advocacy of the penetrative power of a Western state over other predominantly non-Western societies. The word ' predominantly' is used here since I would argue that imperialism, or more specifically US imperialism, whilst having potentially dominating effects on other Western nation-states, is most clearly manifest in the context of West/non-West relations. Although it is abundantly clear that capitalist enterprises, or more specifically transnational corporations, exert far-reaching modes of power, including in their relation to the state, (and here Harvey's stress on the importance of the capitalist logic of power is certainly relevant), I would argue that it is the nation state, as geopolitical pivot, and more specifically those key agents of influence acting within its governmental apparatuses, that exert the central decision-making power. In other words, and in contrast to Hardt and Negri (2000), I would suggest that in the context of US imperialism, the decision-making power that brings an imperialist strategy into being is situated not in decentred networks but in the heart of the state (for a Marxist discussion of the 'new imperial state', see, for example, Panitch 2000).

An imperialist strategy is thus essentially developed within the political space of the state but this does not mean that imperialist ideas are only confined to this domain – they can be seen as being potentially sedimented in all the varying spheres of Western society and economy and this is where the notion of imperiality can be useful. Imperiality can be defined as a composite term that infers the right, privilege and sentiment of being imperial. Thus, Western societies such as Britain, France and the US harbour imperial discourses that are rooted in the history of their geopolitical relations, so that an active strategy of imperialist expansion can be discursively sustained through a reliance on or direct appeal to the deeply-rooted sense of imperial privilege. There can be a mutually-sustaining process here whereby an active strategy of imperialism is supported by a reservoir of imperial sentiment which in turn is further reinforced by a reinvigorated imperialist strategy. Alternatively, where there has been an effective resistance, both internally and externally, as was the case during the Vietnam War, and especially during the later stages, the effects of imperiality are reduced, especially when the will of the imperial power has been defeated. However, much depends not only on the passage of time but crucially on the battle for ideas, or more specifically wars over geopolitical meaning, which are importantly characterised by struggles over what is remembered and what is consigned to oblivion. A current example of what is at stake here relates to the positive way the imperial past can be represented. For instance in Britain, New Labour's Gordon Brown has recently suggested that, 'we should be proud….of the empire' and the 'days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over' (quoted in Milne 2005). Similarly, in France, legislation passed in 2005 concerning the regulation of the national curriculum includes an article that praises the contributions to civilization of French colonizers in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (Lemaire 2006), re-echoing de Tocqueville's support for the civilizing mission of French colonialism.

Given this posited interrelation between imperialism and imperiality, how might we account for the current, post-9/11 resurgence of imperialism, especially as reflected in the renewed projection of US power and specifically the invasion of Iraq? Let us begin by briefly reviewing the different approaches to this question.

For David Harvey, viewed geopolitically and in the long-term, a confrontation with Iraq appeared inevitable and such a geopolitical thrust had to be linked to the strategic importance of oil; access to Iraqi and Middle East oil in general is, for Harvey (2003a, pp23-24) a 'crucial security issue for the United States, as it is for the

global economy as a whole'. A similar perspective has been developed by Klare (2002) in his work on *Resource Wars*, and certainly the wealth of Iraq's oil resources needs to be taken into account as an important factor, but was it the determining factor that largely explains the drive to invade? For Stephen Gill (2004, pp37-38), it is clear that whilst the war is directly linked to the US' official policy on energy security, and its increased dependence upon foreign and especially Middle Eastern oil, it is necessary to probe deeper. The invasion was not only about removing Saddam Hussein from power and taking control of Iraqi oil, but it was also about reinforcing the US' long-term 'geopolitical position', involving both its military basing strategy and its commercial interests, including potential threats to dollar hegemony and its prerogative to pursue wars of impunity which has a long history. The significance of this element of historical and geopolitical continuity is further elaborated on by the San Francisco Bay area group called Retort (2005) who develop a detailed argument on contemporary US imperialism. Their key concepts are spectacle, capital and war.

In a similar vein to Gill, they suggest that whilst the American empire cannot forego oil, its control being a geopolitical priority, strategic and corporate oil interests cannot, of themselves, explain the US' imperial mission. Rather, they go on, 'what the Iraq adventure represents is less a war for oil than a radical, punitive, "extra-economic" restructuring of the conditions necessary for expanding profitability – paving the way …for new rounds of American-led dispossession and capital accumulation (echoes of Harvey)'. This is discussed as a new form of what they call, 'military neoliberalism' (Retort 2005, p 72), a phenomenon that they suggest is 'no more than primitive accumulation in (thin) disguise' (op cit p 75), recalling Rosa Luxemburg's (1968, p 454) notion that militarism is most appropriately viewed as a 'province of accumulation'. However, although there is no space here to go into a detailed consideration of the Retort text,(for a recent review see Soper 2006), it is important to indicate that the perspective that is developed is not as econocentric as it might first appear and the authors introduce a series of points that give considerable subtlety to their approach. When, for example, they state that primitive accumulation is essentially an exercise in violence, they go on to note, in answering their question concerning the circumstances that oblige the state to act in the way it has of late, that, *contra* Marx, these circumstances are rarely straightforwardly 'economic'; it is rather the *interweaving of compulsions* (emphasis added) – spectacular, economic, geopolitical – that reveal the 'American empire's true character' (op cit p 77).

Moreover, when they describe US imperialism they stress the point that they are not talking of a 'smoothly gliding imperial machine, but rather a clumsy, lurching apparatus, responding contingently and by no means moving in a single direction'(op cit p 81). Equally, they emphasize the 'relentless structural energy' of imperial power, whilst adding that although the empire's strategic apparatus may always be about to intervene militarily (permanent war), 'it's levers must still be pulled' (op cit pp 102-103). Illustrating this idea they refer to the significance of 'ideological contingencies', whereby, for instance, zealots of various types may frequently gain the 'ear of the state' – these range, they go on, from the Zionists in the White House and the Pentagon (see, for example, Petras 2005), to the generically imperial (the 'demonstration effect' of actually applying American power), and to what they call the imperiously sociopathic, eg "every ten years or so the US needs to pick up some crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business"(ibid).

These so-called 'ideological contingencies' refer in this case to what I would call the actual *agents of power* (organized, for example through the *Project for a New American Century*) working inside the imperial state with a myriad of links with the economy and civil society and it is these agents of power that make decisions on how to act in the context of the interweaving of compulsions as the Retort group put it. This then is an important interrelation – the working out of the interaction between the agents of power and the nature of the interweaving or imbrication of compulsions. But where do we place the 'spectacle' in this interlocking of agents and compulsions? What happened on September 11, 2001 represented in one key sense a globally manifest puncturing of US power that required a response of reinvigorated force. Chomsky (2003) draws a parallel here with the enforcement style of a Mafia Don. In this context, primary aspects of the 2002 National Security Strategy underlined the imperative of US exemplary action to demonstrate its reasserted power in the form of being prepared for permanent war, including the willingness to engage in preventive wars. The target had to be geopolitically significant, but also weak, Iraq and not North Korea. For Chomsky, Iraq was thus an ideal choice for exemplary action to establish the US doctrine of global rule by force as a new 'norm'. Equally, it has become clear that such exemplary action, a kind of geopolitics of enforcement, has Iraq as the first and not last target.

Several questions arise from the above-outlined points and these may be better contextualized by turning to the theme of US power itself – how, for example, do we account for the specificity of 'American empire'?

## On the Geopolitics of Imperial Democracy

In 2002, US Vice-President Dick Cheney argued that today in Afghanistan, 'the world is seeing that America acts not to conquer but to liberate, and remains in friendship to help the people build a future of stability, self-determination and peace. We would act in that same spirit after a regime change in Iraq…our goal would be an Iraq that has territorial integrity, a government that is democratic and pluralistic, a nation where the human rights of every ethnic and religious group are recognized and respected' (quoted in Kelly 2003, p 347). Similarly in the *National Security Strategy* of September 2002, emphasis is placed on concepts of peace, democracy and freedom, whereby, for example, America is defined as a 'great multi-ethnic democracy' that stands for the defense of liberty and justice in a world where the US must defend peace against the threats from terrorists and tyrants, and extend the peace by encouraging 'free and open societies on every continent' (The White House 2002, pp1-3) What is visible in these short passages and of course these are only two possible but symptomatic examples, are key elements of the official representation of US power in the world, where, for instance, conquest becomes liberation, intervention is framed in terms of freedom, democracy and stability, and where the United States is defined as a plural, multi-ethnic home of global democracy. How is it possible to characterize such an imperial democracy as the United States – how do we view the specificities of its imperial power?

Elsewhere, I have provided an outline of three specificities in the evolution of US imperial power (Slater 2004a) and in this particular paper I want to concentrate my attention on the feature I have termed 'post-colonial imperiality' and its link with a particular vision of democracy – (the other two features relate to the nature of territorial expansionism in the context of encounters with significant others [Indian, Hispanic and African-American] and the changing geopolitics of containment.

Unlike other Western powers, it can be suggested that the imperiality of US power emerged out of a post-colonial anchorage, or in other words a project of imperial power gradually emerged out of an initial anti-colonial struggle for independence from British rule. This fact of emergence has given the United States a contradictory

identity of being a 'post-colonial imperial power' with the determining emphasis falling on the 'imperial'. The post-colonial essentially refers to the specificity of origin, and does not preclude the possibility of a coloniality of power as was exemplified in the case of the Philippines, or as is argued continues to apply to Puerto Rico (Pantojas-García 2005). Such a paradoxical identity has two significant implications. First, one finds juxtaposed an affirmation of the legitimacy of the self-determination of peoples with a belief in the geopolitical destiny of the United States, a belief dating at least from the time of 'Manifest Destiny' and notions of 'benevolent assimilation' to the present wherein, as the Mexican political scientist Orozco (2005, p 54) expresses it, the US sees itself as the 'first universal nation'. Historically, the contradiction between support for the rights of people to decide their own fate and a belief in the geopolitical destiny of 'America' (rather than José Martí's *nuestra América* – see Santos 2001) has necessitated a discursive 'bridge'. This bridge has been formed through the invocation of a democratic mission that combines the national and international spheres. In order to transcend the contradiction between an identity based on the self-determination of peoples and another rooted in Empire, a horizon is created for other peoples who are encouraged to choose freedom and democracy, thereby embedding their own struggles within an Americanizing vision and practice.

Second, the primacy of self-determination provides a key to explaining the dichotomy frequently present in the discourses of US geopolitical intervention where a split is made between a concept of the people and a concept of the rulers. Given the historical differentiation of the New (American) World of freedom, progress and democracy from an Old (European) World of privilege and colonial power, support for anti-colonial struggles has been accompanied by a separation between oppressed people and tyrannical rulers. For example in the case of US hostility towards the Cuban Revolution, the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 makes a clear separation between the Cuban people who need supporting in their vulnerability and the Castro government which is seen as a tyrannical oppressor of its own people and a security threat to the international community (Slater 2004b). Similar distinctions have been made in the contexts of interventions in Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) and overall it can be suggested that geopolitical interventions have been couched in terms of a prominent concern for the rights of people that are being oppressed by unrepresentative and totalitarian regimes. The United States is thus represented as a

benevolent guardian of the rights of a subordinated people. An imperial ethic of care is projected across frontiers to provide one form of legitimization for interventions.

Such interventions which have been a permanent feature of the landscape of North-South relations can be viewed in terms of the interconnections between desire, will, capacity and legitimization. The will to intervene can be represented as a crystallization of a desire to expand, expressed for example in the notion of 'Manifest Destiny' (see, for example, Pratt 1927), and 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 deployment of a discourse of justification. A political will that focuses desire and is able to mobilize the levers of intervention seeks a hegemonic role through the ability to induce consent by providing leadership, whilst retaining the capacity to coerce.

The desire to intervene, to penetrate another society and help to re-order, re-adjust, modernize, develop, civilize, democratize that other society is an essential part of any imperial project. The geopolitical will is provided by changing agents of power working in and through the apparatuses of the imperial state and the processes of legitimization for that will to power are produced within the state but also within civil society(see Joseph, Legrand and Salvatore 1998 and Salvatore 2005). 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 power and hegemonic ambition. Specifically in this regard the aim of spreading or diffusing democracy, or a particular interpretation of democracy, has been and remains a crucial element in the process of justification of geopolitical power.

The former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has discussed important aspects of the relation between imperial power and hegemony wherein democracy plays a key role. For Brzezinski(1997, p24), American supremacy can be seen in relation to its military prowess, its economic position as the locomotive of global growth, its leading role in cutting-edge areas of technological innovation and despite some crassness its unrivalled cultural appeal, but it is the combination of all four factors that makes America 'the only comprehensive global superpower'. In contrast to previous empires, the American global system emphasizes the technique of co-optation (as in the case of Germany, Japan and more recently Russia) and equally

it relies heavily on the 'indirect exercise of influence on dependent foreign elites, while drawing much benefit from the appeal of its democratic principles and institutions' (Brzezinski 1997, p 25).

The appeal and impact of the democratic American political system has of course been accompanied by the growing attraction of what Brzezinski calls the American entrepreneurial economic model, which stresses global free trade and uninhibited competition. Hence, as the imitation of American ways gradually pervades the world, it generates a more favourable setting for the exercise of an indirect and 'seemingly consensual American hegemony' (Brzezinski 1997, p 27). However, it is also argued that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. The economic self-denial (i.e. defense spending) and human sacrifice (casualties among professional soldiers) which are required in the pursuit of power are seen as uncongenial to democratic instincts – 'democracy is inimical to imperial mobilization' (Brzezinski 1997, p 36). And yet, as Brzezinski subsequently has argued, it can be sustained that America today is both a globally hegemonic power and a democracy, and this poses the question of whether the outward projection of America's democracy is compatible with a 'quasi-imperial responsibility' since hegemonic power can defend or promote democracy if it is applied in a way which 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, p 179) – for a critical discussion of the last point, see , for example, Giroux (2004).

Acutely present in the last passage is 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) calls 'hard power' can undermine the seductiveness of the democratic promise abroad. War and militarization, together with transgressions of international law, are inimical to the health of democratic politics in general, as well as being a source for the undermining of the American-made image of democracy for export. The suggestion that democracy might be for export gives us a link with the previously-noted importance of capacities since US projects to diffuse its democratic way of life need some institutional supports.

In 1982, the Reagan Administration announced that the United States would pursue a new programme to promote democracy around the world. It was called 'Project for Democracy' and it became institutionalized as the National Endowment

for Democracy (NED) which has been funded by the US Congress. Democracy promotion, as it has been termed, has included leadership training, education, strengthening the institutions of democracy, conveying ideas and information and developing institutional and personal ties. Congressional support for the NED has grown steadily during the last twenty years or so, so that in 2003, for example, both Senate and House resolutions commended the organization for its 'major contributions to the strengthening of democracy around the world'. Following 9/11, special funding has been provided for countries with 'substantial Muslim populations in the Middle East, Africa and Asia' and by 2003 core funding exceeded US$40 million for the first time, with an additional US$10 being earmarked for specially mandated countries and regions(Lowe 2005). The efforts of the NED need however to be put next to the more important role played by USAID.

The United States Agency for International Development defines itself as the largest 'democracy donor', implementing US$1.2 billion of programmes in 2004. These programmes are developed in cooperation with the State Department, the National Security Council and US embassies. Echoing the *National Security Strategy* of 2002, USAID states that the United States is vigorously engaged in all corners of the globe, acting as a 'force for peace and prosperity' whilst adding that 'expanding the global community of democracies is a key objective of US foreign policy' (http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/ [accessed 11-1-06]). How then does USAID approach the workings of democratic politics in an actually-existing 'corner of the globe' such as contemporary Bolivia? A recent USAID country strategic plan is revealing.

It is clearly stated that USAID's strategic approach is rooted in the US Mission's goal of supporting and defending Bolivia's constitutional democracy as the 'best system for meeting legitimate citizen demands for justice, equity and accountability and for an opportunity to participate in shaping a sustainable future for the country' (USAID, 2005, p 45). The report goes on to discuss 'conflict management and resolution' and notes that 'conflict is an inevitable and not necessarily always undesirable phenomenon in a diverse and complex society such as Bolivia's…and conflict 'can be an engine of positive change '. However, the report goes on, 'conflict all too often takes the form of aggressive and at times violent street confrontation between various groups and government authority'…and...repeated Government capitulation to these extra-legal challenges legitimizes such methods …while

undermining democracy by circumventing its official mediating institutions' (USAID 2005, ibid). Clearly one can see here a tension between the positive encouragement of institutionalized  participation and the negative attitude towards a more populist perspective on participation linked to the role of social movements(for a critical discussion, see Lindsay 2005). This dissonance raises a number of questions concerning democratic politics in a context of what Fukuyama (2006) recently calls the US' 'benevolent hegemony' in spreading democracy globally.

## Democratic Politics in Global Times

Let us begin this final section of the paper by identifying and briefly discussing some important features of the diverse ambits of democracy.

First, democracy, as long as it is to be sustained, requires a process of democratization in the sense of  the renewal of the forms of participation and the development of autonomy, as reflected in the will and capacity of citizens to be self-reflexive and critical of governmental authority. One can suggest that potentially with the spread of democratic principles to the institutions of civil society, as well as the economy, that what Bobbio (1987) has called the democratization of society can come to overshadow the democratization of the institutions of the state. These two potentially intertwined processes can be viewed as mutually sustaining, but at the same time such a 'double democratization' should not be seen in isolation from the existence of phenomena that limit democratization. Trends such as the accentuation of socio-economic inequalities, the denial of human rights, the growing shadow of state surveillance, the burgeoning global power of corporate capital, an increase in violence and a spreading sense of political apathy and cynicism towards existing democratic rule, all constitute sources for the corrosion of a democratic spirit. In addition, it can be usefully pointed out that the interaction between democracy and democratization also needs to be looked at in the context of transnational as well as national spaces, whereby social movements have built up coalitions across national frontiers ( for a recent discussion, see Doucet 2005).

Second, there is the issue of the contested meanings of democracy; the democratic is a classic example of a polysemic signifier being dependent on the different discourses that give the term its meaning. Terms such as 'popular democracy', 'liberal democracy', 'radical democracy', 'social democracy', 'associational democracy', 'imperial democracy' and 'democratic totalitarianism' reflect the continuing attempt

to ground a definition of democracy that will always remain contested. What needs to be underlined here perhaps is that it is a vision of 'liberal democracy' or 'market-led democracy' that has become hegemonic in an era of neo-liberal globalization.

Third, many of the definitions of democracy mentioned above tend to share an implicit belief in the desirability of an existing Western liberal democratic model of governance which is considered to be suitable for export and adoption in non-Western societies. Not infrequently, this goes together with an uncritical perspective on Western democracy itself. There tends to be a governing assumption that Western, or more specifically, US liberal democracy, has a universal validity acting as an already available democratic template that non-Western polities need to follow. Critiques of the Western universalism embedded in such visions tend to be overlooked, although such critical perspectives are to be found (see, for example, Dhaliwal 1996, Parekh 1993, Rivera 1990 and Sheth 1995).

Fourth, there is another vision which emphasizes the radical indeterminacy of democratic politics and the openness of the political terrain on which democratic struggles take place (Lefort 1988 and Mouffe 2000). Lefort (1988, p 17), for instance, argued that *the* revolutionary feature of democracy was that the locus of power had become an '*empty place*' (emphasis added) since the exercise of power had become subject to the procedures of periodical redistributions. No one government or political force can permanently occupy that locus of power, hence the openness and indeterminacy of democratic politics in a new institutionalization of the social. Such a view can be linked to Laclau's (2001) suggestion that there is always an inherent ambiguity concerning the democratic process.

Thus, for Laclau, on the one hand, democracy can be seen as the attempt to organize political space around the *universality* of the community with efforts to constitute a unity of *one* people. On the other hand, democracy has also been conceived of as an extension of a logic of equality to broader spheres of social relations – social and economic equality, racial equality, gender equality etc, so that here democracy involves respect for differences. The ambiguity of democracy can thus be formulated as requiring unity but only being thinkable through diversity (Laclau 2001, p 4).

But how do these varied points relate to the question of imperial democracy? In the context of global politics, the attempt to export and promote one vision of democracy as a unifying project across frontiers clashes with the logic of differences

but in a way that is deeply rooted in nationalist discourses. In the formulations developed by Laclau, Lefort and Mouffe there is an assumption that one is dealing with a territorially intact polity, that the conceptual terrain can be developed in accordance with a guiding assumption of territorial sovereignty. However, in the context of imperial powers one needs to remember that the autonomy of other democratic experiments have been terminated by interventions organized by Washington (for example Guatemala in 1954, Chile in 1973 and Nicaragua during the 1980s – see Slater 2002). In this sense the internal tension between the logic of unity and the logic of difference has been overshadowed by an imperial logic of incursion, followed by the imposition of a different set of political rules. In the example of the United States it can be suggested that there is a logic of democracy for export and a logic of terminating intervention for other democratic processes that have offered a different political pathway. Furthermore, interventions which have led to the overthrow of dictatorial regimes, as in Iraq in 2003, ought not to lead us into forgetting the realities of Western support for military dictatorships in the global south throughout the twentieth century. Nor, as Callinicos (2003, p 24) reminds us, should we cast a blind eye to the fact that there are contemporary examples of support for non-democratic regimes, as shown in the case of the Bush Administration's backing for the regime of Karimov in Uzbekistan, despite its numerous violations of human rights, and also the Pakistani regime of Musharraf, which receives US support, is scarcely to be considered a fully-fledged democracy.

The imperative to 'democratise', just as the injunction to 'globalise', creates, as Dallmayr (2005) suggests, an asymmetry between those announcing the imperative and those subject to it, between those who 'democratise' and those who are 'democratised'. Such an asymmetry has a long history and Jeffersonian notions of both an 'empire of liberty' and an 'empire for liberty' represented an initial framing of the conflicting juxtaposition of emerging American imperial power, - the United States has a 'hemisphere to itself'- with a benevolent belief in America's mission to spread democracy and liberty to the rest of the world. This juxtaposition, which is also closely tied to the founding importance of the self-determination of peoples, is characterised by an inherent tension between strong anti-colonial sentiment and the projection of powers over peoples of the third world. Discourses of democracy are deployed in ways that are intended to transcend such dissonances and to justify the imperial relation, even though such a relation is frequently denied (for a critical

review, see Cox 2005). What is also significant in this context is the idea that democracy-US style is being called for, being invited by peoples yearning for freedom. Rather than democracy being imposed, the United States is responding to calls coming from other societies to be democratised so that through a kind of cellular multiplication a US model can become gradually introduced; the owners will be the peoples of other cultures who will find ways of adapting the US template to their own circumstances. What is on offer here is a kind of 'viral democracy' whereby the politics of guidance is camouflaged by a politics of benign adaptation.

In the post-9/11 period, the 'war on terror', with its attendant corrosion of civil liberties, denigration of human rights at, for example, Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, and overall insinuation of a politics of fear, has undermined the effectiveness of a positive vision on the diffusion of American democracy. Both at home and abroad, market-based democracy as the universal model for the rest of the world has come to be associated more with a bellicose unilateralism than with a seductive system for political emulation. Moreover, other democratic imaginations emanating from Latin America have been offering vibrant alternatives to the US model. Most notably perhaps, at the national level Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia have put on to the agenda critiques of US power in the Americas and are offering different visions of developing democratic polities more related to policies of redistribution, social justice, indigenous rights and national autonomy. Transnationally, the Hemispheric Social Alliance, which is a large coalition of civil society groups located throughout the Americas, has argued, for example, that the entire process of negotiating trade agreements should be democratized, just as the World Social Forums, originating in Porto Alegre, have similarly argued for a democratization of global organizations such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF.

Whilst imperial powers are being challenged, there is an amplification of democratic politics. In the context of US-Latin American relations, the mission to universalise a Western/US model of democracy is being contested by a wide gamut of political forces and social movements. The promotion of democracy from above may be sustained by imperial sentiment at home but it is actively called into question in a continent increasingly impatient with being framed as the passive recipient. For democracy to flourish, it has to be home-grown and autonomously sustained, not exported as part of a legitimization of subordinating power.

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