

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Briefing Paper No. 13

Comments on Jim Garrison's Briefing Paper No.2

“Models of Global Governance and their Relationship to US Power”

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Having been invited to participate in this Seminar in a personal level, I would like to express my comments about the above mentioned subject in such capacity. Within the context of the enlightening exposition made by Mr James Garrison, I would like to add some additional remarks that may broaden the scope of the subject matter.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the notion of sovereignty took shape. While in the domestic field the State exercised undisputed supremacy, in the international field it was impossible to superimpose any type of authority over the states. In practice the latter meant an atmosphere bound to create confrontation and anarchy. Over the subsequent centuries several thesis and projects emerged, aimed at projecting a reasonable degree of governance in the international arena. From Kant's thesis on Confederation and Perpetual Peace to the League of Nations of Woodrow Wilson, multiple attempts were made in that sense. It was not until the final and subsequent stages of World War Two, under the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, that an interweave of multilateral organisations and alliances, susceptible to sustain something similar to a global governance system, took form.

Under the effort of President Roosevelt the United Nations Organisation came into being and the Bretton Woods Agreements lead to the creation of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the International Trade Organisation (ITO). Under President Truman a whole system of alliances, organisations and plans, linking the United States with Western Europe, Japan and Latin America emerged. These links were consolidated during Kennedy's Administration, with the strengthening of the Atlantic Community and the conversion of the European Economic Cooperation into the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Further afield of the United Nations Organisation that transcended the American primacy, a sophisticated international structure existed under the realm of Washington's hegemony.

The seventies brought about a profound crisis to the above mentioned framework. The conflict and failure of Vietnam strongly shook the prestige and credibility of the United States, while the flotation of the dollar, under President Nixon, cast doubts on the whole Bretton Woods system. The absence of alternatives to American leadership during the Cold War helped to overcome the former, while the world debt crisis allowed for the relaunch of the of Bretton Woods organisations under new parameters.

After the collapse of communism the whole world had to accommodate itself to an international order where the United States was not only the main artificer but also its principal beneficiary. Simultaneously, the neoliberal credo under which the Washington Consensus was based, transformed itself into an inescapable worldwide reference. During the Clinton Administration the system was further refined. With the understanding that the reserves of “soft power” constituted the great strength of his country, Clinton policies immensely contributed to shape the language of globalisation according to American beliefs, life style and popular culture. A network of multilateral institutions, markets, security alliances and shared beliefs, generated a global governance system without parallel in history. Through it the United States could exercise its indisputed hegemony in a veiled way.

The present American Administration has preferred to relate to the rest of the world under new terms, abandoning shared global values and consensual multilateralism in favour of a narrow national interest and a militant unilateralism. What are the implications of this new reality?

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri made a distinction between imperialism and empire. Imperialism would be non other than the expansion of the sovereignty of the ruling power over the spheres it controls. Empire, on the other hand, is a form of power expressed through an international consensus on a set of rules and beliefs. The essence of empire is a form of power that has permeated the collective conscience, determining its fundamental values (*Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000). Michel Foucault remarked on the existence of two types of society: the “disciplinary society” and the “control society”. The former involves a social command in which patterns of behaviour are sanctioned through a powerful apparatus. The latter, on the contrary, involves a society in which norms of behaviour have been internalised as part of their own core of beliefs (*Dits et ecrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994). Joseph Nye made the distinction between “hard power” and “soft power.” The first one being established through conventional power formulas such as coercion and military might. The second one, articulated through the “universality of a country’s culture” and its ability to create a set of “favourable rules and institutions” that allows its international dissemination (*Bound to Lead: The Changing Character of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1991). The common denominator among the former definitions constitutes the essence of real power: that which may be internalised as the product of a general consensus.

The extraordinary merit of the United States had been to achieve such a form of power. One in which its hegemony was able to transcend the boundaries of coercive power, creating an international consensus around its values and projecting them as universal beliefs. The real nature of such power lay in the possibility of implementing what Ignacio Ramonet called “the single thought.” A good description of that single thought could be found in the following words by Benjamin Barber: “In the old times capitalism had to capture the political institutions and the elites in order to control politics, philosophy and religion and, in this way, impose an ideology at its service. Today it markets ideology itself as one of its most profitable products”. (*Jihad vs. McWorld*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1996). That was, indeed, the true nature of American power and the essence of the global governance system that it had been able to create.

The above has been immersed in a dynamic flux. And not for the better. Since its arrival in office the Bush Administration has been dismantling, step by step, a multilateral system and a set of consensual rules and beliefs, which were an historical American heritage and which had brought to that country gigantic levels of leverage and moral authority. Having reached the boundaries of post modern power, the United States has gone back to old fashioned understandings on the nature of power. Under this process we are witnessing a backward movement from empire to imperialism, from the society of control to the disciplinary society and from soft power to hard power.

America's relation with the rest of the world is being shaped through ad hoc coalitions, privileged partnerships, clear cut definitions between the "with us" and the "against us" and reward and punishment mechanisms. This is not, indeed, the best prescription for a global governance system.

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