

The Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSTA)

Free Trade and War in the Creation of the New American Empire

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Abstract

This paper looks at the way in which the US is using free trade and war in the development of its empire. I highlight the way in which John Howard and George W. Bush have locked together free trade agreements and war through the US, UK and Australian alliance in Iraq. I argue that free trade agreements are deeply rooted in the structural violence of globalisation, including the possibility of endless war. I examine the ways in which women in particular are negatively affected by free trade agreements, and suggest that fundamentalism is an integral part of the operation of globalisation and free trade. I conclude that the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement leaves Australia as a party to aggression in an agreement that will not benefit the Australian people, especially women, Indigenous peoples and the poor.

Free Trade and War in the Creation of the New American Empire

The link between war and free trade agreements is apparent in the latest round of events occurring since the beginning of 2003. In the context of Australia this is exemplified in the connection between the proposed Australia United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) and John Howard's commitment to the war in Iraq. In the aftermath of the war in Iraq there have been pronouncements about the possibility of free trade zones in Iraq. Such occurrences are not an accident of history, but rather an integral part of the project of capitalist globalisation.

Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that 'The administration and enforcement of the new imperialism by a system of multiple states ultimately requires a single overwhelming military power, which can keep all the others in line'.^[1] This statement describes precisely the role played by the USA in the global economy and Australia is kowtowing to the weight of imperial will. Australia represents a middle position between the 'Third World' and the western developed world. A former colony, and considered a hot spot of biodiversity, Australia is rich in natural resources, and provides important military intelligence through US bases at Pine Gap and Cockburn Sound. In these respects it resembles 'Third World' nations. Conversely, the standard of living and the heavily influenced Anglo-western culture, in spite of its geographical location, means that it resembles the colonising countries. I argue that this unique combination of features makes Australia an important market to shore up economically through the establishment of a Free Trade Agreement.

The AUSFTA will create conditions in Australia rather like the results of the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed on Third World nations during the 1980s and 1990s. But unlike those economies, the Australian market is culturally open to US products and, in particular, services. According to US Special Trade Representative Bob Zoellick, once the AUSFTA is in place Australia will be equated to America's 'fourth largest export market'.[\[2\]](#)

A further argument of this paper is that fundamentalism is intricately linked with globalisation, control of the rules of trade and war. There are many faces of fundamentalism and I will explicate some of the many different guises in which it appears around the world.

The Origins of the AUSFTA

In 1992, Bob Zoellick, now the chief negotiator of the AUSFTA, wrote a speech for George Bush senior which outlined what was called the Agenda for American Renewal, a plan for a series of bilateral free-trade agreements, Australia among them.[\[3\]](#) The idea did not find favour with the Australian government of the time, but in ten years the political landscape has not only changed enormously, it has shifted significantly to the right.

At the end of 2002 the Howard government through its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade called for submissions on the proposed AUSFTA. The call was put out on 11 December 2002 with a deadline of 15 January 2003. This in itself was an indicator that the government negotiators were not really interested in receiving submissions since this is the period when most working people take annual summer holidays.

Concurrently, the USA was speaking of a pre-emptive strike against Iraq and shoring up alliances with Tony Blair and John Howard. It struck me at the time that Howard's support of George W. Bush was connected to his desire for successful free trade negotiations with the USA.[\[4\]](#) But not until after the war with Iraq was Howard's stance publicly acknowledged. And in an editorial, *The Australian* went so far as to declare the Labor Party irrelevant because it wanted to 'have a careful look' at the agreement to ensure that it was not a deal set to strip Australia of its assets in services, knowledge, finance, biodiversity and agriculture.[\[5\]](#)

Some impacts of the AUSFTA

* Australian domestic sugar prices will rise by 13 per cent.[\[6\]](#) while prices to the consumer in the USA will fall.

* Australian agriculture would be subjected to potential takeover by US-based agribusiness companies and a systemic challenge to the less intensive farming methods in Australia.

* Genetically modified crops will be introduced progressively over the next few years following on from the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator's approval of GM canola on 25 July 2003. To refuse to grow GM crops could be considered a trade barrier under the rules of the WTO.

* The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) is under threat because US drug manufacturers regard the PBS as a trade barrier. The cost of prescriptions for non-concession cardholders could rise from \$23.10 on average to a whopping \$64.[\[7\]](#)

* Women will bear the brunt of free trade especially as care-givers, as cleaners and

caterers in hospitals, as teachers and social service providers in the community. In the UK six out of ten of the health workers in the National Health Scheme (NHS) are women; while eight out of ten of the non-medical staff – administrators, clerical staff, cleaners, caterers – are women.[\[8\]](#) Australia's health system has similar trends.

* The cost of higher education will rise. Access to education for women returning to study, for people on low incomes, and for Indigenous peoples will be increasingly more difficult while an excess of 'choices' will be available to those with the resources to pay for education.[\[9\]](#)

* Indigenous ownership of knowledge of biological resources will be threatened even more than it is now. US-based companies with bioprospecting interests and US-style patents will create profits for US corporations while simultaneously further dispossessing Indigenous peoples. The US National Cancer Institute, the Western Australian state government and the Australian Medical and Research Development Corporation (AMRAD) have been involved in commercialising the Western Australia smokebush.[\[10\]](#) Merck Sharpe and Dohme is among the companies with whom they have entered into exploratory contracts. Merck is a 'recent new member' of the American-Australian Free Trade Agreement Coalition (AAFTAC).

* Australian intellectual property in the arts and culture industries is under threat even if Australia accepts the USA's standstill position. Such a position means that Australia loses the possibility of setting its own funding agendas according to the needs of the day. Australian content quotas, however, are regarded as a trade barrier.[\[11\]](#)

* The weightless economy, an economy based on the appropriation of intellectual property rights, such as patents and copyrights, will be opened up to US entertainment moguls who will buy up cheaply produced great ideas and inventive artistic, scientific or industrial products and sell them at greatest profit to themselves.

* Water and other utility services will be increasingly privatised, compromising water quality and the maintenance of utility infrastructures.[\[12\]](#) With the world's three largest water companies coming out of Europe – Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux and Vivendi Environment both based in France and Britain's Thames Water owned by German company RWE AG – the battle between the US dollar and the Euro will be fought through Australia's water utilities.[\[13\]](#) The person needing a free glass of water might not be able to find a place willing to serve it.

* Detention centres will become an increasingly lucrative area of investment for US-based correctional services companies. George Wackenhut, owner of Correctional Management Australia who has run Woomera Detention Centre, has been accused of transporting 'raw materials for chemical weapons to Iraq'.[\[14\]](#) Stricter border controls for people go hand in hand with borderlessness for capital.

* Australia's military security will be increasingly in the hands of the USA. The combination of security issues being tied to trade is a new direction for federal government policy. In a world where the USA is by far the largest military power, intelligence has a high priority and Australia's location at the base of a potentially volatile part of the world remains crucially important.

* USAID in April 2003 was offering web conferences to Australian companies on issues such as 'primary and secondary education service opportunities ä electricity and water

systems ä public health ä local governance ä and seaport and airport administration'.[\[15\]](#)

* Finally, the Australian constitution allows, under the foreign affairs power, the Commonwealth parliament to pass laws consistent with a particular treaty - in this case the AUSFTA - which over-rides state powers otherwise protected by the Australian constitution. One impact of this would be the potential for an agreement resembling the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) to be brought in. Such laws could threaten many state-based public services because under the MAI companies can sue for loss of future profits in the event of a trade barrier including such socially beneficial barriers as environmental safeguards, banning of carcinogenic substances, or the non-provision of subsidies for foreign companies on an equal footing.[\[16\]](#)

The violence of free trade

The control of the conditions of trade is essential to the centre of empire. This maxim has never been more important than it is now in a global economy. The logic of empire is to maintain control and to wield power in whatever way maximises the life of the empire. Imperialism, from the Roman Empire to the British Empire, has incorporated the benefits of wealth frequently through trade and through control of trade routes or production or the rules of trade.

In the global economy this is exemplified in the USA's blatant flouting of WTO rules, resistance to the International Criminal Court[\[17\]](#) and the treatment of prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay. The failed attempt to ratify the Small Arms Trade Agreement in 2001 is due in large part to the refusal of the USA to recognise the loss of life of women and children in war zones. Instead the US Under Secretary of State John Bolton argued that the agreement 'contains measures contrary to our [US citizens'] right to keep and bear arms'.[\[18\]](#) A further, but instated result would have been that US arms manufacturers and dealers stood to lose a great deal of trade.

Trade, especially the trade in arms, is too important to let slip just because women and children in poor countries are losing their lives. 'Violence is elitist', observes Theresa Wolfwood.[\[19\]](#) Those who are violent tend to believe that they themselves will not be subjected to violence. Such a lack of awareness of consequences is an integral part of domination. Militarisation is the institutional form of domination and it too perpetuates the view that violence is the ultimate arbiter. In the international arena, the five largest sellers of arms are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council[\[20\]](#) who sell arms to the military in mostly poor countries; countries like Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia. They have sold arms - chemical and biological - to Iraq. They have provided training to Idi Amin and to Osama bin Laden. The war against Iraq was a war against a country whose population comprises primarily women and children. This is an instance of violence as elitism. In the Gulu district of Uganda where the Lord's Resistance Army is active and eighty per cent of the population are living in camps, most of the injuries occurred in domestic settings. One participant said of landmines, 'landmines are being buried in our kitchens. Government troops do not cook in our kitchens; they do not use our bathing shelters. Yet last year a child was blasted in a bathing shelter'.[\[21\]](#) It is no surprise therefore to find that women now make up eighty per cent of the victims of war.[\[22\]](#) In the meantime, everything possible is done to prevent American lives being lost in war. Marc Herold, for example, makes the point that 'the 'cost' of a dead Afghan civilian is zero (as long as these civilian deaths are hidden from the public) but the 'benefits' of preserving US military lives is enormous, given the US public's aversion to returning body bags'.[\[23\]](#)

As Michel Chossudovsky writes, 'The application of IMF economic medicine often breeds an atmosphere of ethnic and social strife, which in turn favours the development of fundamentalism and communal violence.'[\[24\]](#) The IMF-imposed rules resemble many of the facets of the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement, as well as other forays the USA has made in which trade, fundamentalism and war all intersect. Indeed, Chossudovsky argues that US foreign policy is not concerned with maximising social justice, but in fact has encouraged the development of Wahabist fundamentalism and, furthermore has sustained international terrorism.[\[25\]](#)

Another aspect of the violence of trade is the export trade in people, in particular of women. Women have become export commodities as trafficked brides, as domestic workers, as sex slaves, all of which enable governments to see women as cash crops and as a means of paying off foreign debt. The illegal trade in women's bodies has been estimated to be the third largest illegal trade after arms and drugs.[\[26\]](#) And as Andrea Dworkin points out:

The trafficking in women is the largest slave trade that the planet has ever seen. It is larger than the slave trading of the middle passage. It is larger than any race-based slave trading. I am not measuring suffering. I mean to measure the dimensions of the problem. Selling women makes more money than anything else. Prostituted women and children are the main cash crop in the Thai economy.[\[27\]](#)

The trafficking of women is a spin off of free trade. It is a direct result of globalisation, in a world in which profit is more important than life and dignity. The trafficking of people who are fleeing violent regimes is a spin off of the increased restrictions on immigration, tightening of border controls, and territorial excision, as in the case of Christmas Islands and Ashmore Reef. Violence is structured into these trades in people, just as they were in the slave trade. And violence is structured into the current global trading system.

War and empire

Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003) outlines how it is that empire depends on war for its existence. She returns to the theoretical underpinnings of the modern notion of a just war elaborated by Dutchman, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and notes that the origins of international law are inextricably linked to 'advocating limited war, and as much to do with profit as with justice'.[\[28\]](#) She spells out precisely the implications of his theory:

Grotius was able to justify not only wars of self-defence, however broadly conceived, but even the most aggressive wars pursued for no other reason than commercial profit ... he sought to demonstrate that [the proper] authority could be vested not only in sovereign states but in private trading companies, which could legitimately engage in the most aggressive military acts to pursue their commercial advantage.[\[29\]](#)

Hugo Grotius's legacy was taken even further by Thomas More in his 1516 classic, *Utopia*. Here More outlines the justification for appropriating the land and its resources from people living in lands deemed worth colonising. The justification rests on 'improvement'. If the land is occupied but is not 'improved' by its current occupants, then it is perfectly justifiable and reasonable in Thomas More's view to appropriate the land or resource, make it productive, and if necessary to conquer them for their own good. This view is eerily reminiscent of not only the justifications for colonisation - bringing culture to the natives - but also for the sudden rash of interest in the late twentieth century in patenting Indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants. Both are very much foundational to the existence of globalisation and the

interest in free trade agreements.

As globalisation has proceeded, through the lowering of tariffs and implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs in poor countries, with the continuation of agricultural subsidies and further privatisation of knowledge, of services or property in the rich countries, it also requires 'a new doctrine of extra-economic, and especially military coercion'.[\[30\]](#) For without the possibility of war, the empire cannot maintain its dominance. Australia – as one the USA's most reliable allies, as an essential part in the USA's global intelligence gathering, and as one of the earth's biodiverse hotspots – is in a unique position to be a very useful free trade 'partner'.

Fundamentalism

The last decades of the twentieth century has seen a rise in fundamentalism around the world and fundamentalist regimes can be found in many countries representing different creeds. The USA has its own home-grown Christian fundamentalism underlying the last three Republican Presidencies, while the Taliban have flourished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Hindu fundamentalist are represented by the BJP government in India, Wahabist Islam has been exported by Saudi Arabia, Buddhist fundamentalists have ruled Burma for many years, Indigenous fundamentalism has been the source of several coups in Fiji, communist fundamentalism is taking North Korea to the brink of war, and market fundamentalism underlies the institutions of globalisation: the IMF and the World Bank.[\[31\]](#) This is by no means an exhaustive list but an indication of the breadth and impact of fundamentalist politics in the world today.

The common thread among all of these fundamentalist regimes is that women fare very badly. It is, argues Teresa Brennan, 'Only on questions of women and sexuality [that] the fundamentalists of either side begin to converge'.[\[32\]](#) Market fundamentalists care as little about the welfare and dignity of women as do the Buddhist fundamentalists in Burma or the Taliban in Pakistan. Women's human rights are not recognised and under all these regimes, women's bodies are threatened, despised and violated. The education, social and economic rights of women are severely limited, and exploitation and oppression are the norm.

At the core of fundamentalism is another fundamentalism: that of masculinist fundamentalism. As Dubravka Ugrešić writes: 'In this male mindset woman has the fixed, unchanging status of an inferior being'.[\[33\]](#) She writes of how men getting together at a bar to drink reflects the misogyny and patriarchalism of the adventure of war which is presented as a highly sexualised event in which 'War is shooting and shagging, screwing and killing'.[\[34\]](#)

The wars that have been declared as part of the 'war against terrorism' have been no different. As Caputi (1987), Enloe (1983) and Morgan (2001)[\[35\]](#) respectively have documented that the training of military recruits, the level of prostitution around army bases, and the ideology of terrorists share many common elements. Those elements include emotional disconnection combined with hatred of women, the portrayal of women as subjected to pornography and prostitution, and the widespread rape of women in war.

These elements appear also in those places where globalisation has had the most destructive impact, namely in poor countries and countries who for one reason or another are in thrall to the United States. It may be due to debt (Sierra Leone) or to agreements on defence (Saudi Arabia, Israel) or because the USA is keen to exploit some natural resource

such as gas or oil (Afghanistan, Iraq) or to create the preconditions of US-based company investments (US agribusiness companies are keen to harvest the riches of biodiverse nations including Australia). These are the origins of free trade agreements and of the combined force of violence and economic exploitation.

Michael Klare sets out just some of the sites of conflict that are the focus of territorial disputes in areas containing oil or natural gas,[\[36\]](#) and it has been a common refrain of many writers that oil is a central trigger for the wars against Afghanistan[\[37\]](#) and against Iraq.[\[38\]](#)

Fundamentalism, war, globalisation and free trade

These four elements, working together have very different impacts on women and men. I will look at each of them in turn and discuss the ways in which they intersect and amplify one another.

Fundamentalism: This is a divisive and violent style of rule. As indicated earlier some men benefit enormously, and all men benefit in comparison with the women of their country. Under fundamentalism it is men who are in power and laws are made (if they are made) to uphold that masculinist power.[\[39\]](#) Women by contrast are severely limited in their movement, in their role in the political, social and economic spheres. This was most profoundly the case under the Taliban whose punitive use of the burqa is intended to break the possibility of community among women, to make women invisible and therefore worthless. Indeed, one of the dictates of the Taliban was to order them *'to conceal themselves to the point of having no human form'*.[\[40\]](#) It is not dissimilar from the hoods used by torturers to force fear and disconnection upon their prisoners.[\[41\]](#)

War: Almost all wars arm men first. In some wars, especially wars of resistance, some women are armed. But when war and fundamentalism are combined men are the ones to bear arms. Women, by contrast, make up eighty per cent of refugees and women and children make up ninety per cent of the casualties of war. But war hurts men too. It does so by encouraging them to engage in acts of violence that involve killing, torturing, maiming and raping – not just enemy combatants – but also civilians. War hurts women, not only because they get to dissociate through violence but because they are subjected to so much violence, as are those whom they are attempting to protect, children and the old or the incapacitated.

Globalisation: Men control almost all the global capital, the global wealth, global land. Women are the poor of the world. Under globalisation, men have usurped women's smallholdings, sometimes pulling out trees or ploughing it up as a cash crop monoculture, leaving women only a few small garden plots. Men have appropriated women's subsistence and sold it to the highest bidder as men have been drawn first into the global economy. Men have also consumed luxury items for themselves – including alcohol, cigarettes, cars and women. Women, by contrast have had to make do on even less, attempting to share it among children, the old and the incapacitated.

Free trade: For men free trade can have split consequences. For some men, the future is bleak. It is rife with unemployment as they are displaced from manual labour, sometimes because their sisters or daughters get a job. Many of these men resort to fundamentalism or violence. For other men, the entrepreneurs and those with resources of land or money, their future looks considerably brighter as they profit from the control of global capital. Men in

poor countries are more likely to fall into the first group, but among them are very wealthy elites profiting from their unemployment, their violence or their fundamentalism. Men in rich countries benefit by comparison with men in poor countries, but among them are the unemployed and the unemployable, the poor who like men in poor countries resort to violence and to the fundamentalism of 'men at a bar'. By contrast women in poor countries - even those who may get the jobs of their brothers or their fathers - do not end up controlling the capital, the land, the family resources. Nor do they have the 'escape' of violence or of taking up arms. And if they happen to work in one of the many export processing zones set up to maximise free trade, chances are they will be exploited, working in conditions without health and safety practices, without environmental safeguards and frequently places where sexual violence is rampant. Or, the women themselves become export commodities, sold for sex or for their domestic labour. Women in rich countries, although they too benefit from the exploitation of those in poor countries will rarely own the capital, the land or the family resources. In the long run, no one really benefits because neither the people, nor the natural environment which is polluted by reckless profiteering, can ever recover sufficiently to live rich and sustainable lives.

A free trade agreement?

Given the intersecting and amplifying effects of fundamentalism, war and globalisation with free trade, the very fact of beginning to negotiate such a deal does not bode well for Australia. Indeed it threatens the well-being of many Australians, as well as the unique environment. Lowering borders on agricultural produce and bioprospecting biotechnology companies threatens Australia's biodiversity, while lifting border protections threatens Australia's social and cultural diversity.

As an integrated part of the US empire Australia becomes a participant in wars of aggression mounted by the USA, as well as a target of other violations.

The women of Australia have much to fear from a free trade agreement as the many public institutions are whittled back and privatised so that women - who still remain on considerably lower wages than men - have to pay more for medical, educational and social services or become the carers, the educators, the social cleaner-uppers for a system which fails all but the rich or the powerful.

The poor - which includes many women - have much to fear as water is privatised along with prisons and detention centres where the poor will be sent for crimes of poverty. The refugees are being detained, deprived and deported for the crime of being a stateless person, an exile, a person seeking asylum. If Australia cannot accept the freedom of movement of people displaced by globalisation, by fundamentalism, by war and by free trade then Australia should not be pursuing a free trade agreement that creates ecologically destructive borderlessness, that invites the largest aggressor on earth to sit with us, and that threatens so much that we hold dear, culturally and socially.

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