

Postmodern Imperialism

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Postmodern Imperialism: An interview with Eric Walberg

Interview by Jonathan Reynolds, an anthropologist who writes for spikemagazine.com and author of two books on the Maya and Guatemala

Q: For a work of geopolitical history, I found the book a real 'page-turner'.

A: Thanks. It's gratifying that this came across. So much of the critique of imperialism is depressing and boring, and puts the reader off. The history is fascinating, if horrifying.

Q: I was impressed by the great sweep of the argument, and how the details of the history of imperialism as you write about it are integrated so well into it.

A: Again, thanks. I couldn't have done it without the internet. I really should have put Wikipedia in the acknowledgments, although this must be treated circumspectly - it allows you to track down hundreds of details in seconds that are essential to making a credible argument. Again, much of the literature is either too detail-heavy or too generalized. In writing both my articles over the past decade, and this (and another book) over the past four years, I developed a style where I try to include as many relevant details as possible without sinking under their weight.

I really wanted to produce something that could be useful as a textbook for an intelligent high school/university student as well as for the general reader, and with something new for all readers. The book covers a huge territory both in time and space, but I hope I have touched on the most important elements. Writing it was definitely a daunting process, but having lived in both the Soviet Union/post-Soviet space and now Egypt, and coming from Canada, I am fortunate to have had the experience of all these social formations. It's a bit like learning to think in different languages. When I write about a particular topic, I try to put myself in the common person's shoes and ask, 'What motivates the particular imperial corner that I'm considering?'

Q: The book makes such a sweeping accusation about "American imperialism", but supported beautifully by a great array of facts, citations, references that it becomes quite clear what is what.

A: Why can't Americans see the imperial nature of their relationship to the world? For a Canadian (or anyone else), this is so obvious. A basic explanation of center/periphery makes this crystal clear in two minutes. Yes re endnotes - again, I tried to reference as many times as possible. The internet provides an unprecedented opportunity to do this. The book would have taken a decade without it.

Q: Do you see a great breakdown coming in the center (as opposed to the periphery, perhaps, as you use Wallerstein), signaling a movement toward a new kind of dispensation...a new kind of society ultimately? I ask this aware of the enormous power the US exerts directly and through its networks and being myself very pessimistic that any kind of real change in social structure and the fundamental nature of the social transaction can occur anytime soon.

A: Absolutely. The breakdown is happening as I write. The euro is doomed, as eventually is the dollar. And, yes, we must prepare people. For all their problems, Soviet and Muslim societies provide clear pointers about the basics of an acceptable alternative.

Q: What made you decide to 'cover this story' - the great story you tell in the book?

A: As I say in the preface, I was struck by the injustice of imperialism while at Cambridge after the 'first 9/11' [the US-sponsored military coup in Chile in 1973]. Everything developed logically out of that.

Q: What's your relationship to Islam?

A: I like Karen Armstrong's quip, "I consider myself a freelance monotheist". All three are fine, though I see Islam as the final corrective of the earlier versions. The true Torah Jews (Neturei Karta) are wonderful, though the inherent "exilic tribalism", as Gilad Atzmon puts it, is an inherent problem with Judaism, the results of which we see today.

Q: Do you believe there are transcendent values, irrespective of culture, time, and history? I am thinking here of transcendent values one associates with Islam...and Marxism. I think even Marx, despite the materialist history he emphasized, saw a kind of a Hegelian 'end of History', for otherwise he would not have supported the phantasm of communism, nor have been unaware that all utopias are dystopias.

A: Marx is sorely misunderstood. Of course there are transcendent values and his writing is imbued with them. Even in evolutionary biology there is the nonzero sum game theory which seems to operate at a genetic level (Robert Wright is great on this) leading to cooperation and empathy. It seems you can arrive at such values even without faith.

Q: Marxists speak of the two world wars of the last century as imperialist wars, and you cite Lenin, whose dictum was that imperialist is the last, and highest, form of capitalism. What about WWII? Weren't the Allies the 'good guys' against Hitler and Nazism ?

A: This was in my mind writing about Great Game I. Good people everywhere (West and East) fought Nazism as evil, but Western capitalist/imperialist governments were the source of Nazism and encouraged it to destroy the Soviet Union. Our history books distort the real origins of both WWI and WWII. I hope my book is a credible compact corrective to this.

Q: Do you, yourself, employ a kind of a dialectical analysis to your history of Anglo-US imperialism? Casino capitalism certainly seems to me to fit most aptly into Marx's analysis of the capitalism and how it operates.

A: Marx is the alpha and omega in analyzing capitalism. His inversion of Hegel's dialectic starts with the material-> theory -> material-theoretic. My three-part theory is really a continuation, via Marx, of Hegel's logic of being-nothing-becoming -> being-essence-notion.

Q: Do you worry that your support for Islam may tend to throw doubt as to your agenda, as it were, as a journalist who writes in such broad, and negative, terms about Israel and Jews?

A: As for my analysis of Israel, virtually the entire world outside of the imperial center condemns Israel. As for Jews, I have the greatest respect for the dynamism and intelligence that has characterized Jewish culture from time immemorial. If it can serve the common good, it will be a key element in finding a way out of Western civilization's current crisis. Gilad Atzmon and Israel Shamir, Shahak and Pappé, Finkelstein and Blankfort... The list is long and growing of Jews who have chosen to dedicate themselves to the common good, to go beyond exilic tribalism.

As for Islam, I admire enormously Muslims' patience and endurance and their stubborn adherence to a spiritual focus in their lives, attributes which non-Muslims have long ago lost. Just consider for a moment the incredible resilience of the Palestinians. It is a miracle that they hang on in the face of concentration-camp conditions, decade after decade. Just as I identified with the communist resilience in the face of imperialism, so I do with the Muslim resilience today. Note how the anticommunism of yesterday morphed so easily into the islamophobia of today. Though it sounds simplistic, 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' has a fundamental dialectical truth to it.

As for my own spiritual journey, I consider myself a freelance monotheist. While I learned the basic prayers and pray with my Muslim friends at the mosque, I go to church with my family when in Canada, and would be delighted to worship with True Torah Jews - if invited. Islam is a much more demanding religion than Christianity. The grueling 30-day dry fasting each year in Ramadan is hard for me to even contemplate.

Q: Is it fair to say that Israel, today, is the only truly racist state on the planet, with its transparently clear insistence on who its citizens can be, and on the nature of the Jewish state?

A: Yes. Like the American empire - why is this so difficult to see? A perfect case of the emperor's new clothes.

Q: With at least one gloss of history you seem to go quickly to the conclusion easier to fit into your overall argument - about Central Europe and the NATO (US) bombing that removed Milosevich, saying nothing about the terrible ethnic cleansing going on (and the moral 'imperative' of the West to intervene, this latter argument one which I acknowledge is at least somewhat flawed since everything large nations do geopolitically is full of ulterior self-interest.

A: History is complicated. The dialectic is only partial, as Hegel and Marx well understood. The same argument for Milosevich goes for Gaddafi, but in neither case was more western intervention the answer. The US and Europe were behind the breakup of Yugoslavia in the first place, as I point out: "The break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, along with the drawn-out campaign of sanctions and 'no fly zones' against Iraq from 1990, were defining moments in establishing the new GGIII. The Clinton administration 'saved' Bosnia and Kosovo from Serbia's attempts to hold the Yugoslav union together, establishing NATO-sponsored Muslim statelets Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, in an eerie reversion to GGI. Bosnia is governed by High Commissioner Valentin Inzko, an Austrian national, who wields powers similar to a colonial administrator. It is occupied by NATO forces, with the central bank governor appointed by the IMF. Kosovo is nominally independent, the site of the

largest US base in Europe, Camp Bond Steel, housing 3,000 soldiers, giving the US control of the Balkans, within easy reach of the Caspian Sea and Israel.” No one else benefited from the civil war in Yugoslavia (ok, maybe Slovenia, if you consider its postmodern status in the EU as desirable).

Q: Again, for the less well-informed: Was there not ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Croatia that, if power existed to halt this, this power should have been used? Rather than consider ‘transcendent values’ as motives behind Anglo-American imperialism, then, and Clinton’s ultimate decision to join in the bombing of Serbia because of these values, might you not legitimately be accused of ‘streamlining’ your argument to avoid addressing this possibility?

A: What is ‘transcendent’ in Yugoslavia is Camp Bond Steel. I make clear in all the games that there are purported aims and real aims. I think you understand the difference.

Q: Regarding the circling project of the West and other assertions and accusations you make, is it capitalism or Anglo-American imperialism that you decry?

A: By ‘circling project’ I take it you mean containing Russia, China and Iran. Everything happening today has its origins in capitalism. The whole dialect derives from *Kapital*, Volume 1, Chapter 1, since imperialism is inherent in the logic of capital. Even the rise of Zionism has its own logical source there. Given an ‘exilic tribe’, its natural activity in the broader community is the profane usury, etc.

Q: Would you call yourself a Marxist?

A: I like Marx’s retort to his son-in-law: “If that is Marxism then I am not a Marxist”. I respect and use Marx as the basis of my thinking about capitalism and society. I prefer to dispense with -isms and labels given their many distortions. My title of *Postmodern...Great Games* is a bit tongue-in-cheek as these terms can mean whatever you define them to mean.

Q: Did Marx underestimate – hugely – the enduring power of capitalism to adapt, to transform itself, in order to survive?

A: He would surely be disappointed that it’s still alive and torturing/ enchanting us today, but he admired it, too as he wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Q: Also on Marx: do you consider class warfare a more or less transcendent dynamic in the history you narrate from Disraeli and Victorian England – the British Empire – through to today?

A: Yes. The iPod revolutions today in Egypt and now on Wall Street only got their backbone when the workers joined in. The intellectuals and frustrated middle class have the obligation to reach out to the workers, just as they do to the Islamists today in the Arab revolutions.

Q: In other words, would you include in an analysis of class warfare, an ‘ethnicity of elites’ with regard to the leaders of banking and finance capitalism, who are ‘at war’ per Leo Strauss, with a middle class and worker/poor class?

A: If you mean Jewish/ non-Jewish, it’s no longer of much relevance. Quoting myself: ‘With the decline of Christianity, for proponents of western civilization, “we are all Jews”’. I go on to quote Vice President Joe Biden: ‘You don’t have to be Jewish to be a Zionist’.

Q: Isn't it true to say that, dialectically, what is sought by Marx and by communism is something opposite to materialism, a utopia that has as its defining meaning a kind of spiritual quality, in the sense that human beings, and human society, are what is important, rather than capital?

A: See what I said about Marx's dialectic earlier: material -> theory -> material-theoretic. It's oversimplifying to accuse him of utopianism.

Q: What should be the nature of social transaction, in an ideal world? On what should it be based? What is the good society?

A: See Robert Wright's [non-zero sum](#) argument. Definitely, a good society should get rid of interest, or at the very least, interest and money should be controlled by a truly broad-based popular government. The logic of anti-capitalism follows from that.

Q: Economists who write about causative factors behind the ups and downs, bubbles, crises, and so forth we have seen and are seeing do not mention - at least in what I have read - this insistence on the dollar as a profound strategy by American imperialists (e.g., the bankers). You have a degree in economics from Cambridge. Did you study this phenomenon as you describe it at Cambridge?

A: I did a thesis for my BA/MA on financial intermediaries in Canada from the Depression to the 1960s. Whatever independence the Canadian government had with respect to economic policy was lost as US banks took control. Re the collapse of the dollar, many economists write about the coming demise of the dollar as world reserve currency. See [Stiglitz](#).

Q: You describe - again, well-sourced and referenced - how American imperialism not only has condoned but participated or directed drug smuggling.

A: Shocking but true. But then the Brits promoted opium in China and no one seems to care much. The evidence is overwhelming throughout the Great Games.

Q: Your assertion about hedge fund attacks on Greece [p 111]. I had not heard of before. Is this not a big enough story to warrant insisting, if possible, that major media like the *New York Times* take a look at this?

A: I quote the *Wall Street Journal* on this (endnote 37): "Some heavyweight hedge funds have launched large bearish bets against the euro in moves that are reminiscent of the trading action at the height of the US financial crisis. It is impossible to calculate the precise effect of the elite traders' bearish bets, but they have added to the selling pressure on the currency - and thus to the pressure on the European Union to stem the Greek debt crisis." You just have to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Q: How do you reconcile your defense of Islam with your Marxism?

A: I think I've made my position as a freelance monotheist and someone who uses Marx but dislikes slots and -isms clear above. Islam is the only monotheism that firmly rejects imperialism in practice, which is why it is targeted today and why anti-imperialists must understand and defend it. It provides a vision of a coherent alternative to imperialism. As for whether Islam and Marx are compatible, in my conclusion, I point out: "The Judaic prophets, followed by Jesus and Muhammad, and the nineteenth century secular prophet of revolution Marx, rejected usury and interest, as representing ill-gotten gain, with good reason. Marx

condemned this mode of extraction of surplus as the highest form of fetishism, based on private property and exploitation of labor. They all rejected this exploitation on a moral basis as unjust, insisting that morality be embedded in the economy, a principle which was abandoned when capitalism took hold. While Judaism and Christianity adapted, Islam did not.

“Interest, and today’s money based on US military might alone, are the root cause not only of the current world financial crisis, but, as a corollary to Rothschild’s dictum about money and politics, and Clausewitz’s dictum about politics and war, the primary instrument facilitating (and benefiting from) the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, and the world political crisis.”

So Marx seems to have rediscovered the wheel. Marx is a joy to read, full of spirit and humanism, very moral.

You can reach Eric at <http://ericwalberg.com/> *Postmodern Imperialism: Geopolitics and the Great Games* is available at <http://claritypress.com/Walberg.html>

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About the author:

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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