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STATES OF WAR

The greatness of an estate, in bulk and territory, doth fall under measure; and the greatness of finances and revenue, doth fall under computation. The population may appear by musters; and the number and greatness of cities and towns by cards and maps. But yet there is not any thing amongst civil affairs more subject to error, than the right valuation and true judgement concerning the power and forces of an estate.

Francis Bacon

AT THE TURN of the century, it seemed unlikely that American strategic planners would contemplate any course of action that might disrupt a number of exceptionally favourable international trends. All the main ones seemed to point to the dawning of another American century: an unopposed encroachment of NATO into the void opened up by the elimination of the USSR, the apparent reversal of a quarter-century of economic decline in a climate of explosive speculation, the deft deflection of Europe back into the Atlantic fold, the deepening synergy with China as the low-wage supplier of the world market, and a compliant attitude at the UN Security Council before the step-wise progression of US revisionism. Washington was allowed the exemptions and privileges of a super-state on the plausible assumption that it had committed its power to the protection and expansion of the zone of globalization. This accommodating hegemonic formula seemed to obviate the need for big and medium powers to have to concern themselves with the arduous task of balancing against the American 'hyperpower'. Indeed, the two potential nuclear adversaries of this democratic peace—rising China, and declining Russia—exhibited little interest in an alliance, seemingly convinced of the pointlessness of security competition with the great enforcer of Open Door capitalism.

On the peripheries of this volatile circuitry of market forces, tightened neoliberal conditions of access to Western investment, aid and moral

legitimation resulted in a far-reaching attenuation of the sovereignty of weak and failing states. Washington's initiatives against small rogue regimes in the name of human rights and WMD interdiction appeared to have consigned to the past traditional statecraft based on great power rivalries. The new strategic doctrines authorizing us and Western interventions in violation of the UN Charter derived their legitimacy from a vague but widely held assumption that the period was a transitional state of exception laying down the foundations of an international community to come. This assumption offered some consolation to liberals on both sides of the Atlantic, who rapidly embraced an airbrushed version of it as the credo of a new cosmopolitanism.

The scrambling of this picture in the aftermath of 9/11 has created a historical context whose elements have yet to settle into an intelligible pattern. In trying to determine whether 9/11 signals the beginning of a new era of international politics, it is necessary to begin by asking whether the aggressive 'unilateralism' of the us response to this event has been an atavistic regression from previously more 'multilateral' norms of neoliberalism, or, alternatively, their continuation by other means. It is here that the Retort group's striking recent intervention, *Afflicted Powers*, poses a series of fundamental questions.¹ This is an intricate piece of work, interconnecting the three constituents of its subtitle—capital, spectacle and war—at a remarkable level of imaginative intensity. In what follows, I will consider the principal themes of the book in turn, and end by offering some reflections of my own on certain of the wider issues it raises.

Primitive accumulation?

Afflicted Powers sets out, in the first instance, to examine the adequacy of certain Marxist concepts to the current geopolitical situation and ask if this can be made more intelligible by locating it within the historical pattern of capitalist development. One of the keys to understanding the sudden darkening of the horizon, its authors maintain, is Marx's conception of 'primitive accumulation'—the earth-shaking use of force to create or restore the social conditions of profitability. In the tradition of historical materialism, the periodization of eras in the history of capitalism has typically involved controversial narrative conjunctions of political

¹ Retort [Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts], *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London and New York 2005; hereafter AP.

and economic developments. Lenin's explanation for the outbreak of an inter-imperialist world war as an effect of the passage from free-market to monopoly capitalism is a famous example. The attempt to do this today puts into the question the ability of the term 'liberal-democracy' to capture the latest, emergent features of advanced capitalist polities: indeed, not so long after it had been declared to be the culminating point of history, Philip Bobbitt went so far as to argue that the convergence of powerful trends in markets, media and warfare was spawning a new type of polity in the West. For Bobbitt, the line of historical development points to a national security regime committed to market freedoms, pre-emptive strikes against human rights violators and unauthorized WMD holders, and stage-managed televisual plebiscites.²

By contrast, Retort's analysis attempts to offer an explanation of the continuities of American foreign policy in terms of the general logic of capitalism, without reference to the structure and history of the capitalist, or more specifically, the American state. *Afflicted Powers* presents post-9/11 American 'unilateralism' as a response to the sputtering out of the first round of neoliberalism with the end of the stock market bubble and IT boom of the 90s. But the story its authors tell by and large avoids any emphasis on the crisis dynamics of capitalism and the distinct periods to which these can be said to give rise. That, they dismiss as the outmoded preoccupations of an older generation. This is a more than questionable judgement, as even a cursory familiarity with the contents of a business magazine would demonstrate. Economics to one side, however, they cannily put their finger on a sudden change in the realm of appearances. In but a few years, the figures typifying contemporary capitalism have shifted from silicon to oil, guns and steel. This is happening, they claim, because neoliberalism is 'mutating from an epoch of "agreements" and austerity programmes to one of outright war . . . those periodic waves of capitalist restructuring we call primitive accumulation.'³ This conception of the role of force in jump-starting and lubricating accumulation comes from Rosa Luxemburg, although the name goes unmentioned. In effect, Retort wholly subscribes to Luxemburg's definition of imperialism as 'the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment'.⁴ For them, this is no demarcated stage, but a continuous

² *The Shield of Achilles*, London 2002; for reflections on this ambitious work, see my 'Algorithms of War', *NLR* 23, September–October 2003, pp. 5–33.

³ *AP*, p. 52.

⁴ *The Accumulation of Capital*, London 1951, p. 453.

process in history since the dawn of capitalism. ‘Sweating blood and filth with every pore from head to toe’ characterizes not only the birth of capital but also its progress in the world at every step.⁵

Retort give this Luxemburg-derived account a further, Polanyian twist: the violence that marks the history of capitalism has typically taken the form of coercive enclosure of ‘the commons’—i.e. the appropriation of myriad forms of common wealth embedded in the non-market environment upon which capitalism feeds. This claim is a striking example of a near-universal tendency on the part of Marxists to understand the relationship between capitalism and war in terms of a systematic logic. I will question the degree to which capitalism has a geopolitical logic at all. In evaluating the plausibility of Retort’s argument—or alternative accounts which make this same assumption—three signal contemporary developments need to be borne in mind. There has been a quarter-century of protracted structural adjustment whose main indices are wage stagnation, heightened job insecurity, speed-up and lengthening of work hours, burgeoning debt service, and levels of inequality not seen since the 1920s. Accompanying it has been a major internal expansion of markets through privatizations over the same period. In the last fifteen years, there has been a huge external expansion of capitalism, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the more or less complete incorporation of China into the world market.

The key question in any assessment of the central thesis of *Afflicted Powers* is that of the role, if any, that politico-military coercion played in enforcing this wide-ranging transformation at the expense of labour and other strata, on the one hand, and opening up and determining the conditions of access to new areas of capital development, on the other. Scepticism is appropriate here. Firstly, most of this domestic restructuring of society for the benefit of investors, owners and rentiers has unfolded from the early 80s without any significant bouts of organized violence from above—certainly when measured against comparable periods in the past when police, Pinkertons and fascist squads were crucial agencies of labour discipline. Secondly, unlike conditions in the era of colonialism, the semi- and non-capitalist environment is now organized on a nation-state basis that impedes the open use of military coercion to acquire or retain spheres of influence. It seems rather unlikely that the new round of imperial wars and occupations is securing the conditions

⁵ Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p. 446.

for the ongoing expansion of capitalism, as they claim. In practice, *Afflicted Powers* itself shows some uncertainty here, oscillating between depictions of military force as a way of breaking down barriers standing in the way of the expansion of neoliberalism, and characterizations of it as a product of ideological fixations and delusions peculiar to an impasse of neoliberalism.

The particularity of the United States

In attempting to theorize the relationship between capitalism and military power, Retort equates the us with ‘the state’ generically conceived, without regard to the sui generis character of the former. Carl Schmitt argued, by contrast, that the extension of America’s manifest destiny from the Western hemisphere into the Old World was transforming the geo-spatial order of territorial statehood, altering the very meaning of the terms ‘sovereignty’, ‘war’ and ‘international law’.⁶ The entry of the us into the Eurocentric old regime of sovereign states was accelerating the erosion of its classical norms of war and diplomacy. The *jus publicum europaeum*, he argued, was a concrete diplomatic order in which war was a legitimate instrument of settlement between fully sovereign states able to measure each other’s relative power positions in a geopolitical environment structured by the homogeneity of state forms and aims. But once a field of relatively homogeneous rival powers vanishes, the very meaning of balancing becomes problematic, while the theories based on this assumption become correspondingly less realistic. Confirming this assessment, the final destruction of Axis empires at the opposite ends of Eurasia did in fact result in a far-reaching reconstruction of the inter-state matrix of the core capitalist zone, precluding any restoration of a traditional system of separate regions and balances.⁷

But the consequences of this radical departure from the security concepts of an older world of war and diplomacy were not entirely apparent during the Cold War, because superpower rivalry, based on a rough symmetry between the main contenders, imposed an overarching bi-polar logic onto the political, military and ideological heterogeneity of a vastly expanded state system. Arguably, the specificity of the us relationship to the inter-state order became evident in the aftermath of the Cold War,

⁶ See, in particular, *Völkerrechtliche Grossraumordnung, mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte*, Berlin and Vienna 1939.

⁷ Peter Gowan, ‘A Calculus of Power’, *NLR* 16, July–August 2002, p. 64.

when American strategic planners scotched any talk of returning to the Western hemisphere after their victory over the last great contender for Eurasian hegemony.⁸ The narrower security concepts of Realpolitik cannot explain the historical pattern of this transformative and expansionary agenda. The attempt to account for the change was the rational kernel of Hardt and Negri's conception of Empire as an open polity transcending the coordinates of closed sovereign states. It could be said that the us differs from other states, because it is the paradigmatic capitalist regime, geared, like the system it promotes, for unlimited expansion. In contrast to the authors of *Empire*, the Retort collective seems more cognizant of the fact that the American Republic is still very much a particular state, vigilantly pursuing its particular strategic interests, while articulating these interests within a wider project of universalizing capitalism by enabling regime changes, from gunboat and dollar diplomacy to shock therapy in both core and periphery. 'Each military intervention is intended to serve an overall strategic project of pressing American power—and the potential for Western capital entrenchment in "emerging markets"—ever further into vital regions of the globe.'⁹ Although *Afflicted Powers* pays little attention to the structure of the inter-state system, its general line of argument allows for an explanation of why the latter has undergone a series of substantive transformations even as the nominal form of an older sovereignty principle has been preserved and generalized.

No blood for oil?

Retort's principal concerns, however, lie elsewhere. Their objective is to address the limitations of the slogans and analyses offered by today's anti-war movement. A focus on the Middle East logically follows. The notion that some combination of Oil, Israel and Islam defines the specificity of the region and the us relation to it is not uncommon, and

⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001, p. 34. The great merit of Mearsheimer's conception of realism is that it provides a framework for analysing the strategic logic of high-risk Great Power geopolitics. The anomalies that its basic assumptions generate when applied to contemporary us foreign policy are therefore especially noteworthy, as they point to a crisis in the realist problematic itself. While the author of this theory of 'offensive realism' has no trouble reconstructing, in these terms, the strategic calculations that went into the enormously risky Japanese decision to bomb Pearl Harbour, his assessment of the post-Cold War scene often falters: while the theory predicts that underdog powers will take a chance to enhance their security through bold aggression, it follows that the most powerful—thus most secure—state in the world should stick to the status quo.

⁹ AP, p. 81.

much of *Afflicted Powers* is an attempt to disentangle and weigh the various elements of this series. In a wider context, of course, what distinguishes this zone is its partial insulation from post-Cold War trends that have everywhere else resulted in neoliberal structural adjustment and corresponding regime changes. To date, its old guard of family rulers and police states has without exception held on to power. In terms of its intended regional effect, the invasion of Iraq was supposed to be a step towards abolishing this anomaly—suddenly less tolerable after the attentats of 9/11—with a dramatic nation-building experiment. Victory over the Baath regime was intended to send a powerful signal to the Arab elites of the need for a modest dose of perestroika, and to the Arab masses of American invincibility and Israel's status as an untouchable beachhead of the new regional order. But this course of action was also meant to have a global demonstration effect as the first clear test of the legitimacy of preventive war and regime change as a strategic-legal norm of the New American Century. This should be near the centre of any account of what Retort call 'the contradictions of military neoliberalism under conditions of spectacle'.¹⁰

Oil is a focus of much of the commentary on the origins of this war. For the anti-war movement, indeed, it has seemed an overwhelmingly obvious explanation of it, from start to finish. And how can its significance be denied, given that the organizers of this enterprise and their well-wishers in the strategic community often met such charges with an unruffled 'so what?' Yes, they said, we need to pry the oilfields out of the hands of Saddam and his henchmen so they can't wreak more destruction. Such candour was no doubt unsettling for those who assumed that the sordid truth had to lie deeper below the surface. Indeed, those who seek to explain the invasion and occupation of Iraq in terms of oil interests are presented with an embarrassment of riches: the unprecedented ties of both the first- and second-in-command to the petro-industrial complex; a fire sale of crony capitalist development contracts; hostile takeovers of French and Russian agreements by Anglo-American supermajors; installation of a pliable swing producer to diminish dependency on the House of Saud; oil leverage over other capitalist centres; and the clinching of the status of petrol as a dollar-denominated store of value.

What is the position of *Afflicted Powers* on all this? Retort argue that while the future of capitalism still depends on the control of a few strategic

¹⁰ AP, p. 15.

resources, the No Blood for Oil argument fails to penetrate the enigmatic core of fossil fuel capitalism, falling back on populist stereotypes of scams and lobbies. Their purpose is not to deny the abundant evidence for the existence of the latter, but to provide an account of the wider context in which the profits of the American oil industry could possess a significance for us policy in the region far beyond what the share of this sector in the national economy would suggest they should have. For the first question that must be asked when constructing a more plausible explanation of the role of oil interests in the calculation of us policy, is how American super-majors could ever be powerful enough to drive up the price of crude when they do not control supply, and higher prices must be borne not just by consumers but by all other firms—an aggregate incomparably larger than Big Oil.

Is there any way to explain why one economic sector might exercise an influence on American policy in the Middle East vastly disproportionate to its actual size, yet cannot exercise this power to achieve any sustainable ‘price leadership’? *Afflicted Powers* makes a commendable effort to do precisely this by developing an alternative to what can be regarded as the most sophisticated attempt to present oil—not just as an industry, but as a strategic use-value whose supply is bound up with the future of the capitalist system—as the main motivation for regime change in Iraq. According to this view, the invasion’s principal aim was to secure the reserves of Iraq in anticipation of a coming peak—the so-called Hubbert’s Peak—in world oil production, after which a rapid depletion of regional fields will set in. Underlying the claim is a Malthusian anticipation of imminent scarcity. What the various End of Oil prophecies that have circulated since the 70s ignore, however, is the periodic recurrence of the opposite danger—glut and falling prices. Such interpretations also fail to address the ongoing investment in hitherto inaccessible fields from Alberta to the Bight of Benin. These developments, Retort argue, must postpone the moment of peak production into a future too distant for markets and regimes to compute. In any event, they point out that natural gas is the future of the industry and its geography lies largely outside the Middle East.

Weapons and wells

Malthusian assumptions, moreover, cannot explain the half-century pattern of a very gradual long-term rise in the price of oil, with fluctuations

cutting against the trend in response to real, anticipated and imagined political turbulence. In Retort's view, the determinants of these fluctuations and their distributional consequences are the real story that needs to be uncovered and theorized. *Afflicted Powers* offers an overview of the history of empires, regional state formation and the scramble to control and manipulate the most lucrative nodal points in the extraction and distribution of petroleum, in order to frame a new understanding of these determinants and consequences. The story begins in the early years of the last century, with a semi-colonial patchwork of weak dynastic entities propped up as cover for massive concessions to Western oil consortiums. Iraq was forged as an artefact of such oil politics. The League of Nations Mandate to Britain required it to perform cosmetic nation-building tasks and share the loot with French and American oil companies. A client monarchy and rigged elections provided the requisite façade of semi-statehood. By the 1930s the Big Three controlled 70 per cent of world oil output, and American investment in the region's fields was increasing rapidly.

In a second phase, nationalist regimes began to take over these semi-colonial concessions and extra-territorial corporate fiefdoms, a development associated with the names of Mossadegh in Iran and Qasim in Iraq. American and European oil companies were relegated to the sphere of distribution, where they by and large remain to this day. us administrations learned to live with this new state of affairs as the price of oil smoothly adjusted to the growth of demand in Western economies. Despite the formation of OPEC in the early 60s, technological development steadily brought down its real price over this entire period. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 led to a brief second wave of Arab nationalism resulting in an oil embargo against the us. While the ensuing price spike stoked inflation in the world economy, most of these surpluses ended up being recycled by low absorbers (the Gulf dynasties with little interest in using oil revenues to build up national power) back into us banks, and by both high and low absorbers into the profit margins of weapons manufacturers around the world. The balancing act that took shape in the 80s between Western economic growth, oil company profits, and high absorbers (states like Iran and Iraq) was more or less satisfactory to all the major parties. When periodic breakdown occurred, the us intervened decisively to hold the centre—an elusive equilibrium price—against potential turbulence. The geopolitical determinants of price movements in this period were the Iranian Revolution and its containment, the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War, the establishment and decay of the sanctions regime and, more speculatively, storms on the horizon in Saudi Arabia. But by the end of the 90s regional tensions seemed to be declining, and this, combined with the deflation of the stock-market bubble in the us, led to glut and plummeting prices for the super-majors.

Such was one of the contexts, Retort contends, in which a high-risk regime change in Iraq—one of the pipedreams of right-wing strategic planners in the 90s—began to seem an attractive prospect for many inside the industry, as well as for policy circles who tend to identify its interests with those of the us *tout court*. Before the grim realities of the occupation set in, there was much bold talk in Washington about American proconsuls imposing a neoliberal revolution from above, with the privatization of Iraq's nationalized oil assets first on the agenda. The oil industries of the 'developing world' had been tenaciously resistant to privatization, but with an Iraqi client installed in OPEC, optimists foresaw the beginning of the liquidation of these last holdouts of statism. Neo-conservative ideologues announced that this was the first step in a wider structural adjustment to the norms and even the way of life of the new American century.

The lesson of Retort's narrative seems to be that while Big Oil is central to the explanation of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the No Blood for Oil argument is a misunderstanding of the force field of world demand, war and speculation in which fluctuations in the price level of this commodity turn out to abound in geopolitical subtleties. The alternative offered by *Afflicted Powers* develops out of various qualifications to the thesis proposed by two Israeli scholars that links the political economy of oil to that of the weapons trade—a connection that these writers, focusing on the way OPEC oil revenues created the market for a massive expansion of the private arms industry in the us, call the Weapondollar–Petrodollar Coalition.¹¹ After the 60s, so this argument runs, the us shifted from the provision of weapons to clients in the form of aid to the promotion of a private arms trade; since then the OPEC share of world market demand for arms has risen from 9 to 36 per cent. For the Retort collective, however, this is only one segment of a larger circuit connecting oil to engineering, construction, financial services and hedge funds. This vast regional and offshore vortex draws into it

¹¹ See Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel*, London 2002.

bountiful underworld streams of laundered and drug money, consisting, they suggest, of ‘trillions of dollars’ of speculative hot money, although they concede that such estimates are little more than guesses. In this combustible field, the objective of us planners is to ensure, against all hazards, that it is their priorities that supervene on the logic of supply and demand. Nitzan and Bichler go so far as to claim that, by ratcheting up regional instability, American interventions have had the intended effect of staving off collapsing petrol prices, and enriching the beneficiaries of oil price inflation. For the authors of *Afflicted Powers*, this is to simplify a far more opaque picture. But although they write as if—after criticizing and qualifying the alternatives—they are going to provide a more adequate account, they ultimately fail to do so. Perhaps, however, this very failure to reconstruct the geo-economic constellation they scan into a causal pattern is a way of bringing home an earlier claim that the contemporary conjunction of capitalism, war and the spectacle is dissolving the intelligible field of strategies.

Images of Israel

In their genealogy of the current disaster in the Middle East, Retort address a directly related case in which the norms of realist statecraft have also seemingly broken down. Why has American support for Israel shot up in a period in which the Zionist state has become a major liability in terms both of its regional strategic interests and its hegemonic credibility? It is easy to forget that this most special of all special relationships came into existence in stages. Although Washington had initially been cool to Israel’s debut as a regional power, by the late 50s the rising fortunes of radical Arab nationalism brought about a reassessment of Israel’s role as a deterrent against potential threats to American oil interests. The us stake in a Jewish bulwark in the region grew steadily after the IDF overwhelmed Arab armies in 1967. Israel—alongside Pahlavi Iran—was rapidly fortified as a sub-imperial guardian holding the balance against the Soviet-equipped Arab armies of Egypt, Syria and Iraq. From the early 80s onwards, however, the fit between Israeli and us objectives in the region began to loosen. Yet Washington’s commitment to Jerusalem has become increasingly unconditional.

The explanation of this anomaly offered by *Afflicted Powers* nimbly sidesteps what is often thought to be the most obvious explanation: the influence of the Israeli lobby, strengthened by an emerging alliance with

the Christian right, within the United States. Without wholly denying it, Retort claim that this development needs to be situated in the logic of the media sphere. For in their eyes it is less Israel itself, than Israel transfigured by the magic of the spectacle into an ideological totem of American identity, that has become the tail wagging the dog. The problem here is just what constitutes the *pays idéal* of Zionism in this imaginary. Retort argue that while ‘modern states are often slower to fall prey to a set of spectacular illusions and compulsions than the other sectors of societies they govern’,¹² once fixated on a mythological image of their identity, they often become incapable of pulling back to a colder assessment of their interests. While suggestive, their account remains itself captive to the tv screens whose effects they seek to lay bare, as if the only perspective on the ideological dimensions of this conflict is from the couch. The ideological mould of us–Israeli relations cannot be completely reduced to the surface images of beleaguered citizens and brave soldiers confronting terrorists, and the occasional bad apples in the midst of so much everyday heroism. There is more to the ideological development that determines this imagery than that.

For the moral authority that the us claims for itself—over and above its role in promoting markets and democracy—has increasingly come to rest on its identity as the modern defender of the Jewish people. Any perusal of the journals that educated Americans read demonstrates the centrality of this historical mission in the contemporary imaginary of the country. Putting aside the truth of the claim, its expansion as a discourse has been striking. Figuring retrospectively as a rationale for America’s battle against the Third Reich, from the 70s onwards it became a powerful thrust in the propaganda war against the USSR, while at the same time underscoring the need to batten down Arab nationalism, as an emblem of all the dangers surging within the Third World. More recently, if there has been some decline (not much) in the popularity of the Jewish state elsewhere in the West, this has if anything enhanced its attractiveness for those Americans who don’t think much of foreigners anyhow. Within the country, of course, the topic of Israel has long become a criterion for dividing legitimate from illegitimate voices in the great American political conversation.

In the view of *Afflicted Powers*, Israel’s time in the sun of the spectacle is coming to an end. Older images of Israel as a pioneering progressive

¹² AP, p. 122.

beachhead of the West, it contends, have given way over the last twenty years to the now familiar scenery of a colonial disaster zone. This claim reads more like—rather desperate?—self-reassurance than a sober description of the prevailing image of the ‘only democracy in the Middle East’ and the bedrock public support it commands, in Europe as much as in the United States. But even if—all diplomatic evidence to the contrary, from Paris through Karachi to Beijing—its international legitimacy were devalued, what would this imply for the future political trajectory of Zionism? Here Retort neglect to contemplate what might be a disturbing corollary of their more general thesis on war and the spectacle. For Israel is perhaps the only state in the world that closely approximates to their conception of a military capitalism. It is also a land where not a few continue to believe that another regional war might provide them with the main chance, messianically conceived.

A revolutionary Islam?

Reflections on the history of radical Islam round out Retort’s portrait of the colonial battlefields of the world system. Remarking that while the anti-war Left has emphasized the role of oil in the political economy of Empire, it has neglected to address the nature of its most conspicuous antagonist, they maintain that an adequate response to the geopolitical moment that begins with 9/11 requires a gauge of the stakes of the battle between America and jihad. While some have seen in ‘the War on Terror’ merely a pretext for pushing through a second instalment of the Reagan Revolution, *Afflicted Powers* argues that the new Islamic vanguards have, in fact, shaken Empire in the realm of image power, provoking it to reckless overreach. Given Retort’s intellectual debt to Guy Debord, this might at first seem like a startling claim. For Debord did not take terrorism very seriously at all, and his judgement of its effects was wholly deflationary: ‘This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. *It wants, actually, to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results.*’¹³ This verdict has more than a semblance of plausibility. Compare it to the claim made by *Afflicted Powers*, that Islamic fundamentalism is ‘something like a mass movement with a nearly unlimited pool of potential operatives.’ Islamists, in the eyes of Retort, have ‘a political project that is global in reach and ambition, anti-imperialist and . . . revolutionary in practice’.¹⁴

¹³ Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, London 1990, p. 24.

¹⁴ AP, pp. 137–8.

But here too fixation on the televisual screen of the social world can be deceptive, as the distinction between reality and appearance is, in this case, belied by the very phenomenon itself. Do militant Islamic cells form an elusive mobile network, ready to strike at any moment the bourses and theme parks of the Abode of War? Or are they a tiny fringe, stranded on the edges of a sea that is everywhere drying up? Looking at their numbers and prospects for coming to state power, it seems clear—at least until Iraq changed the picture—that the latter is much closer to the mark. But it is in the very nature of this war that a bombing anywhere in the world seems to verify, on the screens that both Westerners and Muslims watch, the existence of a vast, many-headed foe. Yet in this age of the so-called multitude, what is striking is the fellah-like passivity of the Arab masses, even as they daily watch, enraged, images of the battlefields of Palestine and Iraq. The Arab street has so far remained impotent. Whether more people than ever are watching al-Jazeera or are in chat rooms does not change the fact that they, like their counterparts in the West, are spectators in this mother of all asymmetrical wars.

Counter-modernities

Afflicted Powers offers an account of the history of Islamic fundamentalism that culminates in provocative reflections on the problem of a radical political subjectivity today. Fundamentalism began as a current within a wider modernizing movement seeking to revitalize the Islamic world in the era of colonialism. Retort's identification of Islamic fundamentalism with modernity—more precisely counter-modernity—is based on their interpretation of the significance of Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual fountainhead of revolutionary Islamic politics. The radicalism of this figure is indeed remarkable, his œuvre distinguished by a severe rejection of scriptural exegesis in favour of an Islamic identity theory garnished with references to sundry texts from the annals of political Romanticism. Although Retort point out that Qutb's influence cut across the Sunni–Shia divide, and was a significant ingredient in the cocktail of ideas that flowed into the political theologies of the Iranian revolution, it is the Sunni sector of the Islamist phenomenon that informs their generalizations, which demand that we reconsider the meaning of modernity in light of the ongoing war of the spectacle between America and its Islamic nemesis. Here their argument takes an unexpected turn. For little in the preceding discussion prepares the reader for the ensuing claim: namely, that modernity is always stalked by its radical brother, a counter-modern

vanguard that Retort polemically trace from Lenin to Bin Laden. Fifteen years after the former's statues were toppled, *Afflicted Powers* asks the improbable question: 'why does Leninism never die?'¹⁵ For an answer, it turns to Nietzsche's reflections on the persistence of the ascetic ideal.

There are two obvious objections, however, to this injunction to understand al-Qaeda in the light of *What is to be Done?* Firstly, anarchism is far more a part of the history of 'terrorism' than Leninism, a fact that should have prompted more circumspection. Secondly, the claim that the 'ideal makes more converts, not less, as modernity lives on', seems to cross the line separating paradox from absurdity.¹⁶ The point could be put more reasonably, perhaps, as follows. World-historically speaking, Bolshevism presented itself as the concrete negation of bourgeois society, an assessment that was shared by its adversary. Those who seek to fill the void left behind by the departure of this tradition will be drawn inexorably to a comparable form of asceticism. The militant figure envisaged by Qutb in his *Signposts Along the Road* bears more than a passing resemblance to an unacknowledged Russian model.

How to initiate the revival of Islam? A vanguard must set out with this determination and then keep going, marching through the vast ocean of *jahiliya* [the state of ignorance preceding and surrounding Islam] which encompasses the entire world . . . The Muslims in this vanguard must know the landmarks and the signposts on the road to this goal . . . they ought to be aware of their position vis-à-vis this *jahiliya* which has struck its stakes throughout the earth.¹⁷

Compare this with the spirit and details of the following passage from *What is to be Done?*:

We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire. We have combined, by a freely adopted decision, for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not of retreating into the neighbouring marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation.¹⁸

¹⁵ AP, p. 172.

¹⁶ AP, p. 184.

¹⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fil-Tariq* [Signposts Along the Road] (1964), as cited in AP, p. 132.

¹⁸ *What is to be Done?*, Peking 1975, p. 10.

The historical meaning of this affinity—if that is what it is—cannot be deciphered without a more discriminating account of the contemporary landscape. For one of the distinguishing features of this is surely the neutralization of whatever was signified by the term Leninism. It is true that some of the affects of the Cold War animate the horror of the postmodern West before the figure of the suicide bomber, whose deed, it is thought, is akin to pronouncements of nihilism from the time of *The Possessed*. For while killing people from afar is at least understandable, killing oneself for a cause has ceased to be. In suggesting that the strength of this militant ideal stems from an understandable aesthetic horror before the spiritual wastelands of the Last Man, set against the backdrop of a planet of slums, do the writers of Retort reveal the nerve centre of their own opposition to military neoliberalism in the age of the spectacle? Such a deduction would be implausible, given their critical conception of such radical subjectivity as a form of revolutionary romanticism. They imply that there is an easy slide from this stance to Bolshevism, or now radical Islam. Accordingly the task of the day is to articulate ‘a non-nostalgic . . . non-fundamental, non-apocalyptic critique of the modern’.¹⁹

But it is not easy to know how to interpret this commendable sentiment when we are told that ‘we have rarely been closer to hell on earth.’²⁰ The valences of Retort’s prose pass from starkly aphoristic depictions of a world at war to a surprisingly bland indictment of the spectacle, taxing commodity aesthetics and consumerism with ‘suppressing social energies’. The radical political negativity of *Afflicted Powers* is at odds with this muffled Kulturkritik. Alain Badiou offers a more judicious formulation of the problem when he writes: ‘there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure—even if it takes the form of denying its possibility—called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to be that of the party militant’.²¹ This succinctly captures the relationship between the conditions of radical subjectivity and its activation in new forms of collective organization. But certainly, such a way of conceiving the contemporary historical situation will not appear convincing to those who want to banish this legacy from the ‘movement of movements’. The title of *Afflicted Powers* is an allusion to deliberations among the defeated rebels of *Paradise Lost*. The identification of the radical position with the overthrown Satan and his lieutenants is a motif of the experience of

¹⁹ AP, p. 185.

²⁰ AP, p. 175.

²¹ Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford 2003, p. 2.

defeat from Milton to Bakunin. But Retort side-step the question of who really are the defeated that can experience and think through the depths of this position today. The attempt to put the names Seattle, Genoa and Chiapas into this slot rings hollow. The career of Guy Debord was a failed attempt to articulate a politics adequate to the austere severity of his diagnosis of the time. But his is a legacy that deserves its own *What is to be Done?*

The permeation of the spectacular

Afflicted Powers appeals throughout, not uncritically, to Debord's category of the spectacle. In its telling, the attacks of 9/11 were a highly effective blow to the American imperium at the level where it has become most vulnerable—the spectacular. But although the book has many acute or tantalizing things to say about the workings of the spectacle today, these are never brought into full focus. Explanations of the current scene in terms of primitive accumulation and of the spectacle are juxtaposed more than integrated, leaving the obvious theoretical tensions between the two unresolved. Yet Debord's conceptualization has wide implications for the field of contemporary politics, national and international.

One of the more striking indices of the contemporary power of the spectacle—the symbiosis of competing market and media forces that drives the machinery of contemporary public opinion—has been the emergence of the contemporary equivalents of great men at the helm of business and state. The spectacle typically credits these figures—a president, a finance minister, most of all a central banker—with magical powers to preserve and create values, despite all evidence to the contrary, only to deflate their reputations not long afterwards. Just as an entrepreneur passes from CEO of the month one year and into jail the next, in the aftermath of 9/11 the simulacrum of public opinion has conferred statesman-like qualities on certain leaders, as if to goad them on to disaster. The strategic direction of state power in the geopolitical arena is becoming increasingly subject to the performance criteria of a televisual construction of social reality. The flitting screens of this pseudo-world have become the more or less exclusive focal points of the experience of social reality, and not just within the most ill-informed strata of American consumers. The logic of teleprompt governance has made significant inroads into the previously more hard-headed worlds of business and foreign affairs.

Meanwhile the lifeworld is colonized by an unstoppable barrage of polls, talking heads, panics and cloying human interest dramas, in which the experience of history collapses into an eternal present.²² For Debord the impact of this new mode of social domination is to precipitate ‘a general shift from having to appearing—all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances’.²³ The spectacle, in this view, sets into motion a struggle for mastery in the realm of the image. What is the specificity of this domain as a strategic field? ‘Just as the logic of the commodity reigns over the capitalists’ competing ambitions, or the logic of war always dominates the frequent modifications of weaponry, so the harsh logic of the spectacle controls the abundant diversity of media extravagances.’²⁴ The sequence of commodity–weapon–spectacle appears in this passage as the integrated moments of a new social logic of domination. But Debord also considered the possibility that the waning of any collective experience of history might have punishing consequences for the stage managers of this new order themselves. The spectacular mediation of the political sphere has resulted in the partial de-realization of what once could be called ‘objective’ strategic interests. ‘Once the running of the state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, the state can no longer be led strategically.’²⁵

But while the mediatization of politics has been effective in subjecting public opinion to the verdicts of the market, it has simultaneously erected barriers to the enterprise of empire-building. Contemporary enthusiasts for imperial Rome or Britain lament the sensitivities of a population that cannot stomach a few thousand American casualties for such a good cause. A major, probably irreversible, sociological transformation of baby-boom capitalism is at work here. The plebeians refuse to die in wars, the rich refuse to pay for them. The spectacle has resulted not only in weak citizenship at the bottom, but also faulty intelligence at the top. With an eye on the mounting chaos in occupied Iraq, it is not difficult to conclude that the Republican administration’s attempt at grand strategy is now heading for the shoals. ‘The dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one’s satrapies in order.’²⁶

²² AP, p. 21.

²³ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit 1970, Chapter 1, xvii.

²⁴ Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, p. 7.

²⁵ Debord, *Comments*, p. 20.

²⁶ AP, p. 37.

War and capitalism

Afflicted Powers treats the United States and the contemporary universe of capital as if, politically speaking, they were one. No other state, save Israel, is accorded significant attention. How plausible an assumption is this, even for polemical purposes? Historically, the relationship between geopolitical rivalry and the global pattern of capitalist development raises a number of extremely difficult theoretical problems. For the experience of successive eras appears to differ fundamentally. In one period, structural adjustment and integration into the world market promoted a relaxation of international tensions in the core; in another, they led to a vertiginous escalation of great power rivalries; while through both, colonial conquest and tribute generated many a heart of darkness on the non-capitalist peripheries of this expansionary civilization. Is there any general relationship between war and capitalism at all, or can there only be theories of specific conjunctures? Even if the latter is more likely, it remains true that it is the evolution of capitalism alone that provides a long-term developmental account of the successive socio-economic transformations that determine the relative wealth of nations, and the field of selection in which different strategies of state formation, including ones based on the attempted suppression of capitalism, come to be tested.

Capitalism arises out of an 'original' separation of the means of coercion from the social relations of production and exchange, which alters the relationship between the internal and external fields of the state apparatus, as war and diplomacy cease to be a continuation by other means of the predatory extraction of surpluses from subject peasants and townsmen. Retort's claim that 'war is modernity incarnate' fails to capture the consequences of this both categorical and real separation of the political from the economic and its materialization in a new relationship between the internal and outer fields of the political. Although the emergence of a specialized, outwardly directed apparatus of statecraft is a development that long precedes the advent of capitalism, the formation of the modern capitalist state generates a novel structural problem for such war machines. Since war and diplomacy are no longer aligned to a logic of appropriating surpluses through conquest and tribute, the pay-off for the enormously costly business of amassing geopolitical power not infrequently becomes objectively indeterminable as a means of achieving security, or any other aim.

'Anarchy' as defined by the realist school of international relations means that if even one state chooses to pursue its aims with force, all others will be compelled to do likewise. But the escalation of hostilities within this emergent field can result in an unpredictable transformation of the goals and strategic interests of each state, radically altering the way they might otherwise have articulated these. Machiavelli noted this, observing that some states are open to such modification in the process of escalation, while others try to neutralize it 'constitutionally'.²⁷ Famously, in the first half of the twentieth century, the test of total mobilization for war led to a transformation of certain states so radical that the classical bourgeois structure of state–society relations mutated into a fundamentally different one, that no one had planned or even anticipated. To varying degrees, all the principal antagonists of these wars of planetary re-division underwent such changes, the Nazi regime furnishing the most explosive and ultimately self-destructive example of this flight forward. The geopolitical field in which states are exposed to this dialectical transformation of their interests is to be distinguished, of course, from those more neutralized regions and dimensions of the inter-state system where the dynamics of competitive mobilization and counter-mobilization are kept within bounds. But there is no sharp dividing-line separating the most acutely rivalrous from the somewhat more pacified zones of the inter-state system, where rulers are in some measure insulated from the harsh and volatile criterion of relative power—i.e. winner–loser strategic situations. The key question concerns the historic relationship between the more open, dynamic and dangerous field of inter-state competition and the long-term pattern of capitalist development. In particular: does this point to the conclusion that the Great Game must eventually come to an end?

For the combined and uneven development of capitalism within the matrix of an older inter-state order has had a fundamentally different impact on the internal and external fields of what Weber called the territorial monopoly of violence. The contrast is essentially this. If the domestic organization of public power has been subject to the ongoing imperative of creating a socially acceptable environment for capital accumulation, the alignment of statecraft to the pursuit of external conditions for accumulation has been a far less systematic process, one typically over-determined by episodic compulsions of inter-state competition for

²⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Chicago 1996, pp. 135–38.

highly variable security goals.²⁸ The distinct performance criteria at work in its domestic, as opposed to geopolitical, fields of operation constitutes a duality at the heart of the modern capitalist state that is inherently difficult to manage—particularly if the state in question is a ‘Great Power’ striving for a place in the sun. For the pattern of state formation that began in the nineteenth century in response to the discipline of emerging market norms led to a comprehensive internal domestication of political violence, but did not bring about a comparable reorganization of the relations between states of the sort envisaged by Kant on the eve of this great transformation. While the vectors of world capitalism seem to point to the eventual withering away of a rivalrous pluriverse of sovereign powers—since head-to-head war in its core regions threatens the very existence of the system—globally speaking, this trend has manifested itself only erratically.

An unstable intermezzo

The event structure of the geopolitical field is highly sensitive to unforeseen contingencies, unlike the more insulated and institutionalized domestic environment. Are there then uniform compulsions structuring this field, that dictate a power and security imperative across the whole system? If so, they cannot be simply a matter of external constraints on generically conceived political structures, for such dictates need to be internalized ‘constitutionally’ by the individual states in question. As Weber recognized, Great Powers must actively posit them, on pain of risking their status as such. Today, however, to the degree that the bare existence and most essential objectives of such states are no longer directly threatened by rival powers, the question is how far such compulsions have ceased to operate.

Some major states still struggle to raise their international power ranking, even if this entails disruption of the status quo, although the number of these has steadily declined from the era of Ranke. Germany and especially Japan, the biggest economies in the world after the us, have more or less dropped out of the ring, a situation that would have been unimaginable in an older era of warring states. While there is presently a drift towards higher levels of tension at the summit of the international power hierarchy, to all appearances the inter-state system is now, structurally

²⁸ Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology*, Oxford 1988 p. 152.

speaking, in an unstable half-way condition between resilient vestiges of an older power logic, and a *de facto* multi-lateralization of military violence that belies the appearance of antithetical sovereign interests at the top. There are no theories that explain in general terms what advantages accrue to major states in the current world market environment from possessing more military power than their peers and competitors; or why their arsenals are strategically directed at other major powers (China and Russia) when the use of most of these instruments was long ago made obsolete by their sheer destructiveness, except in the event of a remote last resort.

According to Stephen Biddle, this state of affairs—in effect for nearly a half-century—has not fundamentally transformed the built-in strategic orientations of the most powerful states:

Major war is also the primary planning yardstick for most world and regional powers. For most of the post-Cold War era, the us military was sized and structured to win two, nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts; the Bush administration has modified this standard to winning one while holding the line in another, but the standard is still set in major war terms.²⁹

What kind of wars are the most powerful states actually capable of winning, and what kind of wars are their existing arsenals designed to wage? No advanced capitalist state even has a contingency plan for assaulting another one (although this is wrongly generalized into the claim that ‘liberal-democracies’ have never fought one another); and the only conceivable wars that the us and its main allies could possibly fight and win are against weak states with little popular support. If the evolution of military arsenals among the major states has nevertheless moved only fitfully in the direction of altering the targets of their force structures and weapon systems, this is principally due to the unique, mixed position of the Chinese and Russian states—high in the international power hierarchy, yet outside the liberal-capitalist core. Exacerbating this state of affairs, war machines built up during a century of Great Power conflicts have proved extremely difficult to redesign for other aims. Under conditions in which the inherited means continue to structure aims, the relationship between ‘objective’ power measurements and their actual deployment as instruments of strategy becomes opaque. ‘Logically unsound unitary notions of military capability that mask crucial tradeoffs’

²⁹ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton 2004, p. 8.

may be the stock in trade of IR theories.³⁰ But if in the era of Great Power wars the validity of these notions was periodically subject to the harsh trial of head-to-head encounters between force structures and weapon systems, current measurements of capability lack the structuring logic of this decisive means of settlement. What role does military power play in determining a state's position within international ranking systems; why and to what extent is it still a decisive dimension of state power? The inability of existing theories even to pose these problems speaks to a deeper crisis of the classical categories of geopolitical rationality.

Epistemic shifts

Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* was an attempt to probe the multiplying anomalies generated by these political categories and distinctions, in a context in which the boundaries, legal prerogatives and *raison d'être* of the state had been thrown into serious question. He argued that theories centred on the figure of the sovereign state were ill equipped to grasp the volatile links between interpenetrating systems that were emerging out of the de-standardization of the older international dispensation. But this is true of all theories and not just IR realism. Marxists, for example, have always more or less accepted the Hegelian conception of the state as the embodied national synthesis of antagonistic group and individual interests. But this canonical conception of the state confronts problems when there is no longer a plurality of actively competing states, all of whom can and must see each other as a certain magnitude of power in a cold calculus of war and diplomacy. The historic geopolitical field had its specific schemas that structured 'the widespread perception that economic strength is a necessary precondition for military strength; that economic and military power is fungible; that economic decline leads to military weakness; and that economic policies merit co-equal treatment with political and military considerations in national strategy making'.³¹ While such equations continue to inform debates over the defence budget, trade and account deficits and long-term threat assessments, it is increasingly difficult for anyone to determine to what extent and why they remain valid.

The crisis and protracted demise of an older geopolitical field in which traditional categories remained operative, and capitalist states had to maintain themselves, unfolded over the first half of the twentieth

³⁰ Biddle, *Military Power*, p. 4.

³¹ Biddle, *Military Power*, p. 14.

century through catastrophic wars. It eventually resulted in the delegitimation of war as the ultimate settlement of inter-state conflict. But while this expressed the exigencies of suppressing outright wars between powerful capitalist states, and later—through far less stable arrangements—between such states and the Communist bloc, outside this zone the consequences of this development were much more problematic. For what has replaced the concept of ‘war’ as a legitimate instrument of settlement between nominally equal sovereign states is an essentially asymmetrical, discriminatory framework of legal disputes between states of vastly unequal status. For the few remaining fully sovereign states, the use of military force is afforded cover by the ‘international community’, while illegitimate ‘rogue’ states are subject to invasive, destabilizing qualifications of their nominal sovereignty in the form of sanctions, international supervision of their weapons programmes, no flight zones and regime change.

Whether any of these methods constitute a state of war or not has become a rather arbitrary, indeed superfluous determination. A long-term epistemic shift seems to be occurring which is blurring older distinctions between war and peace, belligerents and neutrals, and soldiers and non-combatants, and the resulting international disorder is reflected in the increasingly contentious and arbitrary application of these terms. In effect, what scenarios of conflict qualify as ‘war’ for the purposes of any systematic investigation of its relationship to the interests of states, social classes and even whole social formations? Radical political philosophies today often make extreme claims about the role of violence—‘war’ in a vastly expanded sense—in the constitution of society. But the suggestion that war is the constitutive power of modern politics—discernible in both *Afflicted Powers* and *Multitude*—amounts to little more than a slack metaphoric, detracting attention from a sober assessment of the capacities and limits of military power in the present conjuncture. What too does ‘anti-war’ mean, when the meaning of war, and the labelling of violence, has become a matter of such intensely politicized—or alternatively, legalistic—semantics: how many of those who protested hostilities against Iraq welcomed them against Yugoslavia?

Constituents of the present

Such general considerations open up some windows, at least, on the specificity of the present. The structural crisis in the relations between

capitalism and geopolitics has created a historical situation too fluid to capture in the form of a compelling totalization. But this does not mean it is impossible to pick out salient novelties of the contemporary scene. To begin with, the subtraction of the Soviet Union from the international system at the turn of the nineties has created a power vacuum around American planning in which the ordinary calculus of the risks or gains of war is to a considerable extent diluted or suspended. This slackening has been amplified by the widening gap in power projection capacities between the us and all other states, stemming from the technologies of the 'revolution in military affairs'. The first Gulf War was the initial laboratory of the new satellite-guided, laser-precision warfare, whose successes exceeded even the most optimistic Pentagon forecasts. Iraq, it is hard to remember, had previously been thought to possess the fourth most powerful army in the world. Having dispelled any post-Vietnam doubts about American military prowess, strategic planners could now set their sights on bigger targets than the small fry of the 1980s. In fact, the Balkan Wars of the next decade provided the opportunity for the testing and integration of still newer weapon systems, appearing to accelerate the obsolescence of the armaments of all other states. Yet it is not at all clear, looking back over the last fifteen years, to what extent the RMA has transformed the balance of power between more substantial states, or made traditional modes of military organization obsolete. For Pentagon enthusiasts of the new art of war, however, the temptation to assume both as settled facts has been great.

At roughly the same time, the *raison d'être* of all Western arsenals was put 'objectively' into question. After the end of the Cold War and the undisputed victory of liberal-democratic capitalism, what was all this military power now for? Under the Clinton administration, armed force was assumed to be a means to accomplish a civilizing mission of liberal-democratic pacification, in an external state environment that was softening. The notion that nation-states are being superseded is vastly exaggerated. But to varying degrees, and at varying speeds, many states are indeed ceasing to act as a coherent concentration of the interests of nationally defined elites, as these former social cores are transformed into a 'cosmopolitan' layer whose fortunes lose any organic connection with the viability of their respective local economies, and so *ipso facto* with the well-being of a large percentage of their own populations. By contrast, the old geopolitical game of balancing was, in part, motivated by elites whose power and prestige depended on performing at least

decently in this arena. After the Second World War, strata of this kind were either uprooted or emasculated in the defeated countries, yielding to successor formations single-mindedly committed to growth and stability, and so more than willing to entrust their protection to American statecraft. More broadly, since the end of the Cold War the link between domestic hegemony and vigilant nation-state building has become ever looser, as oligarchs, the wealthy and even aspiring middle classes all struggle to get their money and children out of their own countries and into the leading one. This accounts for some of the contemporary tendency to bandwagon behind us demands, although this is arguably now giving way to a new and unstable stalemate.

The reasons for such incipient chaos are clear. America's twentieth-century ascent to world power took off when it emerged as a creditor state over the ruined and indebted belligerents of the First World War. us surpluses were the main levers with which Washington pried open and restructured rival economies in the capitalist cores of Europe and Asia, from the Versailles Treaty to the Marshall Plan. Since the seventies, however, this has evolved into a very different relation to the rest of the world, as the us has become a debtor country on a steadily increasing scale. The foundations of American power have fundamentally altered. us current account deficits have mounted to unsustainable levels, in a global setting where the normal balancing mechanisms and signals of the world economy—bond yields and interest rates—have virtually ceased to function.³² A quarter-century of boom and bubble economics has created a context in which long-term strategic planning has lost its objective foundations in long-term economic trends, in more than one respect.

In part, this is because the increasingly speculative nature of the booms and busts of the last decades has generated radical changes in the way that risk and value are assessed—methods of assessment that have begun to spill over from the world of markets into geopolitical planning. In systems theory this would be described as the de-differentiation of sub-systems. Current imperial enterprises are, *inter alia*, the expression of an erosion of the barriers insulating military and diplomatic strategizing from the mentalities of high-risk financial operations. The autonomy of strategic intelligence in the American state is in danger from a new direction: a generation of planners-cum-business leaders raised in a

³² 'Traffic lights on the blink? Capital markets are hindering, not helping, global economic adjustment', *Economist*, 18 August 2005.

market environment that amply rewards hostile takeovers, downsizing, outsourcing and the arts of cooking the books. The performance standards for determining whether any of this works and for whom are presently in dispute. An observation by the American Secretary of Defense encapsulates this moment in history: ‘we lack metrics to know whether we are winning or losing the war’.³³

Reckoning

Great Powers, according to Michael Mann, repeat whatever they think secured them their last victory. The Cold War, for thinkers of the American right, was won when leaders were elected who had the courage to break out of détente, pursue the arms race to final victory and unleash the free market with massive tax cuts, without flinching before escalating account and budget deficits. Only five or so years before, as they tell it, America was still reeling from its humiliation in Indochina, on the defensive from Afghanistan to Central America and gripped by domestic malaise and self-doubt. The Reagan Revolution is held to be the great turnaround of modern American history, creating a politico-ideological environment that can be repeated today, given the appropriate triggers. The unsustainability of this flight forward is only just beginning to be registered by American policy elites. A painful reckoning is in store for those who have grown accustomed to low-casualty victories, and to thinking of deficits and debts as magnitudes that can be managed by grandstanding and wishful thinking.

It would be a mistake, however, to think this need presage any dramatic reversal of rank-ordering in the international system. The genre of history that tells the story of the ascent of Germany or the us to world power, or of the eclipse of the British Empire, no longer plausibly represents the vicissitudes of national destiny. For in the past thirty years of capitalist restructuring, the rise and fall of powers has become the tale of a decade—often a mere half-decade—in the sun. Among such episodes are the rise of Japan through the seventies, followed by an American resurgence under Reagan, subsequently undercut by an unstoppable Japanese expansion, followed by a decade of Japanese stagnation; or, at the other end of the world, the re-emergence of Germany as once more a unitary state, and Great Power in the making, only to be diagnosed a few

³³ Cited in Alan Krueger and David Laitin, “‘Misunderestimating’ Terrorism”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 5 (2004), p. 13.

years later as the sick man of Europe. What too of the European Union as a new comet in world politics, suddenly deflected from its course by a couple of plebiscites? But the *pièce de résistance* of this genre must surely be the abrupt deflation of grand strategies for a new American century. Each of these turning points was greeted with great fanfare and trepidation, with the publication of books and articles replete with modern and ancient precedents. We are now told that it is China's turn at the leading edge of world history. Judging by the track record of this increasingly flimsy narrative of the rise and fall of Great Powers, this is no doubt a sign that it too is poised for a fall.

So we return, amidst a muddled post-classical landscape of failed states, regime change, humanitarian interventions and WMD interdiction, to the main question that stalks *Afflicted Powers*, and to which it eludes an answer. Why did us leaders ditch the status quo with its manageable levels of risk, held in check by various installations and outposts of the American Empire, and court a potentially catastrophic blowback in Iraq? If indeed the intertwining financial and strategic formulas of American hegemony have evolved to the point where they depend—in ways that are not fully understood by its leaders—upon such gambles, then they are not long for this world. Looming over the horizon, moreover, is another question that no analyst so far seems very interested in broaching. What would the impact of a sharp world-economic downturn be on the entire geopolitical field? This is the great unknown of the current conjuncture.