

# A Critique of American Imperialism<sup>1</sup>

By Frank W. Elwell

John Bellamy Foster's Ecological-Marxism goes beyond immediate concerns of capitalist firms within nation-states that exploit both environment and workers; like Wallerstein, Foster offers a Marxian analysis of the relations between core and peripheral nations that have grave consequences for environmental depletion and pollution, global inequality between and within nation-states, as well as nuclear proliferation and the likelihood of nuclear war.<sup>2</sup> In his analysis Foster examines details of historical and contemporary foreign policy of the United States of America and finds that much of that foreign policy, particularly since World War II, has been aimed at strengthening American political, military, and economic power around the world. Many of these actions have been taken in the name of spreading freedom and democracy around the globe, or of protecting American citizens or allies, or more recently, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. In fact, Foster asserts, these actions are primarily taken to serve the needs of American capital; they are aimed at securing access to raw materials, markets, and labor—to further expand investment opportunities of American corporations. The United States of America, according to Foster, remains the hegemonic power at the core of the world system, and uses its military, political, and economic power in an imperialistic manner; a manner consistent with such historical empires as Britain and Rome.

The roots of American imperialism lie in capitalism and the capitalist world system. “From its beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” Foster writes, “and even more so in the monopoly stage, capital within each nation-state at the center of the system is driven by a need to control access to raw materials and the labor in the periphery.”<sup>3</sup> While the specific mechanisms of imperialism vary historically, the goal of American imperialism today is the same

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<sup>1</sup> An excerpt from *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, 2009, Edwin Mellen Press, pp. 93-102.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, 2006. This book is a compilation of essays written for *Monthly Review* between November 2001 and January 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 109.

as in the past, to invest in the economies of third world nations in order to obtain raw materials and agricultural products at the lowest possible prices, to siphon off the economic surplus produced by these economies, and to exploit their people as a source of cheap labor (and use them as a threat to labor within the core as well). “Economies of the periphery are structured to meet the external needs of the United States and other core capitalist countries rather than their own internal needs.”<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, Foster reports, American imperialism had limited aims and goals within a well defined sphere of influence—an area that excluded the Soviet sphere of influence as well as the contested region of the Middle East. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 the U.S. began an aggressive policy of extending its economic and political power through military means.<sup>5</sup> Another factor behind the intensification of American imperialism in the 1990s, Foster writes, was the huge military war machine that the United States built since World War II in its Cold War with the Soviet Union. American capitalism had long become dependent upon lucrative government contracts for weapon systems and war materials. How was this spending to be maintained without its former enemy? It was the removal of the Soviet check on American power that allowed the U.S. to expand its imperial ambitions; it was its superior military that gave it the tools to do so, and it was U.S. capitalism that gave the government incentive to use this military to both keep the government contracts coming and to assure access to foreign markets and resources.<sup>6</sup>

In Foster’s opinion, the George W. Bush administration does not represent a sea-change in American foreign policy; it is not as if some neo-conservative cabal seized control of American government and the military and has taken America in a new direction of military-imperialist expansion. Rather, the Bush II administration and its use of military force in expanding American empire is consistent with the imperial drift of the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bush II represents a continuation of American imperialism, a bipartisan foreign policy since World War II, becoming more aggressive with the fall of the Soviet Union. The terrorist

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<sup>4</sup> Foster, 2006, pp. 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, 2006, pp. 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 23.

attacks of September 11 only gave the nation the opportunity to become more militaristic and more open in its goals.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to strike the right note when dealing with the causes of the September 11 attacks upon America, particularly for an American audience. Foster opens his analysis with a clear statement that his discussion in no way is intended to excuse or condone the terrorism itself. The attacks were “acts of utter, inhuman violence,” they were “indefensible in every sense...Such terrorism has to be rid from the face of the earth.”<sup>8</sup> The issue is not the barbarity of the attacks, but rather, the root causes of terrorism and how best to stop it. The terrorism from the Islamic world, Foster asserts, is in direct response to Western imperialism. “In this view,” Foster writes, “the terrorists attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were not attacking global sovereignty or civilization (it wasn’t the United Nations in New York that was attacked)—much less the values of freedom and democracy as claimed by the U.S. state—but were deliberately targeting the symbols of U.S. financial and military power, and thus of U.S. global power.”<sup>9</sup>

America as the dominant (hegemonic) nation at the core of the capitalist world system has had a long history of intervening in the Middle East through military, economic, and covert means. These interventions have been undertaken to assure continued access to the region’s oil and markets. American interventions have consisted of support of dictators to assure domestic tranquility, and the training and arming of these dictators to strengthen their rule, as well as the arming and training of terrorist groups when it suits American interests.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the Taliban of Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and the former Shah of Iran were all one-time clients and friends of the U.S. state.<sup>11</sup> “In Afghanistan,” Foster writes, “the U.S. military is seeking to destroy terrorist forces that it once played a role in creating. Far from adhering to its own constitutional principles in the international domain the U.S. has long

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<sup>7</sup>Foster, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, 2006, pp. 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> Such an instance occurred when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> Foster, 2006, points out that support of Saddam Hussein even went so far as to allow U.S. companies to sell the dictator anthrax and other biological cultures that could be used for weapons production. And this continued even after he used chemical weapons against Iran and Iraq’s own Kurdish population (p. 88).

supported terrorist groups whenever it served its own imperialist designs, and has itself carried out state terrorism, killing civilian populations.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that the U.S. conducted a full-scale war in the region in 1990, and has since established permanent military bases in Saudi Arabia is seen by many “as an occupation of the holiest land of Islam,” a fact that bin Laden and those that follow consider sacrilege.<sup>13</sup>

Writing in December of 2002, before the second Iraq war, Foster casts doubt on the existence of any Iraqi weapons of mass destruction since such capabilities were destroyed in the first Iraqi war and the resulting UN inspections. Rather, Foster believed that the then current push to invade Iraq was coming from two motives: (1) control of the regions oil, since Iraq’s reserves are second only to Saudi Arabia, and (2) a demonstration to the world that the U.S. has finally gotten over the Vietnam Syndrome and was now prepared to use its military power fully in pursuit of its interests.<sup>14</sup> The invasion of course, was very successful. The occupation and pacification of the country has been less so; many, including Foster, term it a disaster.<sup>15</sup> Getting out of Iraq, Foster contends, will be difficult and dangerous.

A major problem in sustaining American imperialism is in keeping the support of the population for war. Keeping popular support for policies—both domestic and foreign—that overwhelmingly serve the interests of elites is a chronic problem in democratic-capitalist societies. Force, of course, can be used only in times of crisis. It is far more common for governments to use ideology, propaganda, and other forms of manipulation to keep their populations supportive of the party line. Since America’s first imperialist war (the Spanish-American War in 1899), Foster claims, the U.S. government has propagandized, lied to, and deliberately misled the population to gain its support. In its efforts to mislead, the government is aided by a mass media that is specifically designed to dazzle and entertain, to presents news as

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<sup>12</sup> Foster 2006, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 64. Consistent with Chalmers Johnson, Foster believes that the projection of U.S. military power throughout the world causes “blowback,” a metaphor for the unintended consequences of military and covert action upon the country that initiated that action.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 85; p. 92. The essay in which Foster wrote of the U.S. reasons for war in Iraq was December, 2002, before the invasion the following spring.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, 2006, pp. 133-142. Foster’s opposition to the Iraq war on theoretical, moral, and practical grounds is also apparent throughout this collection of essays.

isolated events, disconnected facts or factoids without context or larger meaning. “What little contextualization professional journalism does provide tends to conform to elite premises.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps a larger problem in sustaining an imperial foreign policy is the fleeting nature of hegemony within the capitalist world system. As Wallerstein has pointed out, the struggle to maintain military superiority eventually erodes the economic base for this superiority. To enforce its will, the U.S. has established military bases in more than sixty countries around the world; the original justification for these bases was to contain Communism. With the end of the cold war the bases have increasingly been used to project American power around the globe. Consequently, the U.S. now spends more on its military than the rest of the world combined; such investment in the military means there is less to spend for education, basic research, social services, and industrial infrastructure.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, opposition to hegemony comes from other core capitalist nations that have material interests in opposing the reigning hegemonic power as they compete with that power and among themselves for markets and resources. The U.S. has been relatively unsuccessful in enlisting the support of its allies in recent military actions. Finally, opposition to American militarism is coming from public opinion around the globe. “The Vietnam Syndrome, which has so worried the strategic planners of the imperial order for decades,” Foster writes,

now seems not only to have left a deep legacy within the United States but also to have been coupled this time around with an Empire Syndrome on a much more global scale—something that no one really expected. This more than anything else makes it clear that the strategy of the American ruling class to expand the American Empire cannot possibly succeed in the long run, and will prove to be its own—we hope not the world’s—undoing.<sup>18</sup>

For these reasons it is probable that military imperialism on the part of the U.S. will be short lived. Foster points out that pulling out of Iraq will be extremely difficult, however, in that so

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<sup>16</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 28. Foster believes the lack of contextualization in the news is due to the concentration of media into a very few powerful corporations whose only goal is profitability.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 55-62. These military bases, Foster asserts, are highly visible symbols of U.S. imperialism around the world. People often perceive the U.S. bases as unwanted “intrusions on national sovereignty” which often interfere in the domestic politics of the host nations and serve as a staging area for the projection of U.S. power in their region.

<sup>18</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 120

much American military prestige is on the line. A right-wing mythology has grown up around the American defeat in Vietnam that blames radicals and the media for their unwillingness to “stay the course” and bring the war to a successful conclusion. “So powerful has this right wing, military understanding of the Vietnam War become,” Foster writes, “that it is now a force to be reckoned with in the current war in Iraq.” Regardless, continuing opposition from allies and enemies alike around the globe will probably cause the U.S. to tone down its militarism over time, but the sacrifice of life and treasure to military expansion, as well as the impact such militarism has on American constitutionalism, allies, and enemies alike will be enormous.<sup>19</sup>

But imperialism, Foster reminds us, does not just grow from the barrel of a gun. There are many forms of imperialism; those who associate it only with military domination or formal political control are mistaken. Marxists view imperialism—like capitalism itself—as an historical process.<sup>20</sup> It is essentially an exploitative relationship between core and the periphery. The particular form of these relationships change through history and circumstance, but the essence of the relationship remains exploitive.<sup>21</sup> In this view, imperialism takes place through formal policies of core nation states that include military conquest, colonization, and unequal trade agreements. But it can also be informal in nature, manifesting itself in corporate investment and finance, often working through local elites and collaborators in peripheral societies. “Informal control of countries on the periphery of the capitalist world system by counties at the center of the system,” Foster writes, “was as important...as formal control.”<sup>22</sup> Under the rule of monopoly capitalism, both formal actions on the part of core states as well as informal actions on the part of corporate entities of enormous resources and political influence are part of a system of exploitation whose goal is to extract the surplus from peripheral areas of the globe for the general benefit of core nation states, and the specific benefit of economic and political elites within those nation states.

Recent globalization is more accurately perceived in the context of the capitalist world system as well. The global free market where corporations compete internationally, free from the

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<sup>19</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 25, pp. 55-62; p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 99; p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 103.

restrictions or aid of government, is as mythical as a free domestic market. Globalization is the intensifying economic incorporation of peripheral areas into the capitalist world-system. Large corporations within core nation-states use their economic power and political access to strongly influence national and international policies consistent with the interests of corporate structures and the elite. Globalization is therefore on very unequal terms.<sup>23</sup> “All the talk about globalization having integrated the world and disintegrated all centers, eliminating all sovereign powers, is largely illusion,” Foster writes. “Nation state sovereignty and U.S. imperialism have not gone away but continue to exist in this new phase of capitalist globalization in an explosive mixture.”<sup>24</sup> Globalization increases the rate of exploitation of the periphery; more and more surplus is taken to meet the needs of the core. Inequality, according to the Marxist view, must therefore rise within and between nations; conflict between the periphery and the core as well as class conflict within nation states themselves becomes “inevitable.” This conflict has taken the form of revolution against puppet or collaborative regimes in the third world, military intervention on the part of the U.S. to suppress revolutions or to extend the control of dictators, and most recently, terrorism.<sup>25</sup>

Imperialism, Foster asserts repeatedly, is an integral part of the capitalist world system—as important to the survival of the system as is profit itself.<sup>26</sup> In 1750 there was little difference in income between states within the center and those on the periphery. By 1930 the difference was 4:1, growing to 7:1 by 1980.<sup>27</sup> To characterize the modern capitalist system as having somehow broken with its imperialist foundation is an absurdity. While some point to the fact that current globalization has led to a closing of the gap between rich and some poor nations, Foster argues that it is illusion. “China,” for example, “once distinguished by its devotion to equality has become increasingly unequal so that by the end of the nineties, China’s distribution of income closely resembled the maldistribution of income in the United States.”<sup>28</sup> Foster’s data for this

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<sup>23</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Foster, 2006, pp. 52-64.

<sup>25</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 73, p. 81, p. 108, p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> Foster, 1999, pp. 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> Foster, 2006, p. 79.

analysis comes from a World Bank distribution of income table for the U.S. (1997 data) and China (1998). This table indicates that the highest 20 percent of income earners in both nations received over 46 percent of all of the income. The lowest 20 percent of earners received less than 6 percent. In addition, Foster cites worldwide income data that indicates that the bottom 85 percent of the world's population received a lesser percentage of income (37.1%) in 1993 than they did in 1988 (41%). Those in the top 10 percent of income recipients received 50.8 percent of world income in 1993 compared to 46.9 percent in 1988.<sup>29</sup> Rising inequality on both national and international scale is precisely what Marx predicted as capitalism intensifies and expands.

Our major environmental and social problems are inextricably linked and rooted in capitalism. Environmental movements can only be truly effective if they begin to connect their concerns of the exploitation and degradation of the earth with capital's exploitation and degradation of workers and the poor, of the capitalist core's exploitation and degradation of peripheral nations and peoples. Make these connections, Foster asserts, and the solution becomes obvious: the social control of the forces of production on a global scale, or world socialism. If priority were truly given to protecting the environment and addressing the needs of the world's poorest—rather than amassing greater and greater capital—economic “development would necessarily take on a radically different character.”<sup>30</sup> Only in such a society embedded in a socialist world-system can the forces of industrial production be subordinated to genuine human needs. Only a socialist society would use science and technology in accordance with sustainability and environmental protection; only such long-term planning can avert environmental catastrophe.<sup>31</sup> Because of the influence of elites on government it cannot take us toward socialism, only a concerted social movement focused upon the connections between capitalism and environmental and human degradation can transform social systems.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that 10 percent of the world's population received more than half of all the income in 1993, and significantly more than 85 percent of the population; and this inequality appears to be rising.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, 1999, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, 2002, p. 57, p. 102, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> Foster, 1999, p. 137; Foster, 2002, p. 81-82.