

Imperialism and its Discontents

Abigail B. Bakan

Volume 56, 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t56re03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Bakan, A. B. (2005). Imperialism and its Discontents. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 56, 269–282.

Imperialism and its Discontents

Abigail B. Bakan

Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London and New York: Verso 2002)

Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder* (New York: Monthly Review 2002)

Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London and New York: Verso 2002)

John Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World* (London and New York: Verso 2002)

Alex Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity 2003)

Introduction: Imperialism Today

THERE IS A GROWING RECOGNITION among critics of US foreign policy that several interlocking elements combine systemically, in a configuration commonly referred to as a new era of global imperialism. A number of avid critics of capitalism, war, and imperialism have turned their attention to the contemporary period. The result is a burgeoning and quite sophisticated literature that collectively addresses all of these elements with varying degrees of emphasis. Five texts that characterize what could be broadly termed contributions to the literature on the new imperialism are the subject of the following review and discussion.

The authors considered here share a common disdain for US President George W. Bush and the policies his government has propagated at home and abroad. The picture described by these authors is, in broad strokes, more consistent than divergent. But their arguments regarding the specific causes and consequences of US imperialism and its effects emerge from different questions. They adopt diverse entry points into the current debates. All these texts broadly address a series of issues that can be characterized under six headings: (i) the drive for US corporate and political control of, access to, and processing and distribution of oil; (ii) an uncertain global

Abigail B. Bakan, "Imperialism and its Discontents," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 269-82.

geo-political context characterized by a lack of unity among the western states on one side, and rising discontent with US foreign policy among the elites of non-Western states on the other; (iii) the related but distinct instability regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict; (iv) the aggressive and militaristic response on the part of the US to the events of 11 September 2001; (v) the specific character of George Bush and Co. as the caretakers of US imperialism in the current era; and (vi) the forces of resistance, including both those who stand under the secular banner of a movement against imperialism, and those who express their opposition through various versions of Islamic religious identification.

What follows is a consideration of each of these authors' works informed, with varying degrees of emphasis, by how they address these issues. This discussion is concluded with a look at the cracks in the US empire, particularly regarding the war on Iraq, with a view to placing this scholarship in the context of anti-imperialist resistance on the home front.

Clashes

Two of the authors considered here, Tariq Ali and Gilbert Achcar, suggest in the titles of their works responses to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.¹ Huntington is, arguably, currently the leading neo-conservative analyst of US imperialism. He developed his post-Cold War, "civilization" framework well before 11 September 2001. Since that historic date, however, the book and a previously published article under the same title have become widely cited as the classic ideological articulation of contemporary US foreign policy.² To indicate the context, Huntington's summary of his own vision of the new, re-made, world order is *à propos*.

The West is and will remain for years to come the most powerful civilization. Yet its power relative to that of other civilizations is declining. As the West attempts to assert its values and to protect its interests, non-Western societies confront a choice. Some attempt to emulate the West and to join or to 'bandwagon' with the West. Other Confucian and Islamic societies attempt to expand their own economic and military power to resist and 'balance' against the West. A central axis of post-Cold War world politics is thus the interaction of Western power and culture with the power and culture of non-Western civilization.³

Tariq Ali, novelist, filmmaker, and journalist, began writing *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* before 11 September, under a different title. However, the author informs us that the focus of the earlier *Mullahs and Heretics* was altered as a result of that day's events. According to Ali, when

¹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (Riverside, NJ 1998).

²Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993).

³Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 29.

those referred to in the first part of the original title, “without my permission, decided to create mayhem in New York and Washington,” and George W. Bush responded with his own imperial fundamentalist response, a new emphasis was called for. (xi)

The main argument of Ali’s *Clash of Fundamentalisms* is that “the most dangerous ‘fundamentalism’ today — the ‘mother of all fundamentalisms’ — is American imperialism,” and that this was “amply vindicated” in the first eighteen months after 11 September. Notably, Ali’s book was published prior to the war on Iraq. Rather than describing or explaining the driving force of US imperialism in the Middle East and elsewhere, Ali’s analysis takes this starting point as a given. He devotes only one section of the fourth part of his five-part study to “A short-course history of US imperialism”; the bulk of the manuscript traces the various periods of collusion and conflict between US imperialism and the dominant classes, or sections of classes, from Jerusalem to Pakistan, from Pakistan to Kashmir, from Afghanistan to India.

For Ali, US imperialism has constructed a new enemy in the form of Islamic terrorism. At the same time, as an author of Pakistani origin, and a self-identified Marxist atheist living in Britain, he offers a unique insider/outsider view of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a reaction to the failure of secular political alternatives. The events of 11 September, for example, Ali maintains, were a long time in the making. He favourably cites Chalmers Johnson’s explanation of political “blowback,” the shorthand for indicating how “a nation reaps what it sows, even if it does not fully know or understand what it has sown.” (as cited in Ali, 318) Writing one year before the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, Johnson wrote:

Given its wealth and power, the United States will be a prime recipient in the foreseeable future of all the more expectable forms of blowback, particularly terrorist attacks against Americans in and out of the armed forces anywhere on earth, including within the United States. (as cited in Ali, 318)

For Tariq Ali, it is not Osama bin Laden, or even what he calls the “miniscule” Al Qaeda network when compared to the Arab armies, that pose the significant challenge to be addressed. Instead, the question is what are the conditions that have led an educated layer of Saudis, Egyptians, and Algerians to identify with or gravitate towards individual terrorism. Why did highly skilled, middle-class professionals, thirteen of the nineteen involved in 11 September from Saudi Arabia, sacrifice their lives in the attacks of that day? Ali moves from allegory to political analysis, tracing the pattern of alliances between the US and both the Saudi and Pakistani states, particularly through the period when US forces supported Islamic militants in the war against the USSR in Afghanistan. Then, having effectively supported the Taliban to power, after 11 September the US and its allies intervened to ensure their removal.

Washington's role in the Afghan war has never been a secret, but few citizens in the West were aware that the United States utilised the intelligence services of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to create, train, finance and arm an international network of Islamic militants to fight the Russians in Afghanistan.... Afghanistan itself, a decade after Soviet withdrawal, was still awash with factional violence. Veterans of the war helped to destabilise Egypt, Algeria, the Philippines, Sudan, Pakistan, Chechnya, Daghestan and Saudi Arabia. Well before September 11 they had bombed targets in the United States and declared their own war against the Great Satan. Osama bin Laden became the bugbear of US official and popular fantasies only after starting his career as a Saudi building tycoon with links to the CIA. (Ali, 209)

Ali also exposes the hypocrisy of US foreign policy in the Middle East regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict. The history of the conflict is not explicable, according to Ali, in terms of historic religious loyalties; rather, "the search for oil was to transform everything and everyone in the region." (85) In the early 1930s, US oil prospectors developed contacts with Ibn Saud, and a concession of land for development was granted at a low price. Through the 1930s, Standard Oil, Esso, Texaco, and Mobil merged to form the conglomerate Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), shaping the future relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US government. Within the borders of the kingdom, the US turned a blind eye. But with the end of World War II, a new period of decolonization opened the potential for more independent states. The US was the strongest western military power, but the competition from an expansionist USSR created an unstable global context.

The 1948 end of the United Nations British mandate in Palestine, and the agreement to establish the state of Israel, were couched in terms of protection for Jewish people who had been the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Ali traces the significance of the Suez crisis and the role of Gamal Abdul Nasser as an emerging anti-imperialist leader. He also discusses the impact of Jewish, anti-Zionist opponents of Israeli imperialism. This section, on "Zionism, the First Oil War, and Resistance," is one of the most informative and accessible explications of the Middle East available, and a high point in what is in general an excellent and accessible exposé of the hypocrisy of western imperialism.

Gilbert Achcar's *The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder* offers a narrative consistent with Ali's, but with a more focused consideration of the origin, nature, and context of the events of 11 September 2001. Achcar, whose experiences in Lebanon and France similarly draw on perspectives across the East/West divide, attempts to trace the conditions which have allowed for the rise in influence of militant, anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism over recent decades. A particular focus, with a more narrow lens than that of Ali, is on Saudi Arabia, which he refers to metaphorically as the "Muslim Texas."

Achcar opens his study with a discussion of another 11 September, this one in 1990, the occasion of a speech delivered by George Bush Sr. to a joint session of the US Congress. The Iraqi military had invaded Kuwait six weeks before this address;

now the US forces, stationed for weeks on Saudi territory, were to open the attack on Iraq under the command title of Operation Desert Shield. Taking up where Republican President Ronald Reagan had left off, the new world order after the Cold War was to be shaped by a new kind of American war. This was to be a historic turning point, a war that could potentially eradicate the Vietnam syndrome. This was a sickness in the heart of US imperialism, the main symptom of which was a generation of American citizens unwilling to see their sons die on the trusted command of the US government. Reagan's legacy in attempting to cure the disease was poor. According to Achcar:

Reagan's main foreign operation had ended in a total fiasco in this respect: the result was an addition of a 'Beirut syndrome' to the Vietnam syndrome, thanks to the first suicide attacks to directly hit the US. These attacks occurred in 1983, eighteen years before the assaults on New York and Washington. After 63 people were killed on April 18 in an attack on the US embassy in Beirut, an additional 242 marines, serving in the multinational force stationed in Lebanon after the 1982 Israeli invasion, perished on October 23 when the apartment building they were using as a barracks collapsed. (7)

George Bush Sr.'s speech, argues Achcar, took seriously Reagan's lesson that without the support of Congress and the US population, foreign incursions were doomed to fail. While promoting war, Bush Sr. couched the plan in the rhetoric of international cooperation across the historic East/West divide, with the aim of achieving conditions of prosperity, and by extension, eliminating the threat of terrorism and violation of international law. Achcar counterposes the realpolitik indicated in this speech, where the idealized realm of global peace is at least perceived as a promise, to the contemporary post-September 11 context. Now, according to Achcar, the barbarism of the West has been unleashed without apology. The result is that: "[T]he barbarism on one side inevitably engenders barbarism on the other.... The clash of these two barbarisms will not usher in a world at peace. Far from canceling each other out, they reinforce each other, in a spiral of reciprocal escalation tending towards paroxysm according to the Clausewitzian mechanism of going to extremes." (11)

While this introductory tone appears to suggest an assignment of equal blame to both western imperialism and fundamentalist anti-imperialism, in fact Achcar's account sees no such equilibrium. US imperialism, he maintains, has created conditions of deepening class inequality within the nations of the Middle East, where heightened frustration has inevitably found expression in movements for political alternatives. Part of this divide has been constructed by the ideological monopoly of the western media. Critics of US government policy have been subject to censorship and distortion, while the events of 11 September 2001 were rendered a spectacle artificially presented as the worst massacre in history. Achcar attempts to assess the 11 September events in a climate of resistance to "intimidating accusations that any such effort amounts to trivializing the atrocity." He objects to the notion that

there is a “monopoly on moral indignation,” and proceeds to suggest that in sheer scale and numbers, the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were “in all a pretty ordinary massacre.” (19) Why, he asks, is it forbidden to consider the much greater scale of the massacres in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the victims of UN sanctions in Iraq, when the US was the chief aggressor?

Achcar maintains that there were two unique characteristics to the 11 September events. The first, and perhaps most important, is that the attacks took place on US soil; second is the extraordinary media coverage of the event. But Achcar insists that the 11 September attacks were in the making, as a direct result of US foreign policy, for many years prior to 2001. That Al Qaeda, including its leader and financier Osama bin Laden, and the US government were historic allies, based on their ten-year collusion against the USSR during that state’s war in Afghanistan, is taken by Achcar as an obvious and well-known fact. He identifies a pattern common to imperialist ruling classes that has a long history, citing Karl Marx’s analysis of the 1857-58 “Indian Mutiny,” also known as the “Sepoy Rebellion,” as an example. At that time, the Sepoys, or *sepahi*, native troops in the British army in India, rebelled against their commanding officers. The English newspapers of the day in turn condemned the “barbarous” mutineers. Achcar sees in the comments of Marx, writing from London for the *New York Daily Tribune*, a striking relevance to the contemporary configuration of forces.

The outrages committed by the revolted Sepoys in India are indeed appalling, hideous, inefable — such as one is prepared to meet only in wars of insurrection, of nationalities, of races, and above all of religion ... However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. To characterize that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself. (as cited in Achcar, 28)

Achcar traces the history of US support for the Saudi kingdom, and the sometimes uneasy relationship between the Saudi political state which governs economic issues, and the Wahabite religious order which was granted jurisdiction over many matters of civil society. He identifies the unholy alliance between US foreign policy and support for the most reactionary tendencies among the ruling classes of the Arab states, a theme similarly identified in Ali’s work. Achcar emphasizes that the “clash” is not one between “civilizations” but “barbarisms,” which are in essence the antithesis of civilized society. In the process, the US became a prime cultivator of Islamic fundamentalism, just as it presents itself in the post-September 11 period as its victim. Achcar summarizes the development over several decades of imperialist ventures in the region, noting the Soviet Union’s war on Afghanistan,

Israel's Six Day War, the death of Abdul Nasser in Egypt in 1970, and the rise of Khomeini in Iran as key turning points. As Achcar describes the chain of events:

Israel's victory in the June 1967 Six Day War was a deadly blow to Nasserism, compounded with Nasser's death in 1970. Combined with the sudden spurt of oil prices following the fourth Arab-Israeli war in October 1973, it considerably strengthened the Saudi kingdom's influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds. But the Iranian 'Islamic revolution' of 1979 faced the Saudi rulers with an unexpected ideological challenge: anti-Western radicalism, which would henceforth combine Islamic fundamentalism of the Khomeini pattern. This happened the very moment when a panicky Soviet Union was pushing out for the first time beyond its own post-1945 imperial domain in order to invade a Muslim country, Afghanistan. In these unprecedented conditions, the Saudi-Wahabite ideological enterprise threw itself into a more-radical-than-thou contest with the Khomeini-inspired Islamic fundamentalism. The Saudis counterposed their predominantly anticommunist fanaticism to the Khomeini pattern of predominantly anti-Western fanaticism. (37)

Achcar devotes attention in this changing historical pattern to a comparison between the Clinton and Bush Jr. administrations, particularly regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. Achcar maintains that there is no potential for a lasting peace in the region without considerable concessions from Israel, and Clinton appeared to be favourable to compromise. In reality, however, Clinton's administration "joined successive Israeli governments in trying to extract even more concessions from the Palestinian leadership — concessions of a kind that the Palestinian people would have inevitably rejected and which would have undermined a new accord from the start." (70)

The Postmodern and The Real

Slavoj Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* is the most unsatisfactory of the texts considered here, in terms of offering clarity to the post-September 11 configuration of US and global imperialism. Written in a style and language that moves intentionally between the explanatory and the imaginary, or between fact and speculation on feelings and perceptions, Žižek attempts to challenge or shock the reader at the same time as he hopes to enlighten. The premise of the work is that the 20th century marked a historic break from the 19th, where the latter was grounded in utopian or 'scientific' projects, guided by a common set of ideals and plans for the future. The 20th century, Žižek maintains, was defined by "the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality — the Real in its extreme violence as the price for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality." (5-6) Now, in the early 21st century, we live in the desert of the past century's "Real."

From essentially a Lacanian post-modernist perspective, Žižek challenges the posited post-September 11 binary of US-style "democracy" and ostensibly "terrorist" Islamic fundamentalism. In five separate but related essays, including one titled "Happiness After September 11," Žižek combines biting opposition to a

capitalist world where images and ideologies are constructed to deceive and justify oppression, with near-incomprehensible metaphor. All of this is coloured by a sense of almost total despair. For example, Žizek suggests a parallel between the current global conjuncture and one of the most unconstructive political outgrowths of the 1970s, using the example of Western Germany.

And is not so-called fundamentalist terror also an expression of the passion of the Real? Back in the early 1970s, after the collapse of the New Left student protest movement in Germany, one of its outgrowths was the Red Army Faction terrorism (the Baader-Meinhof ‘gang’, and so on); its underlying premise was that the failure of the student movement had demonstrated that the masses were so deeply immersed in their apolitical consumerist stance that it was not possible to awaken them through standard political education and consciousness-raising — a more violent intervention was needed to shake them out of their ideological numbness, their hypnotic consumerist state, and only direct violent interventions like bombing supermarkets would do the job. And does the same not hold, on a different level, for today’s fundamentalist terror? ... These ... examples indicate the fundamental paradox of the ‘passion for the Real’: it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle* ... (9)

Žizek finds parallels between US foreign policy and Hollywood film presentations, seeing the plane which attacked the World Trade Centre on 11 September, for example, as “the ultimate Hitchcockian blot.” He offers a detailed deconstruction of Steven Spielberg’s animated dinosaur series, *The Land Before Time*, by way of comparison with the media-filtered treatment of those claimed to be Al Qaeda conspirators imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay. The suggestion is that in the film as in the prison, we are told that everyone is different and therefore deserves to be differently treated, resulting in an endless cycle of life and evolution. (64) The point, it seems, is that for Žizek resistance, or at least the discourse of resistance, is futile.

At this point, of course, an obvious criticism imposes itself: is not such tolerant Hollywood wisdom a caricature of truly radical postcolonial studies? To this, we should reply: is it really? If anything, there is more truth in this simplified flat caricature than in most elaborated postcolonial theory: at least Hollywood distils the actual ideological message out of the pseudo-sophisticated jargon. Today’s hegemonic attitude is that of ‘resistance’ — all the poetics of the dispersed marginal sexual, ethnic, lifestyle ‘multitudes’ (gays, the mentally ill, prisoners ...) ‘resisting’ the mysterious central (capitalized) Power. Everyone ‘resists’ — from gays and lesbians to rightist survivalists — so why not draw the logical conclusion that this discourse of ‘resistance’ is the norm today, and, as such, the main obstacle to the emergence of the discourse which would actually question the dominant relations? (66)

There is, however, a slight reprieve from this pessimism suggested in Žizek’s discussion of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In the final essay of the book, “From Homo Sacer to the Neighbour,” Žizek offers a comparison between Freud’s dream imagery of a naked person in front of a crowd with a “nightmarish scene of the every day racist violence” that he witnessed on the streets of Berlin in 1992. He then

counterposes this sense of stark, empty isolation to the discovery of the “simple ethical act” of Israeli military reservists refusing to serve in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is a refreshing discussion of the power of resistance in the Israeli army, one that belies the more cynical theoretical premises of the argument of the Real. Here Žižek notes the irony of Israeli state policy toward the Palestinians and the US portrayal of the Middle East crisis in western media. He writes:

[T]he Palestinians are basically treated as evil children who have to be brought back to an honest life through stern discipline and punishment. Just consider the ridicule of the situation in which the Palestinian security forces are bombed, while at the same time pressure is put on them to crackdown on Hamas terrorists. How can they be expected to retain a minimum of authority in the eyes of the Palestinian population if they are humiliated daily by being attacked, and furthermore, by being expected simply to endure these attacks ...? (114)

Rulers and Mandarins

John Pilger’s *The New Rulers of the World* and Alex Callinicos’s *The New Mandarins of American Power* offer focused considerations of the ruling class, in the US and internationally, and what they do when they rule. Pilger’s work is a collection of four essays, each focused on a different corner of the world, but displaying consistent patterns of imperialism, racism, and resistance. The essays are linked by a premise outlined in Pilger’s introduction, that despite stated differences in the post-September 11 period, there is a “legacy of old imperialism” that has found expression in a “return to respectability as ‘globalisation’ and the ‘war on terrorism’.” (4) Pilger is a political journalist, and the essays are written with a crispness and respect for sources and hard fact that is refreshingly blunt and to the point.

For example, in an article that focuses on the events that led to the rise and consolidation of General Suharto in Indonesia in the mid-1960s — written as a sort of post-mortem to Suharto’s fall from power in 1998 — Pilger focuses on the links between the West and the internal power dynamics of the Indonesian state. He reports on interviews with the Chief Executive Officer of the Cargill Corporation, the dominant corporation in food grain trade, and with a poor peasant farmer who was in jail for fourteen years because of his opposition to “free trade.” Then, linking the economic interests and the internal political repression that was associated with Suharto’s 30-year dictatorship, Pilger provides a retrospective.

Since Suharto’s fall, a body of evidence has been amassed that exposes the fiction.... What is ... no longer in doubt is the collaboration of western government, together with the subsequent role of western big business. Indeed, it might be said that globalisation in Asia was conceived in Indonesia’s bloodbath. (27-8)

Other essays in Pilger’s collection consider the role of UN sanctions in Iraq prior to the 2003 war, and the post-September 11 war on Afghanistan. His writing focuses on the most minute detail of both human suffering and human strength. At

the same time, Pilger links these pre- and post-September 11 moments with a consistent exposé of the hypocrisy of the so-called “humanitarian” aims that motivated the interventions. In a final essay, the focus turns to the experiences of indigenous peoples in Pilger’s native Australia. Offering a critical eye on his own home country, Pilger insists that imperialism is not only about the foreign policy of great nations, or aggressive military invasions abroad, but lurks in “the unresolved apartheid behind the picture postcard of Australia.” (11)

In Alex Callinicos’s work, the lens shifts sharply to the United States. Callinicos offers a careful and detailed analysis of the specific constellation of forces that has produced the administration and policies of George W. Bush. What is unique about this analysis is its combination of sobriety about the ruthlessness of the US administration, and a consideration of the intrinsic constraints and divisions that hamper the capacity of that administration to operate unhindered. These constraints mark US ruling class interests both domestically and internationally. Contrary to theories that focus on either international conspiracy as an explanation for 11 September and its aftermath, or those which maintain the US has been taken over by some form of creeping “fascism,” Callinicos traces US foreign policy to one wing of the US elite that has rationally attempted to address a post-Cold War reality. At the same time, Callinicos identifies the splits in the ruling class and the tendencies to vacillation. He identifies the inherent limits to a project that he expects will continue to generate massive opposition. As Callinicos puts the case:

The ‘war on terrorism’ began as a response to the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. What ever one thinks about the form taken by this response, it was an intelligible reaction to a specific and demonstrable threat. Now it has become a global and permanent state of war that will last longer than the two most terrible military conflicts in the history of humankind and whose rationale is a project of a sociopolitical transformation — the use of the military power of the United States to impose ‘democratic values’ on parts of the world that are identified as threats to ‘liberal civilization’.... This is hardly a hidden agenda. (5)

Callinicos identifies the evolution of a particular current in the US elite associated with the neoconservative think-tank, the Project for the New American Century [PNAC]. While specifically positioning itself for hegemonic influence after 11 September, the origins of the policy and the personnel date back to the Reagan administration. Callinicos maintains that the PNAC expresses an ideological and tactical orientation of the US ruling class in its efforts to secure a dominant position in the global capitalist system today. US foreign policy today is shaped, he maintains, not only by the end of the Cold War, but also by fear of growing competition from former enemies and allies alike. The drive for oil is central to this, but not simply because the US is dependent on oil resources outside its borders. There is also a recognition in the US that other imperialist powers are similarly competing for the control of oil resources.

This perspective is expressed clearly in the US policy document, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, published a year after the 11 September attacks.

Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.... We are attentive to the possible renewal of old patterns of great power competition. Several potential great powers are now in the midst of internal transition — most importantly Russia, India, and China.⁴

There is a sense of urgency expressed in this document regarding the increased importance of overt military occupation. The post-September 11 context is taken as a model to be generalized. The plan is to increase US military preparedness, including striking “pre-emptively” before any actual attack on the US has materialized. A policy of the US going it alone — indicating that multilateralism, or building international alliances, is not a precondition to US military strategy — is central to the plan. This is the principal pillar of the PNAC’s orientation and strategy for the maintenance of US hegemony. The “Bush Doctrine,” as it is referred to in the US administration, is based on the notions of pre-emptive war and military unilateralism. This orientation, Callinicos argues, was a break with the historic perspective of the US during the Cold War, when “containment” of the USSR, a policy shaped by George Kennan, was the strategic goal.

The same policy continued, after the war on Iraq in 1991. It was referred to as “dual containment” when Saddam Hussein was kept in power in order to repress the restive Kurdish and Shiite resistance; Saddam was to be held in check by the “dual” strategy of periodic bombing raids and UN sanctions. By the late 1990s, however, this strategy was seen to be failing in Iraq, as UN Security Council members such as France and Russia, and the Arab states, were looking for ways to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties to Iraq.

Increasingly, the US and the UK were taking unilateral action with periodic military bombing raids on Iraq, in an effort to maintain US hegemony in the region. The UK, under Tony Blair’s Labour Party leadership, was maintaining an historic strategy of attempting to increase the competitive advantage of Britain within Europe by maintaining close ties to the US.

Callinicos does not see any capacity for the US to regain the position of hegemony that marked the period after World War II. Instead, he sees the current period of global conflict marked by inter-imperialist competition. In this context, Callinicos sees the need for anti-war movements across national borders to form united campaigns of resistance. Callinicos notes the global day of protest against the war in Iraq on 15 February 2003, one month prior to the attacks, as an important step. He remarks on the coverage of this event presented in the unlikely pages of

⁴*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>>

The New York Times. “The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge anti-war demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” (as cited in Callinicos, 7)

Cracks in the Empire

In the current context of global imperialism, there is little doubt about the relative superiority of US military and economic power. There is also little doubt, however, that the project established in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 has not gone exactly according to plan. While the authors reviewed suggest a variety of perspectives regarding the inherent contradictions in the project of empire, these titles indicate a burgeoning intellectual space for critical analysis of imperialism and militarized globalization. There is also a widening audience for such analyses. This is a process still at an early stage, perhaps a moment of Gramscian counter-hegemony in the early phases of formation. At the same time, history is moving quickly. It would have been impossible to predict in the days and weeks immediately following 11 September that the “war on terrorism” would have faced so many obstacles and challenges, generated both from the logic of its own project and by popular resistance internationally and in the US.

At the centre of the post-September 11 imperial project is the war on Iraq. This is a war that was supposed to have proven definitively that the US was the only force capable of stopping terrorism and destroying weapons of mass destruction that threatened western security. Instead, the US is now widely perceived to be caught in a Vietnam-style quagmire.

Perhaps the most telling sign of the fault lines of the project is the increasing challenge of maintaining the morale and numbers of US soldiers at the centre of what has now become a prolonged ground war in Iraq. Unlike the period following World War II — a period to which the newly re-inaugurated Bush administration is prone to proffer comparison — Iraq is not being treated to an extensive Marshall Plan of reconstruction and development. Nor are the ideologically defined and varying “enemies of democracy” — terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, political dictatorship — generating massive enlistment in military ranks. Instead, the US economy is being strained as it increases its occupation forces in Iraq, while US soldiers increasingly question the risks to which they are being exposed.

According to Jamie McIntye, CNN senior Pentagon correspondent, the US military witnessed in early March 2005 a decline in recruitment targets in all sections of the military. The US army has reported for the first time in five years that the number of recruits who reported to boot camp was 1,936 below the target of just over 7,000; and the army reserves were 133 below their recruitment target of 1,320. For the US marines, February was the second consecutive month to see shortfalls in recruits

signing military contracts, registering 192 below their target of 2,900, and following a January shortfall of 84 below a target of 3,270.⁵

The growing number of US military casualties, now officially at over 1,500, is clearly affecting not only recruitment of new soldiers, but the morale of those in the field. What was expected to be Donald Rumsfeld's post-election photo op with the US troops at Camp Buehring in Kuwait on 8 December 2004 turned into an expression of the rage and discontent of the soldiers on the ground. Rumsfeld was put on the defensive as the elite of the US army challenged the current military policy of "stop-loss," which prevents US troops from leaving military service even if they are officially eligible to do so. Soldiers also challenged Rumsfeld about the poor quality of the military equipment they are using in Iraq. A CNN report is instructive regarding the tenor of the meeting:

One soldier, identified by The Associated Press as Army Spc. Thomas Wilson of the 278th Regimental Combat Team, a Tennessee National Guard outfit, asked Rumsfeld why more military combat vehicles were not reinforced for battle conditions. 'Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to uparmor our vehicles?' Wilson asked. The question prompted cheers from some of the approximately 2,300 troops assembled in the large hangar to hear Rumsfeld deliver a pep talk at what the Pentagon called a town hall meeting.⁶

Another example of increasing restiveness in the army is Iraq Veterans Against the War [IVAW], an organization founded in the US among returning soldiers mobilized since 11 September. A statement released by the IVAW on 20 March 2005, marking the second anniversary of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, deserves quotation:

We were first told that there was a link between Iraq and the horrible 9/11 attacks. But there was none. Then we were told that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction; yet only a few old warheads and some dormant bacterial cultures have been found despite rigorous searching. Then finally, we were told that Saddam Hussein was training terrorists to attack the United States, but no terrorist presence seems to have existed in Iraq prior to the massive build-up in early 2003. Post-invasion Iraq, however, has clearly become a hotbed for new terrorist threats. We, the veterans of the war, now know all of these reasons for invading the sovereign country of Iraq were false, and we have paid a heavy price for these lies. Two years into a seemingly endless war, our nation has incurred a terrible debt, while the corporations who profit from the business of war reap millions. Our deficit has climbed to a rate that can only be paid by our children's grandchildren. While our domestic programs crumble, the social and economic future of our children is indeed bleak. Most tragic, over 1,500 of our comrades

⁵See Lou Dobbs Tonight, CNN.com, Transcripts, 3 March 2005 <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0503/03/ldt.01.html>>

⁶"Troops Put Thorny Questions to Rumsfeld," 9 December 2004, CNN.com International, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/12/08/rumsfeld.troops/>>

in arms have given the ultimate sacrifice for this senseless, imprudent, and immoral policy of war and occupation.... On the second anniversary of this unwise, unjust, and unproductive invasion, Iraq Veterans Against the War call upon our President, the Congress, and all elected officials to immediately and unconditionally withdraw all US troops from Iraq and the Middle East. We also demand full funding for the medical needs of our returning veterans, including treatment for post traumatic stress disorder and the effects of depleted uranium. Finally, we call for all citizens of the United States to demand that their government end the pillaging and destruction of Iraq so that everyday Iraqi people can control their own lives and country.⁷

The rise of an American “refusenik” movement, comparable to the one in Israel that inspires even Slavoj Žižek, the most cynical of the authors reviewed, is another indication of discontent among the soldiery. Currently, there are at least 15 US soldiers who have come to Canada and applied for refugee status, seeking asylum as they have refused to deploy to Iraq and participate in the war. So far, however, the Canadian government has not offered the welcome hand extended to war resisters during the Vietnam era, despite public opposition.⁸ With a growing crisis in the ranks of the US military, there is speculation about the return of the US draft, and the consequent opening of massive public debate and further unwelcome comparison with the Vietnam war period.⁹

In such times, critical scholars have an important job to do. History has proven repeatedly that social movements cannot continue to grow without simultaneously developing new ideas and the “organic intellectuals,” again to use Gramsci’s terms, who can analyse the big picture in all its complexity. To this end, the authors considered above should be saluted, read, and debated. Imperialism has shown us its barbarous dimensions. It is a system that demands astute critics who can build, and become a part of, an alternative tradition and point the way to a different and better world.

⁷See IVAW Statement on the Second Anniversary of the Iraq War, 20 March 2005 <<http://www.ivaw.net/index.php?id=39>>

⁸See War Resisters Support Campaign for details of this movement at www.resisters.ca.

⁹Lou Dobbs Tonight, 3 March 2005.