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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

EXPLAINING THE NEW WORLD ORDER OF THE 1990'S

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Introduction

The decade of the 1990s dramatically altered the Cold War international order in two fundamental aspects. In the political-economic sphere, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 shattered the ideological divide that had driven much of the policy-making during the Cold War. The new Russia and its former eastern European client states rushed to adopt Western economic and political models, albeit with varying degrees of success. The handful of avowedly Marxist states, such as Fidel Castro's Cuba and Kim Il Sung's Democratic People's Republic of Korea, remained mired in despotism and economic ruin. The People's Republic of China gradually became Communist in name only as it sought to adopt market capitalism and limited democratic reforms to modernize its moribund economy.

In the realm of military affairs, the victory of the U.S.-led coalition over Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War established that the U.S. military had pushed operational art and tactical proficiency to levels of lethality unattainable by either our allies or adversaries. The Iraqi regime had meticulously acquired a panoply of advanced Western and Soviet arms including chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, a modern integrated air defense system, long-range artillery, and guided anti-tank weapons. The numerically superior Iraqi army in Kuwait was entrenched in fortified, defensive positions with short, interior lines of communication. Despite these normally decisive advantages, it took the coalition forces a mere six weeks to inflict a humiliating defeat on the Iraqi invasion force. This astounding victory was achieved with astonishingly trivial casualties and materiel losses on the coalition side, even as Iraqi forces were repeatedly annihilated down to the last vehicle.

The two books I review in this paper attempt to explain why these tectonic changes occurred in the international order during the 1990s and what implications these changes herald

for the future. In Empire, authors Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose a new emerging system of international order based on an ultimately successful Marxist theory. In Culture and Carnage: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power, Victor Davis Hanson proposes that the West's hegemony is derived from its cultural vibrancy which produced political, economic and military institutions far superior to anything in the non-Western world. Hardt and Negri have the much harder task. Despite their enormous efforts, they ultimately fail to validate Marxist theory as a viable predictor of the evolving world order. In contrast, Hanson has an easier job explaining why the West has won. His work convincingly shows that the West's military proficiency is directly attributed to its unique culture.

Empire: Reviving Marxist Theory

Hardt and Negri face an apparently insurmountable challenge: how can you reconcile globalization with Marxist theory? After all, globalization is a wholly capitalist phenomenon. Globalization provides an opportunity for previously marginalized, low-productivity workers to participate in the global economy by exploiting their comparative advantages over workers in more developed economies. Instead of toiling in a subsistence agriculture society, an impoverished worker in Guatemala or Mali can find relative prosperity working in a textile factory that exports clothing to the developed world. Even at its lowest rungs, the global capitalist economy provides a degree of prosperity unequalled in pre-modern feudal or tribal societies. Hardt and Negri don't deny the capitalist nature of globalization. In fact, they embrace it and declare that it is the basis of the post-colonial global order, which they dub "Empire."

Empire is their term for the new system of sovereignty which regulates the global flows of production. "Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule."¹ Empire

represents a transfer of sovereignty away from traditional nation states to supranational institutions. Globalization is making it increasingly difficult for States to regulate and control the global economy. In the traditional Westphalian state system, states achieved sovereignty over their immediate territory within recognized international boundaries. During the colonial era, states extended their sovereignty by drawing additional boundaries over discrete portions of the world that were not part of the original Westphalian system. In today's era of globalization, Empire is supplanting state sovereignty because it is explicitly de-linked from a specific territorial jurisdiction. Since Empire encompasses the "spatial totality" of the civilized world, it "...effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity."² Furthermore, Empire "...not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature."³

For Hardt and Negri, Empire is the ultimate form of subjugation for the proletariat. In the past, each nation's proletariat responded to capitalist oppression through revolutionary struggle at the national level. Unfortunately, today's global proletariat (dubbed "the multitude") lack a coherent foe. However, since the sovereignty of Empire is diffused through all aspects of human interaction, its entire structure can be attacked and undermined by virtually any form of rebellion at any point. The pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen square, the Palestinian Intafada, the Los Angeles riots and strikes by French truck drivers all appear unrelated and unconnected events, yet they are actually linked as spontaneous revolts against the power of Empire.⁴

For Hardt and Negri, the militant is the key to a successful revolt against Empire. Despite the overwhelming success of capitalism, the militant "must resist imperial command in creative ways."⁵ The ultimate goal is to secure the the global proletariat's "right of reapportionment" over

their non-material labor. In addition to controlling the means of production, but they must be free to exercise communal “self-control and autonomous self-production.”⁶

Critiquing Empire

Empire's thesis is vulnerable to criticism on a number of fronts. The most general critique is that Negri and Hardt base their analysis on Marxist ideology which has been thoroughly discredited in the 1990s. In the traditional Marxist framework, society is beset by a constant cycle of dialectic conflicts which synthesize into new political-social structures. These conflicts forced society to evolve from primitivism, to feudalism, and eventually to capitalism. The struggle against capitalism was supposed to produce communist/socialist states which would end the oppression of the proletariat and found a utopian international order without governments.

The history of the 1990s seriously called into question the inevitable march of Marxist history. Hardt and Negri's thesis is based on a simple assertion: capitalism's internal contradictions will cause it to fail eventually, and Empire is bringing these contradictions to a tipping point by instigating a world-wide revolt by the disconnected multitude. This assertion, however, ignores Marxism's long history of being wrong about virtually everything. Workers became more prosperous under capitalism, not less. Communist states developed into barbaric, impoverished autocracies surrounded by walls and barb wire. In short, their thesis asks the reader to ignore the manifest failures of Communist theory and practice over the past century, and trust that Empire's success is actually sowing the seeds for its eventual destruction.

Beyond its regurgitation of discredited socialist rhetoric, the Negri-Hardt thesis misconstrues the changing nature of sovereignty in the 1990s. They argue that Empire is a new form of sovereignty which supercedes the sovereignty of individual states. It's true that with the

end of the Cold War, many international theorists hoped that a new web of international institutions were gaining ascendancy over the nation state. The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization would constrain state power, in particular American power. It's arguable that along with international corporations and non-governmental organizations, these supranational organizations are becoming more important in the conduct of international affairs, but Hardt and Negri present no evidence that they are dramatically undermining the sovereignty of nation states. The authors ignore the fact that these supranational organizations were founded, funded, and controlled by nation states and are frequently ignored and defied by their member states. Hardt and Negri also ignore the fecklessness, corruption, and incompetence of these ponderous uber-bureaucracies, particularly in light of the myriad crises they failed to prevent and/or mitigate: the wave of currency crises in Asia, Latin America and Russia, the Rwandan and Balkans genocides, Iraqi disarmament, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Northern Ireland, just to name a few. Of course, the authors completely denigrate the obvious rise of American power which in fact has only accelerated throughout the decade.

It's bad enough that Hardt and Negri have embraced a failed theoretical framework and ignored the dominant international trends following the Cold War. On a more practical level, their work can be criticized for justifying and even celebrating global terrorism as the ultimate reaction, the strongest protest, against Empire. Even worse, their construct seems to justify attack on innocent civilians since the tentacles of Empire can be found in virtually all social institutions.⁷ Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the authors have disavowed that terror attacks against innocent civilians are a reasonable manifestation of their theory.⁸ But

any fair reading of their work indicates a strong advocacy for militant, even violent, opposition to Empire.

Culture and Carnage: Why the West has Won

Unlike Hardt and Negri, Victor Davis Hanson does not attribute the Western domination of world affairs to capitalist exploitation of the proletariat. Instead, he seeks to link the widespread success of the West to its deadly prowess in military conflict. Hanson contends that this prowess is not a product of superior genetics, geography, natural resources, religious morality, or luck. Rather, it is the West's cultural values which produce a uniquely deadly style of warfare.

According to Hanson, the key to understanding Western dominance in battle is the West's commitment to individual freedom. Beginning around 500 B.C. with the classical Greek polis, Hanson contends Western societies tend to favor freedom in politics, religion, scientific inquiry, and economics. The institutions which spring from this freedom directly enhance the West's capacity for warfare. Free scientific inquiry produces consistent technological advances. Market-based economies provide the productive capacity to sustain powerful militaries. Consensual governments and widespread property ownership generate a large cohort of potential soldiers with a deep personal and economic stake in their society. Western military leaders are completely pragmatic in developing tactics; they are free to develop new approaches to battle without censure. Innovation is enhanced by the sense of individualism present among such citizen-soldiers.

Armed with these cultural advantages, Western armies have formed phalanxes, maniples and squares of highly disciplined, heavy infantry who work in unison to annihilate the enemy using the tactics of shock battle and close combat. The goal of Western combat is to obliterate its

enemy, not merely to intimidate and cow him into submission.⁹ Hanson provides 9 “landmark battles” covering 2,500 years showing the Western soldier’s long-standing partiality for fighting in organized, dense formations.

In contrast to their Western counterparts, Hanson reveals that most non-Western armies don’t fight in this fashion. In general, these cultures tend to emphasize deception, attrition, and religious or spiritual ritualism in battle rather than risk direct confrontation and annihilation.¹⁰ The favored tactical formations are fast, lightly armed cavalry or missile troops who employ loosely organized swarming, raiding, and ambush tactics. Non-Western armies are composed of vast musters of slaves forced into battle by despotic pharaohs, emperors, and kings. A soldier’s reward even in victory is merely a small share of the captured booty; then he returns home to continue his life as chattel of the local dynastic dictator. Despite the ferocity and courage of individual soldiers, the non-Western society’s lack of economic and political freedom ultimately denies its armies the same level of support found in the West. The result is that outnumbered Western armies, thousands of miles from their native lands, consistently destroy vast non-Western armies and even entire civilizations.

This dominance in battle originated during the era of Greek-Macedonian-Roman empires. Even during Europe’s weakest period, the Middle Ages, the remnants of the Western military tradition were preserved and able to eventually stop the onslaught of the Mongol and Muslim hordes. Since 1400 A.D., the West’s military predominance has steadily increased, allowing Europe to conquer and colonize most of the world.¹¹

Critiquing Culture and Carnage

Hanson’s thesis is vulnerable to criticisms from a number of fronts. At the least, he can be accused of “over-generalization.” At worst, he may have committed the dreadful sin of

cultural chauvinism. Hanson's survey of Western culture covers 2500 years and 7 distinct societies. A Greek hoplite, a Spanish conquistador, and a British redcoat all lived in vastly different societies with significantly different levels of political and economic freedom. Is it possible to draw conclusions from such a disparate data set?¹² Hanson's answer is a credible yes.

Hanson contends that such obvious differences don't rebut a generalized conclusion about the commonality of cultural traits among Western societies. The fact that these institutions didn't spring into existence fully developed in 500 B.C. and remain unchanged for 2000 years doesn't mean they didn't influence later British, Spanish or American culture. Also, the absolute strength of these institutions is not as important their relative vigor compared to their opponents.¹³ The deficiencies of the sixteenth century Spanish monarchy pale in comparison to the utter barbarism and despotism of the Aztec theocracy. There was far more tolerance of political freedom in stuffy Victorian England than in the highly regimented Zulu nation. To deny that there are long-lived common themes in European philosophy, politics, economics, mathematics, architecture and military practice is simply preposterous.

The charge of cultural chauvinism is also potentially problematic for Hanson's thesis. His critics charge that any victorious power can assert that its victories were caused by an innate cultural, religious or ideological superiority. Extensive use of Western sources can tend to emphasize the Western point of view and put the opposing culture in a disparaging light.

Hanson adeptly refutes these claims. He devotes an entire chapter to showing how free speech and self critique are key Western cultural institutions.¹⁴ From Herodotus to Peter Arnett, Western societies have traditionally excelled at allowing both official and unofficial chroniclers to provide differing accounts of events. Comparable traditions of objective inquiry generally don't exist in non-Western cultures. The works of non-Western historians were generally less

credible than Western histories because they are usually subject to governmental scrutiny and censorship. In the case of cultures lacking widespread literacy (such as the Zulu and Aztec nations), written indigenous accounts were not available until Western historians arrived to transcribe oral accounts. Thus, the West tends to produce a more voluminous, diverse, and ultimately, more credible, body of historical records than non-Western cultures.

The mass and veracity of Western sources lends credence to Hanson's conclusions. No Zulu account refutes that 100 British soldiers defeated 4,000 Zulu warriors at Rorke's Drift. Aztec history doesn't deny that 1,000 conquistadors subjugated an entire Mesoamerican empire of 8 million in less than two years. Nor do Persian historians dispute that Alexander's modest army of 30,000 Macedonians conquered their empire of 70 million. Non-Western sources cannot deny that Western militaries have consistently outfought and conquered much of the non-Western world. Only their own cultural prejudices prevented non-Western societies from adopting the same superior political, economic, and military institutions as the West.

Conclusion

Explaining the changing nature of the international order after the unexpected outcome of the Cold War is difficult. For disappointed Marxist theorists like Hardt and Negri, it's a Sisyphean task. Only truly dedicated socialist academics could look at the rubble of the Soviet collapse and the pre-eminence of global capitalism which emerged in 1991 and declare that it's all part of Marx's far-sighted plan to achieve the commune of mankind. They can accomplish this goal only by marshalling discredited Marxist theory to conjure a new global paradigm, all the while ignoring the very real changes in the international balance of power/sovereignty.

In contrast, Hanson's work presents a reasonable explanation for the long domination of the Western military tradition. Unlike Empire, Culture and Carnage draws a general conclusion

by finding recurrent relevant themes within the long history of Western civilization. Hanson doesn't sugar-coat or conceal the West's frequent and egregious shortcomings. But he does offer substantial evidence that Western institutions have produced a durable military dominance. Whether the West maintains this position is not dependent upon some inevitable dialectic, but, rather, the character of the West's citizens.

The events of the late 1990s and early twentieth century have largely vindicated Hanson's conclusions and invalidated Hardt and Negri's. The institutions of the Cold War international order, such as the United Nations and NATO, have demonstrated their inability to deal with global terrorism. When multilateral organizations proved unsuited to conducting the war on terror, the United States resorted to traditional bilateral diplomacy and even unilateralism to achieve its ends. The extraordinary American victories over Afghanistan and Iraq appear to presage an even greater period of American military, economic, and political hegemony. Negri and Hardt's vision of a self-destructing capitalist Empire looks increasingly improbable.

Endnotes

- ¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.
- ² Hardt, xiv.
- ³ Hardt, xv.
- ⁴ Hardt, 52-5.
- ⁵ Hardt, 413.
- ⁶ Hardt, 406-7.
- ⁷ Tom Peyser, "Empire Burlesque," Reason, April 2002, 50-55. Proquest (14 April 2003).
- ⁸ Lorraine Adams, "A Global Theory Spins on an Altered Axis; 'Empire' Author Michael Hardt in the Wake of Attacks," The Washington Post, 29 September 2001, p. C1. Proquest (14 April 2003).
- ⁹ Victor Davis Hanson, Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power, (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 4.
- ¹⁰ Hanson, 22.
- ¹¹ Hanson, 12.
- ¹² Chris Bray, "Torturing History," Reason, April 2002, 56-59. Proquest (14 April 2003).
- ¹³ Hanson, 23-4.
- ¹⁴ Hanson, 389-439.

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- Adams, Lorraine. "A Global Theory Spins on an Altered Axis; Empire Author Michael Hardt in the Wake of Attacks." The Washington Post. 29 September 2001, p. C1. Proquest (14 April 2003).
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