On Empire and its instantiations

STEVE LOYAL
University College Dublin


In their highly influential work, Empire, Hardt and Negri (2000) combine Italian workerism with post-structuralist philosophy to argue that we live in a US-dominated empire where sovereignty and nation-states have become less influential and where temporal and spatial limits and borders have increasingly lost relevance. Drawing on Polybius’s pyramidal characterisation of the Roman Empire in terms of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, they argue that the strength of empire derives from the balance of these elements held together by what they call the ‘universal spectacle’. Empire is, they argue, generated by all the forces it represses, including biopower, yet these forces also permit forms of resistance to emerge vis-à-vis a ‘protean’ and ‘anonymous multitude’.

Hardt and Negri’s abstract polemic displays metaphysical excesses of the worst sort not only in its Foucauldian notion of power as ubiquitous and planar, but also its imposition of Polybius’s flawed tripartite characterisation of the Roman Empire on to the modern world. Nevertheless, this highly contentious work has been hugely influential in restating the concept of empire at the expense of imperialism. Historically, the concept of empire is older and broader, but came to be replaced in the mid nineteenth century by imperialism. Imperialism was given further impetus in the work of Hobson, Lenin, and Schumpeter, where it came to stand for annexationism and the seizure of territory. However, since Hardt and Negri’s book, empire has again become the favoured term for designating the interaction between a dominant and subordinate state, serving as a buzzword featuring in numerous book titles and covers, and various commentaries which deal with international politics, the USA, and the modern world order.

Empires have been central forces in world history for many millennia. In his The Peloponnesian War, Thucydides pointed to three factors underpinning the Athenian Empire: ‘We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human
nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so – security, honour, and self-interest. And we were not the first to act in this way. It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power’ (I, 76). Thucydides’s identification of the security threat posed by Persia and Sparta, the search for imperial glory, and the pursuit of material self-interest, as well as his mention of the strong using their power against the weak, provides a prescient and pithy explanation of the motives underlying empire and imperialism. Empire, as Michael Doyle notes, is very much a contested concept (Doyle, 1987: 13). Historically, empires have obviously displayed some similarities and regularities. However, the identification of such broad generic regularities can be as misleading as they are revelatory. As a system of interaction between two political entities – a dominant metropolitan centre and a subordinated periphery, historical and sociological debate has focused on the nature of this relation – whether it involves formal sovereignty through annexation, or effective sovereignty through control. Machiavelli notes in The Prince that: ‘when those states which have been acquired are accustomed to live at liberty under their own laws, there are three ways of holding them. The first is to despoil them; the second is to go and live there in person; the third is to allow them to live under their own laws, taking tribute of them, and creating within the country a government composed of a few who will keep it friendly to you’ (1950: 18).

In recent work, the key area of discussion concerns whether the global power of the US, with little territorial control, constitutes an empire. The assertion that it is an empire is, of course, not new (Williams, 1980). However, the issue was brought to the fore again by Hardt and Negri, it has only really taken off following the election, and foreign policy objectives, of George W. Bush (Colas and Saull, 2005).

According to Mann, there has been a fundamental shift in American foreign policy from a multilateral vision of the world order to a unilateral vision, or what he calls a ‘new imperialism’ or ‘new militarism’. The roots of this shift are to be found in the Clinton presidency. With an increase in power accruing to the US following the collapse of the Soviet Union, discussions emerged within the administration concerning ‘pre-emptive action’ and the use of force as a ‘practical exigency’, rather than a ‘last resort’. The shift in the global balance of power was also reflected in the US reluctance to engage in Kyoto, the International Criminal Court, and the landmines treaty. However, for the new imperialism to emerge three further contingent factors were necessary: firstly, the bias of the American electoral system whereby Bush was elected despite winning fewer votes than Gore; secondly, the staffing of a US administration by neo-Conservative ‘chicken-hawks’ including Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, J.D. Crouch, John Bolton; and thirdly, 11 September.

The new imperialists do not aim to rule permanently over foreign lands, but instead, seek to impose an indirect and informal Empire: to occupy, restructure and leave various countries. Moreover, the USA’s ambition to intervene is
geographically circumscribed; the rich North and the poor South remain beyond its military purview. That leaves two major areas of interest and concern for the USA, North East Asia, specifically, North Korea and the Middle-East.

Rather than attacking American foreign policy simply on moral grounds, Mann outlines the actually existing powers available to the USA. Here he draws on the four main types or sources of power he previously distinguished in The Social Sources of Power (1986, 1993). These include: military, political, economic and ideological power.

In terms of military power, America is unrivalled in the world: the US is the only military superpower. The 1990 revolution in military affairs saw an introduction of new technologies, including the global positioning system and smart weapons. These have had important repercussions in terms of increasing the capacity of the US to conquer and simultaneously to reduce the number of its own casualties. However, although US forces are big, they are not overwhelming. This means problems arise, especially on the ground, in trying to consolidate victory and pacify a country after a war since this usually requires two and half times as many soldiers as fought in the war itself.

Economically, the US remains formidable, despite the economic rise of Europe and Asia. However, it is only a back-seat driver since it cannot directly control foreign economies – especially the larger ones in the North or big economies like those of Russia, China, and India – but merely steer them occasionally. Though the US came off the gold standard in 1973, the dollar remains the world’s reserve currency which allows the US to exact indirect imperial tribune. However, the cost of war is enormous – up to four and a half percent of GDP and whether Americans are willing to pay for this through taxes remains unclear. Moreover, reckless leadership coupled with unpopular interventions may lead to a flight of the dollar.

Politically, for Mann, US foreign policy is schizophrenic, oscillating between multilateralism and unilateralism. By adopting the latter, the US loses a major range of powers – the political mandate of the UN which brings unconditional permission to use foreign bases, allied troops, finances and importantly, legitimacy. Going into a country without European allies or even any local allies as in Iraq, is also highly problematic.

Ideologically, although the US was the first to develop the efficient mass production of culture, America’s cultural hegemony is weakening. There has been a long-term decline of imperial ideology following the emergence of nation-states and the rise of nationalism. The ideology of self-determination directly challenges the ideology of empire. The growth of ethno-nationalism has been matched by a growth in religious fundamentalism – with Islam historically being anti-imperialist.

According to Mann, to exercise power effectively all four of these sources of power are needed. The new imperialists overestimate American power by focusing exclusively on military power. The current Bush government fails to realise that US economic power is tenuous, and they neglect the importance of multilateralism as a basis of political power. Finally, their actions contradict the sources of American
ideological power – democracy, rule of law etc. It is the unevenness in these four power sources which leads to ‘imperial incoherence’ and lends its name to the book rather than the rise of other powers or imperial overstretch.

In separate chapters there are insightful discussions of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan the US achieved a quick victory involving very few American casualties. However, despite their glowing claims concerning the high-tech Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), not all precision bombing was surgical, with about 10,000 Afghans killed. This, along with the six hundred prisoners held illegally in Guantanamo Bay, has resulted in significant blowback, alienating many Muslims who saw the attack simply as revenge for 9/11. The war had already cost $37 billion by February 2003. Nevertheless, American priorities were clear – victory but not pacification, militarism, not nation building. For Mann, the most powerful motive for invading Iraq was oil. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world constituting at least eleven per cent of the world’s total. A second motive was revenge: Saddam Hussein had humiliated Bush senior, so Bush the son sought revenge. Though the military victory was achieved after only twenty-five days, the level of civilian casualties was high, with almost 10,000 civilians having died. The invasion also resulted in a humanitarian disaster with the disruption of food, electricity and water supply. Moreover, the US went into this invasion with no credible plans for political reconstruction. The debate only concerned invasion. Nobody discussed the force size needed for pacification afterwards. Finally, there was every chance of significant blowback. Saddam had ruled through ‘tribalism’ – a patron-client system where the central regime rules through local notables. Unlike other Empires, however, the US lacks allies on the ground. There is also the possibility of ethnic/religious conflict being sparked among Sunni and Shia Iraqis.

Although the war against terrorism is directed almost entirely against Muslims, Bush has made further fundamental mistakes in his attacks on terrorists: firstly, he has made no distinction between international and national terrorism; secondly he has blurred the dividing line between terrorism and national resistance; thirdly, he has conducted a one-sided struggle against terrorists in which he condemns the Palestinians but not Israel.

Left to themselves there is little future for present international terrorist networks. They could in fact, be defeated within a few years. Yet the US is achieving the reverse. Through their imperial actions the US consistently generate ‘blowbacks’, both from the victims and sympathisers and from America’s discontented allies. The new imperialism creates more rather than less terrorists and rogue states and it weakens American leadership in the world. For Mann, America’s powers are uneven and unsuited for Empire. The American Empire is not yet overstretched, but its stretch is incoherent. Its militarism outstrips its political capacity to rule any conquered country. It refuses to and cannot finance the pacification and reconstruction of acquired territories, and its policies contradict the ideology of freedom and democracy that the US (and the world) hold. Moreover, the use of militarism
alone is not enough to maintain an Empire. As Mann concludes: ‘The new militarism becomes part of the problem, not the solution.’

Mann’s book has a number of important insights and recommendations. It is clearly written, accessible, jammed full of facts and information, makes a useful distinction between national and international terrorists, emphasises the importance of the ideology of nationalism and self-determination, and employs surveys and opinion polls to convey a vision of the world from the point of view of Arabs and Muslims as well as from the West. He disagrees with the claim accepted by most liberals, leftists and those on the right, that American power is enormous and that the Empire is a coherent, well organised, unchallengeable force. Mann argues that the new imperialists exaggerate the unity and cohesion of their imperial powers. This is, in fact, part of its ideology, an argument reminiscent of Philip Abrams’s warning that sociologists need to avoid adopting and reproducing the state’s own description of itself – ‘the state idea’ – as a coherent, and concrete order (Abrams, 1988). He also usefully employs the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy to expose the specific and powerful social logic which is at work in American foreign policy. By defining and acting toward all Muslims as terrorists and enemies, they in turn become enemies. The same logic applies to designating states as rogue states. The book also rightly focuses on the central role of nationalism within empires. Throughout Incoherent Empire it is argued that the idea of sovereign nations and self-determination has played a fundamental role in challenging the possibility of Empire. The British only gave up India when Indian nationalism began to spread in the twentieth century. Similarly Arabs today refuse to be ruled by outside forces and demand self-determination.

If there is a problem with the book, it concerns its structural and temporal focus. According to Mann, the difference between post-war US foreign policy and the ‘new imperialism’ hinges on a shift from multilateralism to unilateralism, which took place over the last decade. Hence, his analysis of the US Empire is concerned only within a time frame of 10 years. This is tied to a Weberian emphasis on contingency and chance, the idea ‘that things could be otherwise’. In fact, these methodological criteria reinforce each other. The unfair election, the appointment of Cheney and his subsequent staffing of the administration with neo-con hawks, and 11 September are all seen as contingent events. Had any one of these events not occurred then things might have been different. But such an argument is problematic. How do we know? This, of course, is the problem with all counterfactuals. Mann may be right to argue that, had Gore come to power the US may not have invaded Iraq, but as Tariq Ali has argued, the US have been consistently bombing Iraq up to the war, not to mention the death toll that its economic sanctions have caused. Nevertheless, this methodological flaw does not detract from what is overall an insightful and rich analysis of American Empire.

In her Empire of Capital Ellen Meiksins-Wood argues that in order to understand various types of empire it is necessary to understand the different modes of surplus extraction that exist in capitalist and non-capitalist societies. The capitalist
system involves a separation of the economy and the polity where workers are compelled indirectly and impersonally to sell their labour power; whereas non-capitalist societies rely on coercive force, political and military power and privilege, to extract economic surplus. For Wood, there is an analogous difference between non-capitalist and capitalist forms of imperialism. Old colonial empires dominated territory and subject peoples through means of extra-economic coercion including military conquest and direct political rule. By contrast, capitalist imperialism exercises its rule indirectly by economic and market imperatives. Moreover, the detachment of economic power from direct coercion means that the economic hegemony of capital can extend far beyond the limits of direct political domination.

Wood then goes on to outline a broad taxonomy of the forms of empire. These are divided according to their forms of political rule, modes of surplus extraction, and their forms of ideological rationalisation. Beginning with the third-century BC Chinese empire, she argues that China’s pattern of rule was based on an imperial state centralised under the control of an Emperor and consisted of a large bureaucracy composed of hierarchically ranked offices. These offices, composed of royal functionaries and fiscal officials, were backed by military force which facilitated the extraction of surplus labour from peasant villagers. Since power was ultimately tied to office, an expansionary dynamic remained absent in China.

By contrast, Rome and Spain constituted ‘empires of private property’ that were expansionary from the outset. As a city-state governed by an aristocracy of landowners, Rome was administered through a relatively small central state, through a wide-ranging coalition of local landed aristocracies and elites aided by Roman colonists and colonial administrators, who were backed by a large military force. In the Roman Empire, private property – especially as land, and not state office, constituted the main source of wealth. The peasantry, as rent producers, taxpayers, but also as soldiers, constituted the military backbone of Rome’s expansion. Both Roman law – developing from *ius civile* to *ius gentium* – and Roman citizenship were universalistic and inclusive ideologies, and played a major role in unifying an otherwise geographically and ethnically fragmented empire.

Although the Spanish Empire included a large state bureaucracy, its imperial expansion into the Americas was also centrally based on private property. Like Rome, Spain extended its imperial domain by vesting power in local landed classes. However, the Spanish *encomienda* system was modelled on feudal relationships. Although the empire was in many ways genocidal, it nevertheless needed to retain a native labour force in order to mine for gold and silver, as well as to maintain agricultural plantations. Christianity initially played the central role in justifying Spanish imperial expansion and colonisation but was later replaced by an ideology promoting the ‘civilised’ values of European life.

The second type of empires Wood outlines are ‘empires of commerce’ and include the Arab-Muslim Empire, the Venetian Empire, and the Dutch Empire. Unlike empires of property, the central dynamism underpinning these empires is not the appropriation of territory or resource extraction, but commercial dominance.
The diffuse areas constituting an empire are no longer dominated by an over-arching political state, but instead by economic links among separate markets, though these remain reliant on military force in order to acquire territory and control trade routes.

Social relations in the Arab Empire did not only consist of rural producers exploited by landowners and Caliphates through taxation, but also of domestic and overseas merchants. Unlike competitive production which characterised capitalism, the principle of trade remained that of buying cheap and selling dear and depended on a variety of extra-economic advantages including political power and religious authority. The ideological correlate of this commercial trading was the Muslim religion, preached and taught by a body of religious leaders, the ulama and containing a comprehensive system of laws and moral norms that provided both a common culture and the basis for a regulatory order.

In the North Italian city-states of Florence and Venice, the urban classes dominated the surrounding contado or countryside, and extracted wealth similarly to other tax/office states. The production of silk and glass, the slave trade with the Islamic world, and the provision of financial services provided sources of great commercial wealth. Again commerce was based on extra-economic advantages including monopoly privileges, and financial practices such as double-entry book keeping with the command of trading networks and markets being maintained with the aid of urban military force. Ideologically, these commercial practices, which combined the civic virtues of the republican citizen with the military virtues of the Roman soldier, were expressed in the thought of Machiavelli.

However, the archetypal empire of commerce was the Dutch Empire in which conquest for colonial settlement remained a secondary concern in comparison to achieving supremacy in trade and commerce. While Dutch merchants invested in production, the Dutch Republic essentially operated on non-capitalist principles, above all in its dependence on extra economic powers of appropriation through its shipping and military strength. With public office constituting a crucial source of private wealth, the development of the economy was strongly shaped by the needs of both merchants and office holders. The Dutch also produced the perfect ideology of commercial imperialism in the work of Grotius who, in *Mare Liberum* and *De Jure Belle ac Pacis*, produced a theory of politics, property and war that served the purposes of a commercial empire.

By contrast, Britain was the first of a new kind of empire operating according to capitalist principles. In capitalism, the pursuit of profit derives from exchange and the creation of value in competitive production. Capitalism entails not only establishing imperial rule or commercial supremacy as part of an empire, but also extending the logic of capital by drawing other national spheres into its orbit. Ireland became emblematic of a policy which aimed not simply to impose British rule, but to transform the social property relations of Irish society into commercial agriculture based on landlord-tenant relations, through the ‘plantation’ of settlers. The intention of the Elizabethan conquest and plantation was to ‘civilise’ the Irish
but to make Ireland into a dependent colony whose raw materials could be exploited to provide the means of improving competitive production at home.

Although the pattern of colonisation in America was intended to mirror the white settler policy undertaken in Ireland, different circumstances and unique conditions prevented such a replication. Britain would encounter similar problems in India where the density of population and economic conditions precluded such an option, forcing Britain to revert to earlier, non-capitalist forms of empire: the commercial imperialism of the East India Company, and later a territorial empire presided over by the British state.

Despite an emphasis on the peaceful pursuit of production and wealth, the British Empire was initially as violent as any other, using a massive naval force to impose its domination. The British policy of empire was to find its ideological justification in the work of John Locke and especially in his *Second Treatise on Government*, which, in contrast to the work of Grotius, allowed for the appropriation and utilisation of unused land without consent of the local sovereign.

By the late nineteenth century, a significant portion of Europe, including France and Germany, had reached a classic age of imperialism involving colonial expansion and conflicts and wars over the division of the colonial world. It was this historical conjuncture, in which capitalism remained far from a global system, that produced the idea of imperialism and a number of theories designed to analyse it from Lenin to Mao. Underlying Lenin’s idea that imperialism represented the highest stage of capitalism, and Luxembourg’s arguments in *The Accumulation of Capital* was the assumption that capitalism required non-capitalist formations for its survival, and pre-capitalist forms of extra economic force; this led to high levels of interstate rivalry, colonial wars, and an extensive use of military force. However, the classic age of imperialism ended in 1918 and a new form of empire emerged after World War II. With the destruction of its two greatest economic rivals, Germany and Japan, and the creation of the Bretton Woods system, the IMF, and the World Bank, and the imposition of the dollar as the principal reserve currency, the US began an age of ‘new imperialism’ whose logic was governed increasingly by economic imperatives – of imposing a capitalist economic framework on other countries and opening their markets and resources to US capital. The role of the military also shifted from underwriting imperial expansion and enforcing direct colonial control, to policing the world in the interests of US capital. More recently, the US responded to a capitalist crisis of overcapacity and overproduction, by internationalising capital, ensuring its free movement, and indulging in high levels of global financial speculation. This globalisation is less concerned with free trade than with controlling the conditions of imperial capital by opening subordinate economies to US capital whilst protecting the US economy from overseas cheap labour, thereby sustaining uneven development.

Though economic imperatives have increasingly replaced political forms of domination and surplus extraction, the world that came under the control of the US following the Second World War has not been a world where states have
disappeared; on the contrary, it has been increasingly a world of nation states. Rather than states disappearing, or a singular global state emerging, globalisation has engendered a hierarchically structured global system of multiple local states. For Wood, nation-states are an indispensable condition for the operation of capital by providing a legal and institutional framework that engenders predictability in property and property-less relations. Given the potential anarchy that unregulated markets can create the nation-state also maintains social order, controls the labour force, and wage levels, through migration.

In the final chapter of the book, Wood attempts to explain Bush’s current foreign policy. She argues that even though economic competition has increasingly overtaken military force as a determinant of relations among the major states, the US has increased its military spending – accounting for nearly fifty per cent of the world’s military spending – in order to become the world’s dominant military power. It is because the new imperialism no longer has clear and finite objectives and that it must undertake ‘a boundless domination of a global economy’ (2006: 144) that it requires such massive military force in order to pursue its imperial interests, economic hegemony and the interests of US global capital. The US has also redefined war by replacing the ‘just war theory’ with a notion of ‘humanitarian war’ or ‘war without end’ which promotes defensive interventions and permits pre-emptive strikes in anticipation of some future danger. This new military doctrine constitutes an open ended, indefinite declaration of war to meet the needs of the new imperialism. A goal of ‘full spectrum dominance’, or what Charles Krauthammer calls the ‘demonstration effect’, of discouraging advanced industrial nations from challenging the US dominated global system and its economic hegemony, and of attacking rogue, weak, and ‘failed’, or ‘unpredictable’ states. This was first outlined in Paul Wolfowitz’s Defence Planning Guidance strategy document. It was designed to discourage the creation of autonomous Japanese and European military forces and rival economic competitors. Hence, the US is increasing its use of military force to sustain its economic hegemony and to control the flow of oil.

Given the rather diminutive size of the book – it is only 168 pages long – Wood’s book covers a large swathe of concentrated information. It attempts to provide a sophisticated Marxist understanding of various forms of empire by drawing on Marx’s central thesis that ‘the specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers determines the relationship between rulers and ruled’ (Marx, 1993: 919). Its focus on the separation between polity and economy and the relation between economic and non-economic modes of surplus extraction provides an interesting optic through which to interpret the rise and fall of various empires. It also provides a salutary discussion of the role of ideologies and how they emerge and rationalise structures of empire.

However, the book in some ways possesses virtues and pitfalls the opposite of Mann’s book. Conceptually it attempts to look at long-term structural processes rather than at short-term paradigmatic contingent events. In place of a broad carpet of dense empirical detail, it offers a predominantly rationalistic theory. In place of
clearly articulated arguments it offers cryptic, opaque assertions. In place of an emphasis on nation it focuses on capital.

The most problematic aspect of the book, however, is its implicit Platonism and rationalism. One often gets the feeling that Wood is merely taking a theoretical argument concerning economic and extra-economic modes of surplus extraction, based on an ideal type, and imposing this selectively on various substantive examples which come into conformity with her argument. The evidence is made to fit the argument. The result is that her interpretations of the various empires, flattened on a conceptual binary of economic and non-economic surplus extraction, are often strained and misleading. For example, her discussion of the Dutch Empire overlays the role of trade and the circulation of commodities, whilst simultaneously downplaying the capitalist character of its economy and the formative role that competitive production, in textiles and porcelain for example, played in the empire. This theoretical logic which, to quote Bourdieu, confuses ‘the things of logic for the logic of things’, carries over into her broad taxonomy of empires. It is a taxonomy that operates at an unhelpfully high level of abstraction and generality. Thus her discussion of empires of property ends up categorising the Roman Empire and the Spanish Empire together because both empires emphasised the importance of private property. On the basis of such a level of generality, very little is actually explained about these societies. One would at the outset question which empire did not place a premium on private property, making the explanatory value of this concept very limited. However, of more fundamental concern is the plethora of differences between these two empires which are overlooked under this rubric: the different military structures – Rome’s large army compared to Spain’s small standing army and its reliance on a navy; the different political structures of the two empires, one based on aristocratic republicanism, the other on a predominantly feudal form of absolutism; the different economies and labour systems, Rome making extensive use of slavery, the Spanish less so; and their different objectives and goals, e.g. those of gaining tribute and expansion, and of attaining gold and silver from overseas. Moreover, the different durations of the empires are also glossed over. Equally, in her discussion of empires of commerce, that is empires whose central preoccupation was not land but mercantile trade, the profound differences between the sizes and political structures of the predominantly rural Arab caliphates, predominantly urban oligarchies of Venice, and the urban Dutch capitalists are submerged. If the differences between empires and their ramifications are ignored, even less is made of the historical development of a single empire and the shifts within it. Thus, for instance, there is no discussion of the effects that the Augustan administrative revolution in the first century BC had for maintaining the duration of the Roman Empire (Doyle, 1987: 94).

The second methodological problem relates to Wood’s use of functionalist arguments as a basis for her analysis. Rather than examining determinate individuals in determinate relationships together with their interests and needs, she looks instead at how various structural institutions emerge in order to meet the capitalist
system’s needs. Thus she argues that in the modern world global capitalism needs local states in order to maintain social order and to provide a predictable administrative context for an often anarchic market to operate. As a result nation-states simply emerge. Not only is this a problematic functionalist argument, but it fails to explain why capitalism needs a nation-state, as opposed to a state, in order to emerge.

Wood’s discussion of the state is also reductionist. Is the state simply a reflection of the needs of capitalism, a monolithic appendage to capital as Wood suggests? Of course this is a thorny area and the subject of a massive literature which involves examining a whole history of various types of state formation. But a more accurate account would surely have to look at the state in a more sophisticated way: perhaps as Gramsci does by looking at the contested outcome of class forces. Bourdieu’s discussion of the emergence of dynastic and bureaucratic states, and the left and right hand of the state is another example (Bourdieu, 1998, 2005). If the nation-state is simply there to meet the needs of capital then why do so many of its members so readily oppose immigration?

The absence of discussion of class conflict in her account of empire is surprising not only given Wood’s Marxist affiliation, but because of the important book she has written on this subject (Wood, 1986). Wood, like Lenin and Schumpeter, tends to concentrate her argument on the metropolitan centre – various empires and their internal dispositions – rather than giving due attention to the class structure or national or political forces both within the empire and more importantly, those which characterise the periphery. Her discussion of the existence empires and their dissolution does point to the contradictory structural tendencies inherent within them, but rarely to the balance of class forces. This relates not just to the discussion of the tributary nature of the Roman Empire, but also to the discussion of the British Empire in Ireland, America and India. Wood does not only mistakenly treat British capitalist agriculture and capitalism as if they are identical in terms of property relations and social interests, but she also argues that the reproduction of a system of English property relations in America and India, following the ideal imposition of settlement imperialism in Ireland, was thwarted by factors such as extensive land mass, population density, and the absence of pre-existing tenant-farmer social relationships, or a labour force not reducible to wage labour status. These are structural issues which are important variables but have little to do with forms of collective agency and resistance. There is little systematic discussion by Woods of forms of class resistance in terms of oppositional class forces, let alone what could be argued was a more preponderant axis of opposition, national liberation movements.

There is also scant analysis of the relationship between capitalism and imperialism. Questions surrounding why capitalism engages with imperialism or needs imperial overseas expansion are left hanging, as is the question of whether capitalism drives imperialism, or older forms of imperialism drive capitalist development. Instead, in six short pages, Wood outlines the development of imperialism from the seventeenth century to the Second World War, via nineteenth French and
Germany imperialism and bypasses any discussion of decolonisation or of the deterioration of old forms of empire.

The last chapter in the book is the weakest. Wood argues that, even though there is no more geopolitical rivalry between the major capitalist powers, US military power has been escalating and moved towards what she calls ‘surplus imperialism’, a war without end, with no specific purpose. Wood’s explanation for why these processes have emerged involves contingent explanations which seem to depart from her heretofore structural thesis on surplus extraction and sit rather uneasily with the book as a whole.

In the *End of Empire*, Emmanuel Todd argues that there has been an inversion of the US’s global function: from being a problem solver it has become the problem itself. Since the Second World War the US has been generally perceived and supported as the guarantor of economic and political freedoms – a beneficent maintainer of the global social order defending the world against Nazi Germany, militaristic Japan, and the reactionary communist regimes in Russia, China and elsewhere. More recently, however, America has become the central problem for the rest of the world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and within a context of capitalist hegemony, the US has begun demanding that the international order should acknowledge that certain peripheral states – including Iraq, North Korea, Iran – constitute an ‘axis of evil’ that has to be directly confronted. This assertion, however, has fostered a permanent state of tension, uncertainty, and conflict in the global order and also unsettled the heretofore-closest allies of the USA.

For Todd, the two existing explanations for this shift in American behaviour are both inadequate. On the one hand, ‘structural anti-American’ writers such as Chomsky and Benjamin Barber point to the inordinate power of the US and the immoral and evil foreign policy that ensues, but overestimate the US’s power. On the other hand, establishment political scientists such as Paul Kennedy, Samuel Huntington, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and Robert Gilpin look to the dramatic reduction in American global power, provide a more viable explanation but fail to situate these global shifts within a context of rising populations and economic development, and to grasp the impact that education and demographics – increases in general literacy and the spread of lower birth rates – have as central explanatory variables.

Todd adds both Fukuyama’s Hegelian ‘End of History’ hypothesis – in which history has as its goal the universalisation of liberal democracy – and Michael Doyle’s Kantian hypothesis, that war between liberal democracies is impossible, to this scenario.

Extrapolating from current statistics, he suggests that universal literacy will exist by 2030. Not only does literacy integrally affect economic development and migration, but it also influences mastery over reproduction and birth control. Higher literacy and lower birth rates also facilitate the rise of individualism and demands for greater democracy. The spread of political modernisation has, however, also
led to a fundamentalist reaction in a number of Muslim countries especially in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan – two of the birthplaces of the 9/11 attackers.

Although there has been a global spread of democracy, the specific shape taken by various democracies has been and will be shaped by different kinship structures. Anglo-Saxon family structures, which are individualistic and inegalitarian, are conducive to liberalism and can be contrasted with Arab family structures which emphasise egalitarianism but reject a strong state and therefore have more difficulty with liberal forms of democracy. However, a Muslim world with falling birth rates will eventually work its way through its transitional crisis, without the need for outside intervention and establish its own specific form of democracy.

Todd also points to a second inversion. As democracy progresses in places where it was formerly weak, it regresses in places where it was formerly strong. The USA, Great Britain, and France are all becoming oligarchies. As a result of educational expansion, a new ‘overclass’ is emerging which comprises about 20% of a nation’s population, but controls about half of its wealth. Furthermore, because this class is undemocratic it is also increasingly militant.

The rapid spread of global democracy means that America as solitary overseer of global order and security is increasingly becoming defunctionalised, isolated, and no longer needed. This has happened, however, at a time when the US is becoming ever more economically dependent on other countries. The American trade deficit has risen between 1990 and 2000 from 100 billion to 450 billion dollars. From a post-war position of autonomy and overproduction the US has now become an industrially weak nation dependent on consumption and imports. Moreover, its move towards neo-liberalism has increased inequality throughout the world.

To pay for its consumption imports, the US freely and spontaneously obtains tribute through foreign investment. Companies, banks, and institutional as well as private investors especially in Japan and Europe, have continued to buy dollars thereby keeping its value as the main reserve currency high. The capital flowing to the US, contrary to neo-liberal ideology, reveals a predominant tendency towards safety and security rather than profit. However, because the collection of imperial tribute operates via a liberal voluntary mechanism that is unstable and dependent on the goodwill of the Europeans and Japanese ruling classes, and given the US’s decreasing economic viability, a stock market crash followed by the meltdown of the dollar is possible.

The US is also unable to maintain its empire because of its ideological shift away from universalism. One of the essential forces explaining the success of an empire, such as Rome as compared to Athens for example, was its capacity to treat all men and peoples as equals. However, this ability again derives from a specific anthropological code. Anglo Saxons are especially ambivalent in relation to competing conceptions of differentialism versus universalism. The US is both the outcome of a radical universalism in its incorporation of immigrant populations from Europe, and yet differentialist in relation to Indians, blacks, and more recently, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. In the foreign context Arabs play the role of
Although the American loyalty towards Israel remains a mystery for specialists of strategic analysis, it is, Todd argues, based on a shared belief in inequality and differentialism between these countries. However, without a homogenous vision of a united humanity composed of its many peoples, America will not be able to reign over such a vast and diverse world.

Although the military budget of the US represents half of all military spending in the world, this is still not enough to control its empire. The fragility of the American military is, in a sense, structural, a consequence of never having fought an adversary of its own size at any time in its history. The absence of a tradition of American military might on the ground makes it difficult, if not impossible, to occupy territory and establish a truly imperial space in the traditional sense.

In order symbolically to mask its declining powers, its industrial weakness, maintain its status as the global financial centre and remain the world’s indispensible superpower, the US has begun a process of ‘theatrical micromilitarism’. This involves firstly, concentrating on minor league powers such as Iraq, Iran, N. Korea, and Cuba, in such a way that will reflect well on American might, and secondly, by developing new arms systems in an endless arms race. For Todd, although this theatrical micromilitarism makes the US a short-term obstacle to world peace and has engendered a hysterical reaction from some, looked at dispassionately, it simply reflects the ensuing disintegration of the American empire.

As the US is increasingly becoming defunctionalised, oligarchical, and economically dependent on a trade deficit, its main strategic objective becomes less a defence of the global social order, than the political control of the world’s resources and the maintenance of a necessary inward supply of commodities and capital. However, its declining economic, political, ideological and military power prevents it from controlling both an increasingly literate and democratic world, and subordinating the major players in the international order – Russia, Europe, and Japan. The American need for oil does not on its own explain the US’s fixation on the Middle East. Rather, the energy supply it seeks to control is that of the two poles it remains economically dependent upon – Japan and Europe – so as to exert significant pressure on them if necessary.

Drawing on the arguments of American exceptionalism, Todd argues that Europe’s long-term historical experience of poor peasantry and warring ruling classes has led to an instinct for economic equilibrium, and a greater faith in the state. Moreover, the Europeans possess shared cultural values – agnosticism, peace and balance – that are distinct from American differentialism. In addition, rather than eliminating or isolating its only military rival – Russia – the disorder and incertitude engendered by America’s foreign policy has had the opposite effect of bringing Russia, Japan and Europe closer. Despite high levels of suicide, poverty and violence, Russia not only offers Europe a more rational and ideologically coherent – because universalistic – counterweight to a predatory, dangerous, and erratic America, but also a provider of future energy sources and a sound trading partner.
Given its global structural position and trajectory, no strategy will allow the US to transform its semi-imperial situation into a fully-fledged, legitimate empire: it is too weak economically, militarily and ideologically. For Todd, the world that is currently emerging will not be an empire controlled by a single power. It will be a complex balancing act among a system of nations including Europe, Russia, Japan and eventually China as well as the USA.

Todd’s book has many virtues. It is well written and makes a number of controversial, insightful, and clearly stated claims. His background in political theory, economics, demography, and comparative anthropology allows him to operate with a broad conceptual framework. His discussion of the societal implications of the rise in global levels of literacy, extending arguments he made in his earlier work, *The Invention of Europe* (1990), conjoined with insights from the philosophy of history, and reinforced with an abundant use of statistics, allows him to provide an original synthetic perspective on empire.

His systemic approach is also welcome, not least because his relational emphasis on the operation of a global interconnected, interdependent system of nation-states and power blocks is more explanatorily fruitful than a singular and restricted focus on American foreign policy. Hence, the argument that the US has lost its global function since the end of the Cold War and that, correlative, Europe and Japan have both expanded their political and economic resources, though often exaggerated, provides an important insight into present-day international relations and the shifting back and forth of power flows. Equally, the idea that modern democracies don’t fight each other is commendable.

However, the same arguments that provide strength to Todd’s analysis are also the source for a number of weaknesses in the book. These relate mostly to the nature of the exaggerated, simplified, and overstated claims that he makes. Though well written, the tone of the book is often jarring and shrill, and his writing contains much hyperbole. The book provides a self-reassuring image for Europeans. Not only are the differences between America and Europe overstated in favour of the latter, but Todd ends the book by offering a vision of the future world characterised by a democratic balance, with Europe at the forefront, and with America returning to its original democratic glory.

Todd’s discussion of the socio-political characteristics of the US is also questionable. Not only does he downplay the pre-1945 role of the American Empire, which as others have argued is significant (Mead, 2003), but his rosy characterisation of post-war America and the expansion of universalism from 1950 to 1965 is hard to square with the realities of large-scale discrimination against African Americans, McCarthyism, Korea, Vietnam, and treatment of women. The heroic role that America played during the Cold War can be contrasted with an equally exaggerated villainous role that Russia played, something that is evident in Todd’s earlier book *The Final Fall* (1979). With the shift from centre right, which characterised his political position when he wrote the latter book, to centre left, which characterises his position now, Todd has merely
inverted his argument whilst keeping the same binary moral structure. In *End of Empire*, it is now Russia’s turn as hero representing a crucial military bulwark and espousing a universalist ideology in opposition to a predatory, undemocratic America. Both characterisations are simplifications that gloss over vast amounts of historical detail for the sake of a neat argument.

Moreover, Todd’s argument concerning the shift of America (and other European democracies) towards oligarchy is another made with no empirical backing but is merely asserted. The same criticism can be made about his discussion of how educational expansion is reintroducing a stratified inequality in developed societies. These arguments need some backing. For example, why and how do these groups form an ‘overclass’? Is the ‘overclass’ homogenous or differentiated in terms of cultural and economic capital? Moreover, the argument that America is militarily weak because it has no serious tradition of land warfare is overstated. It also underestimates the power of the US army and its actual military and strategic strength as Andrew Bacevich shows in his book on the *American Empire* (2004).

Todd’s whole discussion of universalism versus differentialism is also both strained and unproductive. His assertion that ‘Peoples with an egalitarian conception of family relations, one where brothers especially are treated as equals ... as is the case for Rome, China, the Arab World, Russia, and Northern France, tend to perceive men and peoples as equals’ (2004: 102) is not only empirically open to question but ignores the history of the social struggles that have been involved in equalising social relations. He also fails to distinguish between an ideology and a practice, and leaves open the question of how these families are structured in the first place. The book’s novelty lies in its discussion of demographics, yet it equally places too much emphasis on family structures. The structure of the family is in many ways a fundamental concept but Todd doesn’t explain what structures the family. Moreover, his selection of what constitutes a ‘differentialist’ or ‘universalist’ position remains arbitrary and fluctuates since the concepts remain undefined. Thus multiculturalism is considered by Todd as differentialist, yet one could argue that its underlying principle, that of treating all cultures as equally valid, could also be considered as a universalistic claim. This equivocation applies with even more force to his interpretation of feminism as differentialist, when a claim for equal status in respect of gender relations is surely a universalist claim. Todd’s treatment of feminism remains problematic throughout the book, not least in his odd description of the American woman as ‘a castrating, threatening figure, almost as disturbing for European males as the all-powerful Arab man is for European females’ (2004: 176).

Further questions relate to what Todd sees as the implications of literacy. His claims in this regard are again vague. Does literacy provide a universal key to explaining all social processes, a panacea for all ills, or can it be explanatorily useful only occasionally, and as an explanatory variable is something in turn shaped by broader processes? In his discussion of religion, it is not clear whether
he believes literacy leads to secularism or just less religious zealotry and fundamentalism. His assertion that there is a worldwide decline of Islamism is also asserted with no evidence, while his explanation for America’s support for Israel in terms of a shared evil worldview is banal.

Part of the problem in Todd’s account is his restricted and singular use of the Roman Empire as an ideal type and as a sole point of contrast with the American Empire. The Roman Empire combined three major qualities that appeal to scholars: its duration, its size, and its integration of a diversity of peoples. However, none of these qualities characterises the US Empire, which not only makes the rationale underlying Todd’s persistent and selective use of Rome unclear, other than as simple contrast, but also leads to a restricted conceptual framework. As Wittgenstein notes ‘a main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example’ (*PI*, §593).

As well as their differences, these books also share a number of features. All three books appear to be quickly written in response to George W. Bush’s foreign policy. Though all are accessible, Wood’s and Todd’s books are not well organised and are often repetitive. They also attempt to combine an analytical detachment with a level of political involvement with varied levels of success.

However, neither Wood nor Todd defines ‘empire’, which for any work is a crucial preliminary step. Not only is it left unsaid what generic features characterise empires, but the status of whether the US is an empire remains vague. Both Mann and Wood assert that the US is an empire, while Todd vacillates, sometimes saying it is an empire and at other times asserting that it is a semi-empire. But a clarification of whether empire differs from international inequality, or hegemonic domination, remains elusive.

Both Todd and Mann rightly see the American Empire as weak or more contradictory than its own image of itself. Todd, however, takes this too far by caricaturing it as a paper tiger. Such an image does not square with the reality of its military and economic standing. Wood, by contrast, paints a gloomier picture since she provides little space for class and nationalist resistance movements within her conceptual framework.

Other questions relevant to these books pertain to the dynamic forces underpinning and maintaining empire and whether these are economic, military, political, cultural, or a combination of these. The conceptualisation of state and economy in terms of both the explanatory weight of either, and in terms of the relationship between the two ‘spheres’, often remains absent. Moreover, in some of the discussions analytical concepts become reified into substantive realities. The way society is divided into ‘economic’, ‘political’ and ‘social’ spheres is problematic since these can all refer to the same nexuses of events seen from different points of view.

Although all three books look at the US historically, none of them does so from a long term historical perspective, that is by providing an examination of the continuities and discontinuities in American foreign policy in its military and consensual interventions, from at least the nineteenth century, as does
W. R. Mead (2003), for example, in his powerful work. Rather 1945 marks the turning point for both Wood and Todd, and 2001 for Mann. This omission is particularly surprising given Mann’s commitment to a long-term methodological historical approach, though sure to be remedied in his upcoming third volume of *Sources of Social Power*. Had these writers provided a more long-term analysis of US policy, then a more structural and explanatorily fruitful outcome may have been possible. Moreover, the explanatory relevance given to the Cold War is only really pushed to the fore in Todd’s work. Here another thinker, again of the right, Robert Kagan, has offered a more satisfying account (2003).

Finally, neither Wood nor Todd deals adequately with the relation between metropole and periphery, either in terms of systemically discussing how intra-state relations of class and social domination fundamentally affect inter-state relations and vice-versa, or in terms of the power differentials between the constituent spheres of Empire. In terms of the former, drawing on a sociology of knowledge tradition, Elias (1996) has usefully argued that as the middle classes came to occupy the position of ruling classes in Europe between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, within a context of rising nationalism, they replaced the aristocratic code of honour and civility with that of virtue and equality within the state, but continued to operate with an aristocratically inspired Machiavellian code of power politics in their inter-state relations. This valorised as a general principle the practice of unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, under the pressure of mutual fears and suspicions, with deception and killing as normal means to one’s ends. He also points to how the disparity of power between the dominant and subordinate state also has enormous repercussions for how states treat one another and see one another. Similarly, Robert Kagan in his Nietzschean characterisation of the structural and ideological relation between Europe and America, has half-jokingly argued that Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus, but insisted that this is not just because of American exceptionalism – a difference in values – but also as a result of the power differences between them, and how a difference in power ratio determines their world-view.

Thus although all three books possess many virtues, with Mann’s insightful and empirically rich book clearly the strongest, all embody certain failures that only a more long-term account could remedy.

**Note**

This review draws heavily on a number of important insights advanced by Perry Anderson in his ‘Twenty-First Century American Imperialism’ research seminars held in UCLA in 2004.
References

Sociology, 1 (1): 58–89.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Bourdieu, P. 2005 ‘From The Kings House to the Reasons of State: A Model of the Genesis
of the Bureaucratic Field’, in Loic Wacquant (ed.), Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic
Colas, A. and Saull, R. 2005 The War on Terror and the American Empire After the Cold
Mann, M. 1986 The Social Sources of Power, vol. I, A history of power from the beginning
to AD 1760. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Mann, M. 1993 The Social Sources of Power, vol. II, The rise of classes and nation states,
1760–1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Mead, W.R. 2002 Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and how it changed the
York: Karz.
Wood, E.M 1986 The Retreat from Class. London: Verso