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Why American Hegemony Differs From Britain's Empire

Foued Djemai^{1*}

¹ University of Algiers 2, Algeria

Abstract

History, we are told, is discourse. There is no understanding it unless we understand the language in which people think, talk and take decisions. Among the historians tempted by what is called 'the linguistic turn' there are even some who argue that it is the ideas and concepts expressed in the words characteristic of the period that explain what happened and why. We are saturated with what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes called 'insignificant speech' (speech which means nothing) and its sub varieties 'euphemism' and George Orwell's 'newspeak'-namely speech deliberately intended to mislead by misdescription. But unless the facts themselves change, no amount of changing names/words changes them.

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The current debates about empire are good cases in point, even if we leave aside the element of advertising spin or plain sanctimoniousness in the literature. They are about the implications of the US governments' claims to global supremacy. Those who favor the idea tend to argue that empires are good; those who do not tend to mobilize the long tradition of anti-imperialist arguments. But these claims and counter-claims are not really concerned with the actual history of empires. They are trying to fit old names to historical developments that don't necessarily fit old realities, which makes little historical sense. Current debates are particularly cloudy, because the nearest analogy to the world supremacy to which the current US government is committed is a set of words –'empire', 'imperialism- which are in flat contradiction to the traditional political self-definition of the US, and which acquired so almost universal unpopularity in the twentieth century. They are also in conflict with equally strongly held positive beliefs in the US political value-system, such as 'self-determination' and 'law', both domestic and international. Four developments lie behind the current attempts to revive world empire as a model for the twenty first century.

The first development is the extraordinary acceleration of globalization and the tensions that have consequently arisen between the economic, technological, cultural and other aspects of this process and the one branch of human activity that has so far proved quite impermeable to it, namely politics. Globalization in the currently dominant form of free-market capitalism has also brought about a spectacular and potentially explosive rise in social and economic inequality, within countries and internationally.

The second development is the collapse of the international balance of power since the Second World War, which kept at bay both the danger of a global war and the collapse of large parts of the world into disorder and anarchy. The end of the USSR destroyed this balance, but I think it may have begun to fray from the 1970's on. The basic rule of this system, established in the 17th century, were formally denounced by President Bush in 2002, namely that in principle sovereign states, acting officially, respected one another's internal affairs. Given the end of a stable superpower balance, how could the globe be politically stabilized? In more general terms, what would be the structure of an international system geared to a plurality of powers in which, at the end of the century, only one was left?

The third development is the crisis in the ability of the so-called sovereign nation-state, which in the second half of the 20th century became the almost universal form of government for the world's population, to carry out its basic functions of maintaining control over what happened on its territory. The world has entered the era of inadequate, and in many cases failing or failed, states. This crisis also became acute from about 1970, when even strong, stable states such as the UK, Spain and France had to learn to live for decades with armed groups such as the IRA, ETA and Corsican separatists, groups they lacked the power to eliminate.

The fourth development is the return of mass human catastrophe, up to and including the wholesale expulsion of peoples and genocide, and with it the return of general fear. We have experienced the reappearance of something like the medieval Black Death in the AIDS pandemic. War and civil war have returned, even to Europe-there have been more wars since the fall of the Berlin Wall than during the whole of the Cold War period- and though the numbers who fought and their battle casualties were small compared to the mass wars of the twentieth century, their impact on the non-combatant population was disproportionately vast.

At the end of 2004 it was estimated nearly forty million refugees outside and increasingly inside their own countries¹, which is comparable to the number of displaced persons in the aftermath of the Second World War. Concentrated as they were in a few zones of the globe, and now visible on screen in our living rooms almost as they occur, these images of desolation now have a far greater and more immediate public impact in the rich countries. Think only of the reaction to the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

In short, the world increasingly seems to call for supranational solutions to supranational or transnational problems; but no global authorities are available with the ability to make policy decisions, let alone with the power to carry them out. Globalization stops short when it comes to politics, domestic or international. The UN has no independent authority or power. It depends on the decisions of some states, and it can be blocked by the absolute veto of five of them. Even the international and financial organizations of the post-1945 world, such as the IMF and the World Bank, can take effective action only under Great Power Patronage (the so-called 'Washington Consensus'). The only effective actors are some states, the G7. And in terms of a major military action on a global scale, there is at present only one state capable of it, namely the USA. *'The best case for empire is always the case for order'*². In an increasingly disorderly and unstable world it is natural to dream of some power capable of establishing order and stability. Empire is the name of that dream. The American empire, with its hopes of a Pax Americana, looks back to the assumed Pax Britannica, a period of

globalization and world peace in the nineteenth century associated with the assumed hegemony of the British empire, and this in turn looked back, and named itself after the Pax Romana of the ancient Roman Empire. But this is claptrap. If the term 'pax' has any meaning in this context, it refers to the claim to establish peace within an empire, not internationally.

The empires of history rarely ceased to conduct military operations on their territory, and certainly they did so on their frontiers at all times, only such operations rarely impinged on metropolitan civil life. In the era of 19th and 20th century imperialism, they didn't tend to count wars against non-whites or other inferiors-Kipling's 'lesser breeds without the law'- as proper wars to which the usual rules applied. Hew Strachan rightly asks, '*Where were the prisoners taken in British colonial conflicts, other than the Boer War [which was seen as a war between whites]? What judicial processes were regularly applied?*'³ President Bush's 'unlawful combatants' in Afghanistan and Iraq, to whom neither law nor the Geneva Convention applies, have their imperialist precedents.

World or even regional peace has been beyond the power of all empires known to history so far, certainly beyond all the great powers of modern times. If Latin America has been the only part of the world immune to major international wars for almost two hundred years, it is not due to the Monroe doctrine, which was 'for decades ... little more than a Yankee bluff'⁴, or to US military power, which was never in a position directly to coerce any state in South America. Until the time of writing it was habitually used only in the dwarf states of Central America and the islands of the Caribbean, and then not always directly. Military intervention, including attempts to impose 'regime change', was practiced in Mexico –or what was left of it after the war of 1848- between 1913 and 1915 under President Wilson⁵. Disaster followed after what was described as his 'program of moral imperialism' which '*placed the weight of the United States behind a continuous, sometimes devious, effort to force the Mexican nation to meet his ill-conceived specifications*'⁶. However, Washington has since then decided, wisely, not to play armed Pentagon games with the only large country in its Caribbean backyard. It was not US military power that brought about US domination of the western hemisphere. Britain, of course, as the phrase 'splendid isolation' suggests, was always aware that it could not control the international power system of which it was a part, and had no significant military presence on the European continent. The British empire benefited enormously from the century of peace between the powers, but it did not create it. I would summarize the relations between empires, war and peace as follows.

Empires were mainly built, like the British empire, by aggression and war. In turn, it was war between rival empires that did for them. Winning big wars proved as fatal to empires as losing them-a lesson from the history of the British empire Washington might take to heart. International peace is not what they created, but what gave them a chance to survive. All the same, leaving aside 16th century Spain and perhaps 17th century Holland, Britain from the mid-18th or the mid-20th century and the US since then are the only examples of genuinely global empires, with global and not merely regional policy horizons and power resources- naval supremacy for 19th century Britain, air supremacy for 21st century US- backed by a unique world network of suitable bases. This was and still is not enough, since empires depend not just on military victories or security but on lasting control.

On the other hand, 19th century Britain and 20th century US also enjoyed an asset no previous empire had before, or indeed could have had, in the absence of modern economic globalization: they dominated the industrial world economy. They did so not only through the size of their productive apparatus as ‘workshops of the world’-the US, at its peak in the 1920s and again after WWII, represented about 40% of global industrial (manufacturing) output and in 2005 was still the largest, though with only 22.4% of ‘manufacturing value added’⁷- both also did so as economic models, technical and organizational pioneers and trend-setters, and as the centers of the world system of financial and commodity flows, and the states whose financial and trade policies largely determined the shape of these flows.

Both, of course, have also exercised disproportionate cultural influence, not least through the globalization of the English language. But cultural hegemony is not an indicator of imperial power, nor does it depend much on it. If it did, Italy, disunited, powerless and poor, would not have dominated international musical life and art from the 15th century through the 18th century. Moreover, where cultural power survives the decline of the power and prestige of the states that once propagated it-the Roman empire, or the French absolute monarchy- it is merely a relic of the past, like the French-derived military nomenclature or the metric system.

We must, of course, distinguish the direct cultural effects of direct imperial rule from those of economic hegemony, and both again from independent post-imperial developments. The spread of baseball and cricket was indeed an imperial phenomenon, for these games are only played where once British soldiers or US Marines were stationed. But this does not explain the triumph of the global sports such as soccer, tennis and, for business executives, golf. They were all British 19th century innovations, like practically all internationally practiced sports.

I now turn to the crucial differences between the two states. The potential size of the metropolis is the first obvious difference. Britain has fixed borders and had no frontier in the American sense. Britain has been part of a European continental empire on occasions-in Roman times, after the Norman Conquest, and, for a moment, when Mary Tudor married Philip of Spain- but was never the base of such an empire. When the countries of Britain generated surplus populations, they migrated or founded settlements overseas. The British Isles became a major source of emigrants. The US was and remains essentially a receiver, not a sender of populations. It filled its empty spaces with its own growing population and with immigrants mainly from north-western and central Europe, until the 1880s. With Russia, it is the only major empire that never developed a significant emigrant Diaspora. Unlike Russia since its fragmentation in 1991, the US still has no Diaspora.

The US empire, it seems to me, is the logical by-product of this form of expansion across a continent. The young US saw its republic as co-terminous with all of North America. To settlers who brought to it European forms of farming population density, much of it seemed boundless and under-used. Indeed, given the rapid, unintended quasi-genocide of the indigenous population by the impact of European diseases, much of it soon became so. Even so that the famous ‘frontier’ thesis on the making of American history found no place at all for Native Americans, who, after all, had been very obviously present in the America of J.F.Cooper⁸.

North America was by no means 'virgin land'⁹, but substituting the European form of economy for the indigenous and extensive use of the territory in both cases implied getting rid of the natives, even leaving aside the colonists' conviction that God had given the country exclusively to them (The sacred mission of the Puritans, the notion of Providence, the Manifest Destiny, the words of Lincoln: a free land for the free white people, Webster's definition of a Native ...). After all the American Constitution excluded the Native American from the body politic of *'the people which enjoyed the bright right of 'the blessings of liberty'*¹⁰. Of course effective elimination was possible only where the original population was relatively small as in North America or Australia. Where it was not, as in Algeria, South Africa, Mexico and, as it turned out in Palestine, even larger settler populations had to live with, or rather on top of, vast native populations.

Again unlike Britain and all other European states, the US never saw itself as one entity in an international system of rival political powers. That was precisely the system which the Monroe doctrine claimed to exclude from the western hemisphere. Within the hemisphere of decolonized dependencies, the US had no rival. Nor did it have a concept of a colonial dependency, since all parts of the North American continent were to be integrated as parts of the US sooner or later, even Canada, which it attempted but failed to detach from the British Empire. So it had problems with taking over adjacent territories that did not fit the pattern, mostly because they were not colonized or colonisable by white Anglos- Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Pacific dependencies, for example. Among such territories only Hawaii was to make it into a state. An independent slave South, being used to the difference between a free and a mass unfree population, and to integration into the British empire global trading system, might well have become more like a European empire, but it was the North that prevailed: free, protectionist, relying for its development on the unlimited mass home market.

As it was, the characteristic form of US empire outside its continental heartland was not to be either like the British empire or the British colonial empire. It could not consider dominions, i.e. the gradual separation of areas of white settlement, with or without natives (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, even South Africa)- because it sent no settlers abroad. In any case, since the North won the Civil War, the secession of any part of the Union was no longer legally and politically possible, or on the ideological agenda. The characteristic form of US power outside its own territory was not colonial, but a system of satellite or compliant states. This was all the more essential because US imperial power until WWII was not global, but only regional-effectively confined to the Caribbean and the Pacific. So it was never able to acquire a wholly owned network of military power bases comparable to the British one, most of which is still there, though it has now lost all its old significance. To this day several of the crucial bases of US power are on the soil of some other states.

Second, the US is the child of a revolution- perhaps as the most lasting revolution in the history of the revolutions of the modern era, the ones driven by the secular hopes of the 18th century, Enlightenment¹¹. If it were to acquire an imperial mission, it would be based on the messianic implication of the basic conviction that its free society was superior to all others, and destined to become the global model. Its politics, as Tocqueville saw, would inevitably be populist and anti-elitist. Both England and Scotland had their revolutions in the

16th and 17th centuries, but they did not last, and their effects were reabsorbed into a modernizing but socially hierarchical capitalist regime, governed until well into the 20th century by kinship networks of a landowning ruling class. Colonial empire could easily be fitted into this framework, as it was in Ireland.

Britain certainly had a strong conviction of its superiority to other societies, but absolutely no messianic belief in, or particular desire for, the conversion of other people to the British ways of government, or even to the closest thing to an ideological national tradition, namely anti-Catholic Protestantism. The British empire was not built by or for missionaries; indeed, even in its core dependency, India, the empire actively discouraged their activities.

Third, since the Domesday Book, the kingdom of England, and after 1707 Britain, was built around a strong centre of law and government operating the oldest national state in Europe. Freedom, law and social hierarchy went with a uniquely sovereign state in authority, 'the king in parliament.' Note that in 1707 England entered a Union with Scotland under a single central government, not as a federal arrangement, even though Scotland remained separate from England in every other respect-law, state religion, administrative structure, education, even the sound of its language. In the US, freedom is the adversary of central government, or indeed of any state authority, which is in any case deliberately crippled by the separation of powers. Compare the history of the US frontier with the very British history of its Canadian equivalent. The heroes of the US Wild West are gunmen who make their own law of the John Wayne kind in lawless territory; the heroes of the Canadian West are the Mounties, an armed federal police force founded in 1873 to maintain the state's law. After all, was it not the British North America Act of 1867 that created the Dominion of Canada state, with as its objectives 'peace, order and good government', not 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'?

Let me briefly mention one further difference between the two countries considered as nations: age. Like a flag and an anthem, nation-states need a foundation myth for that modern construction, the nation, which is most conveniently provided by ancestral history. But the US could not use ancestral history as a foundation myth, as England and even revolutionary France could. The US had no usable ancestors on its territory earlier than the first English settlers; the Native Americans, like slaves, were by definition outside the Founding Fathers' definition of 'the people'. Unlike the Spanish American Creoles, they could not mobilize the memories of indigenous empires-Aztecs, Incas- in their struggle for independence. They could not integrate the heroic traditions of Native American warrior peoples. The only people linking its national identity to American Indians was the small and isolated Welsh, whose romantic explorers thought they had identified the descendants of Prince Madoc- who had once, they felt sure, discovered America before Columbus- as notionally Welsh-speaking on the Missouri¹². And since the US was founded by a revolution against Britain, the only continuity with the old country that was not shaken was cultural, or rather linguistic. But note that even here Noah Webster (the dictionary maker) tried to break that continuity by insisting on a separate orthography.

So the national identity of the US could not be constructed out of a common English past, even before the mass immigration of non-Anglo-Saxons. It had to be primarily constructed

out of its revolutionary ideology and its new republican institutions. Most European nations have so-called “hereditary others” –permanent neighbours, sometimes with memories of centuries of conflict, against whom they define themselves. The US, whose existence has never been threatened by any war other than the Civil War, has only ideologically defined enemies: those who reject the American way of life, wherever they are.

As with states, so with empires. Here also Britain and the US are quite different. The empire – formal or informal –was an essential element both for Britain's economic development and its international power. It was not so for the US. What was crucial for the US was the initial decision to be not a state among other states, but a continental giant, with a continental population. The land and not the sea was central to its development. The US was expansionist from the start, but not in the same way as overseas maritime empires like the 16th century Castilian and Portuguese, the 17th century Dutch, and the British, which usually were based on states of modest dimensions or populations. The US without an empire would still be the state with by far the largest population in the western hemisphere, and the third most populated state on the globe. Britain without its empire was and is just one middle-sized economy among many, and knew itself to be so even when it owned and governed a quarter of the world's land and population.

What is more striking, because the British economy was essentially linked to global world economic transactions, the British empire was in many respects a central element in the development of the 19th century world economy. This was not because it was a formal empire. There are no significant British colonial territories in Latin America outside the Caribbean area, and Britain deliberately refrained from using its naval or military force to intervene there, though it could easily have done so. Yet until WWI, Latin America was far more a part of a British-oriented world economy than it was linked to the US: British investments were more than twice as large as those of the US in 1914¹³ and ran them close even in Mexico, where (with Cuba) American capital was concentrated. In effect, 19th century Britain was an economy complementary to the developing world. Through the 1950s, at least three quarters of Britain's enormous investments were in developing countries.¹⁴ Even between the wars well over half of British exports went to the formal or informal British regions. That is why the British connection made the southern cone of Latin America prosperous when it lasted, while the US connection with Mexico produced chiefly a source of cheap labour for the northern neighbor.

With European and US industrialization, Britain soon ceased to be the world's workshop, except for the construction of the international transportation structure, but it remained the world's trader, the world's banker, the world's capital exporter. Nor should we forget that at the peak of its economic supremacy, Britain was in effect the world market for primary goods –food and raw materials. Modest as it was in size and population, as late as the 1880s, it bought most of the internationally traded raw cotton and 35% of internationally traded wool. It also consumed something like half of all internationally traded wheat and internationally traded meat, and most of its tea.

The US economy had and still has no such organic connection with the world economy. Being by far the largest industrial economy on the globe, it made, and still makes, its impact

on it through sheer continental size and the Yankee originality in technology and business organization that made it a model for the rest of the world from the 1870s onwards, and especially in the 20th century, when it emerged as the first society of mass consumption. Until the period between the wars, heavily protected, the US relied overwhelmingly on domestic resources and the domestic market. Unlike Britain, it was a relatively modest importer of commodities and a disproportionately small exporter of goods and capital until the late 20th century,

Indeed, in spite of its global industrial primacy since the 1870s, with 29 % of world industrial output, its actual share of global exports did not equal that of Britain until the eve of the 1929 slump. The US remain one of the least trade -dependent economies in the world – much less so than even the euro area.¹⁵ Although from WWI onwards, the US government encouraged American exporters with tax breaks and exemption from anti-trust law,¹⁶ US enterprise did not seriously envisage penetrating into the European economies until the mid-1920s, and its advance was slowed by the Great Depression. Broadly speaking, the New World's economic conquest of the Old World is something that took place during the Cold War. There is no guarantee that it will last very long.

Unlike the worldwide advances of 19th century Britain, this conquest was only partly the result of what might be called the global division of labour between industrialised and developing (primary-producing) countries. The great leap forward since the WWII was based on the increasingly globalised interchange between the similar and rival economies of developed industrial countries, which is why the gap between the developed and the poor worlds has widened so dramatically. But it is also why the plunge into free market globalization makes even the strongest national economy dependent on forces it cannot control.

Faced with the industrialization of Europe and the US, Victorian Britain – still massively industrialized, still the world's largest trader and investor – shifted its markets and capital investments to the formal and informal empire. The US of the early 21st century has no such option, and in any case cannot, since it is no longer a major exporter of goods and capital, and pays for the goods it can no longer produce itself by going into debt to the new centers of world industry. It is the only major empire that has also been a major debtor. Indeed, with the exception of the seventy years between WWI and 1988, the global bottom line of its economy has never been in credit.¹⁷ The capital assets, visible and invisible, accumulated since 1945 by the US economy are large and not liable to rapid erosion. Nevertheless, US supremacy must be acutely vulnerable to its relative decline, and to the shift of industrial power, capital and high technology to Asia. In a globalised world, the “soft power” of market and cultural Americanisation no longer reinforces US economic superiority. The US pioneered supermarkets, but in Latin America and China their running is made by the French Carrefour chain.

The American empire, unlike the British, has consistently had to rely on its political muscle. American global enterprise was mixed with politics from the start, or at least from 1916 when President Wilson addressed a convention of salesmen in Detroit and told them that America's “democracy of business” had to take the lead in “*struggle for the peaceful conquest of the*

world".¹⁸ No doubt its influence in the world rested both on being a model for business enterprise and its sheer size; yet it also rested on its fortunate immunity to the catastrophes of two world wars, which exhausted the economies of Europe and the Far East, while its own economy prospered. Nor were US governments unaware of the enormous boost this gave to dollar diplomacy. "*We have got to finance the world in some important degree,*" thought Woodrow Wilson, "*and those who finance the world must understand it and rule it with spirits and their minds.*"¹⁹

During and after WWII, from the Lend-Lease of 1940 to the British Loan of 1946, Washington policy did not conceal that it aimed at the weakening of the British empire as well as victory over the Axis forces. During the Cold War, the global growth of American enterprise took place under the patronage of the political project of the US, with which most American CEOs, like most Americans, identified themselves. In return, given its world power, the US government's conviction that American law ought to prevail in the dealings of Americans anywhere in the world, put considerable political force behind it. Note the (often misquoted) 1950s catchphrase, "*What's good for the country is good for General Motors, and vice versa.*"²⁰ Of course the first mass consumer economy benefited enormously from the rise of affluent European mass consumer societies in the golden decades of the 1950s and 1960s. After all, it had developed the productive capacity, the big corporate producers, the institutions, the knowhow and even the language of such society.

As a French novelist said as early as 1930, advertising sold not only the goods but the adjectives to talk about them. But, thanks to the British empire, English became a universal global language and the essence of American cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, aside from its demonstration effect, the US major contributions to 20th century world economic development are politically anchored: the Marshall Plan in Europe, the occupation land reforms in Japan, the military orders in Asia for the Korean and, later, Vietnam wars.

Without the Cold War's political supremacy in the "free world", would the sheer size of the US economy alone have been enough to establish as the global standard the US way of doing business, US credit-rating agencies, accountancy firms and commercial contract practices, not to mention the "Washington Consensus" for international financing? It may be doubted. That is why the old British empire is not and cannot be a model for the American project of world supremacy –except in one respect. Britain knew its limits and especially the limits, present and future, of its military power. Being a middleweight country, aware that it could not hold the world heavyweight championship for ever, it was saved from the megalomania that is the occupational disease of would-be world conquerors. Britain occupied and ruled a larger part of the globe and its population than any state has ever done before, or is likely to do, but it knew it did not and could not rule the world, and it did not try to do it. Its navy, which did indeed enjoy supremacy on the oceans for a long time, was not a force suited to this purpose. Once Britain had established its global position with successful aggression and war, it kept out of the politics of European states as much as it could, and altogether out of those in the western hemisphere. It tried to keep the rest of the world stable enough to proceed with its own business, but did not tell them what to do. When the age of Western overseas empires ended in the mid-20th century, Britain felt "the winds of change" earlier than other colonizers.

And, because its economic position did not depend on imperial power but on trade, it adjusted more easily to its loss “politically”, just as it had adjusted to the most dramatic setback in its earlier history, namely the loss of American colonies. Will the US learn this lesson, or will it be tempted to maintain an eroding global position by relying on politico-military force, and in so doing promote not global order but disorder, not global peace but conflict, not the advance of civilisation but of barbarism? That, as Hamlet said, is the question. Only the future will show.

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