

The Empire Strikes Back: Permanent War and the Spatialities of Global Conflict after 9/11

Introduction

This paper is located within the nexus of what I consider to be 2 growing areas of thought in contemporary analyses of world politics:

1. *Globalisation and the west*: Much of the thought concerning the relationship of security and globalisation has focussed on the manner in which the latter has induced insecurities in the non-western world. Globalisation – in its guise as liberalisation of markets, or has a form of cultural homogenisation – has been taken to be the cause of certain insecurities in the non-western world, be they the insecurities associated with Structural Adjustment Programmes, or the insecurities that are a result of a terrorism that purports to be a backlash against the spread of western culture. However, there is a growing literature that focuses upon the manner in which the processes associated with globalisation have transformed western practices of security. In the wake of the rejection of hyperglobalist speculations about the death of the state, there is a renewed examination of the transformation of the practices of statecraft brought about by the processes associated with globalisation. This is of concern here, today, since we are concerned with the manner in which western security practices might be transformed in and through their response to globalised terror. If such a transformation is occurring, I would argue that it is directly related to the processes associated with globalisation – especially the transformation and global expansion of information technology. We might say, then, that the geopolitics of fear and a securitising statecraft predicated on states of emergency and permanent war are part of the process of the reordering of world politics that has generally been subsumed under the title globalisation. These political developments are, thus, a consequence of the impact of globalisation upon western statecraft and its primary tool, organised violence. Understanding this transformation is, therefore, vital to our concerns.
2. *Empire*: there has been much talk about the possibility of the emergence of an American Empire. Often this has been in the unhelpful form of generalisations

drawing upon models of imperialism that were designed to explain the colonialist expansion of capitalism in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And yet it is clear that such models are poorly suited to the analysis of American power in the early twenty-first century – not least because America has always insisted, in its self identity, that it is an anti-imperial, anti-colonial power. Beyond the crude instrumental assertions that the war in Iraq was – to quote the anti-war movement– “all about oil”, there is a growing literature aimed at interrogating the nature of the globalisation of American power. Some of this thought can be attributed to a greater understanding of the impact of globalisation upon western statecraft. In part, it has been difficult to get to grips with the nature of American empire because of the hegemony of the Westphalian model upon thinking about international politics. This model condemns us to an instrumental form of thought that regards states as unitary actors implementing strategies of domination, acquisition or survival. Moreover, it contains within it a narrative of temporal progress, that regards the re-emergence of empire upon lines more akin to that of Ancient Rome as improbable since it marks a step backwards. And yet, the better understandings of the nature of contemporary American power have looked to Rome, not to Westphalia. This is of interest to us here, because if there is a politics of totalisation, it is a politics of empire. And yet this is not the same as the political hegemony of one state over others. Empire is a decentred form of political control that is flexible and diffuse. It is not the simple rule of one state over another. Totality here is not the global dominance of the American state *per se*, but the globalisation of an American strategic doctrine. We must thus draw the line between *imperialism* (which may or may not still be alive today, but which is not, I would contend, what America is practicing) and *empire*, which is a conceptual term for a form of politics which stands in contrast to the form of politics that we have known under the Westphalian order.

Identity, fear and permanent war

In order to understand the nexus of globalisation, empire and terror that shapes American power in our era, it seems imperative to me to revisit what I understand to

be the central insight of David Campbell's *Writing Security*: namely that security – or securitisation – is an integral element in the constitution of a normal, regularised identity. There are a number of ways we could understand this point, but I would want to draw upon Heidegger's understanding of the horizon as a point from which something unfolds – rather than the point at which something ends – as a way of understanding the relations between identity and the practices of securitisation and statecraft that are said to bound identity.

In a classical reading of the discourse of security we could argue that security is related to identity insofar as security is the practice of the protection of the limits of identity. That is to say, the locations at which security is classically practiced – borders – are the places that mark the limits of an identity. In this understanding identity precedes borders and the security attendant to them.

However, if we reverse this model we can argue that security/securitisation and the borders that it constitutes are the point from which identity is constituted. Identity is not prior to boundaries, but is a consequence of their constitution.

Moreover, fear is central to identity, since security/borders are motivated only by fear. Constituting threat, locating fear, are the central constitutive motors, then of identity in this understanding. Of course, this is a pessimistic vision of political identity – but one that offers considerable purchase for a critical understanding of security in our contemporary era.

In the case of American power in the aftermath of 9/11, I would argue that we can see the following:

- That in the wake of 9/11 a specific identity has been normalised as 'American' through a geo-politics of fear. Following Toal in his 'Critical Geopolitics' we could say that the 'axis of evil' and the ever present foreign operatives of the shadowy al Qaeda network are located in a scripting of global space that identifies a certain axis of threat linking the various failed states and zones of indistinction that permeate the twenty-first century global order. It is not new, of course, to project fears abroad in this way. Indeed, this could be said to be the time-worn script of international

security. What is interesting, is to note the form of identity that unfolds from such fears – an messianic America, entrusted with a sacred mission that is both a continuation and radicalisation of the tradition of manifest destiny that has permeated American history. The homeland defined by such fears is also a beacon of light – it is simultaneously to be guarded and exported.

- That such identity has been normalised through the production of crisis in the heart of the homeland. With continual warnings about immanent attack, patriot missiles based in and around key sites, and the securitisation of everyday life through agencies such as air marshals and the office of total information awareness, the America produced by the fears invoked in and through the axis of evil is regularised. Of course this relates both to the concrete diminishment of civil liberties associated with the so-called ‘war on terror’ as well as the more insidious disciplinary technology that constitutes Americans as a people under siege, with a mission to bring civility to an ungrateful and barbaric world. Of course, this is not to say that a significant number of American’s have not rejected such identity, nor is it to say that this is not also the form of identity that is increasingly constructed in the UK. But it is to say that the discourses of fear invoked the post-9/11 period can be linked with the normalisation of a specific form of identity.
- The normalisation of this identity through a perpetual narrative of danger, has legitimised a form of securitisation that could be termed ‘permanent war’. This may well be the central most important aspect of securitisation in the post-9/11 period. We should be discriminating, however, about how we view this ‘permanent war’, for it is not a simple pledge to export organised violence universally as some of America’s detractors would have us believe. The permanent war is a commitment not to a war whose victory would be the territorial domination of the globe by American forces. Rather it is a commitment to a permanent threat of violence to counter localised threats. It is a commitment to a flexible, network-centric principle for the application of force regardless of boundaries. Behind it there is not commitment to the other aspects of war, such as the responsibility of

victors, nor the spoils of conquest. In this sense, perhaps permanent war is the wrong term. Rather it is an erosion of the modern division between politics and war that reconstitutes organised violence as – to take Howard Caygill’s formulation - a form of perpetual policing committed to deferral of threat as and when required.

The geo-politics of Empire

This ‘perpetual police’ – to borrow Caygill’s perversion of Kant – is both a consequence, and constitutive element of, a specifically imperial form of geo-politics. There are two dimensions to this imperial geo-politics:

- In the first place there has been a transformation of strategic doctrine – most commonly referred to as the ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA). The full extent of this revolution is now becoming apparent. What is clear is that once we move beyond the techno-fetishism usually associated with consideration of the RMA, we find that it is both a social and spatial revolution. Specifically, it is predicated on social transformations that have led to a transformation of the political imaginary within which organised violence is located. To put it another way, it has reoriented public thought about the use of military force as a tool. Such a transformation seemed clear with the visions of ‘clean war’ that surrounded the Kosovo war, but is now further consolidated with the light force invasion of Iraq. This vision perceives war not as industrialised death – at least not for the western combatants – but as a high technology battle fought by a professional army whose roots in society are vastly different to the roots of the conscript armies that fought the First, Second and Vietnam Wars. This perception that organised force is a rapidly deployable, flexible force on perpetual readiness for deployment, is predicated upon a revolution in the spatial imaginary within which organised violence is understood. Specifically, the RMA and 9/11 have consolidated network centric understandings of the organisation of violence by western states. These understandings are in clear contradistinction to the traditional linear, horizontal understandings of organised violence between states. This spatial imaginary legitimates intervention since it perceives nodes rather than territories to be the targets of violence. And thus this spatial imaginary no longer takes borders to be

significant. We should note here that this spatial imaginary is clearly at odds with the territorial bases of international law.

- This transformation is not confined to the emergence of a network-centric spatial imaginary. The RMA has been central in the transformations of the vectors of organised violence as it is practiced by western states. Such violence has been transformed from a practice organised within a horizontal plane, to one organised in a vertical plane. And again this has led to a greater stress upon interventionism since borders are significant in a horizontal plane –as its subdivisions – but are not similarly significant in a vertical plane. Moreover, this verticalisation consolidates the messianic notion of manifest destiny, since it locates American forces in the role of bringing vengeance from the skies. Empire, in its guise as the deployment of organised violence, thus seems to the casting of a net across the globe – a net enforced by the vertical deployment of force without the hindrance of boundaries. No wonder then that the anti-war movements have withdrawn into the Westphalian model of the UN as a way to contest such a transformation. Only if we hark back to the importance of borders can we challenge such a rampantly interventionist spatial imaginary. And yet, such an assertion of the Westphalian principles seems conservative and thus we have to ask what kind of ethical challenge could be made against such an empire, without reasserting the sanctity of borders.

The virtualisation of battle space

One further transformation seems to me to be evident, however. The networked, verticalised empire is also characterised by an extension of battlespace that could be described – possibly overly crudely – as the virtualisation of battlespace. On one level virtualisation refers to the manner in which the map now precedes the territory – to put it in Baudrillard's terms – in the practice of organised violence. Military force is now deployed according to real time models of global space. These models, predicated on an understanding of the enemy as a networked organisation have reoriented battle away from a focus upon the problems posed by terrain and the acquisition and domination of territory, to a concern with applying force at nodes in networks. These networks are conceived of in cyberspace and, hence, the maps of western militaries provide the space within which control is exercised. As we see in

the conquest of, and subsequent failure to occupy, both Afghanistan and Iraq, the precession of the image has had a profound impact on the deployment of force.

However, this virtualisation is not confined to military doctrine, but also legitimates an expansion of battlespace into the daily lives of those that are the subject of securitisation – into the information technology that characterises day to day western life and the media which shape the geo-political imaginaries of western populations. Every modern nation-state has turned the media to its own ends, but empire has exploited it in a distinct fashion. The battle is now waged in 24 hour news cycles as a struggle not for control over information flows but for control of the geographies of fear which, ultimately legitimate the securitisation of everyday life. The performance of crisis and the geo-graphing of fear are predicated upon the diffusion of images of terror in and through the media. In this sense, I think Baudrillard was right. Although the third Gulf war *did* happen, it happened well before the actual deployment of coalition forces in Iraq. It happened in the relentless deployment of tropes of fear – images of bio-chemical terror, suicide bombers, patriot missiles and alert statuses – that located a subject of security, the normal citizen who is to be protected, and thus authorised the permanent policing of the boundaries – physical and metaphorical – from which such identity is constituted.

Conclusion

What can we say then about empire? Well, in keeping with our theme here, we can say that empire is a distinct form of the globalisation of organised violence that draws its political authority from a geography of fear which induces a state of crisis and, hence, demands securitisation. Moreover, we can say that this securitisation takes the form of a policing which ignores boundaries and extends a virtual battlespace well into the daily lives of these subjects on whose behalf it wages war. Its vertical vectors and networked capabilities mean that it is tempted to strike at will, in contradiction of the Westphalian principles of international law. And all of this because the normal citizen has become one paralysed by a fear of an other who is implicit in a daily performance of crisis.

The task I take from this is two fold. Firstly, to delineate the workings of such empire in its local manifestations – both in its performance of crisis in the homeland, and in its practices of violence overseas. And secondly, I take it that more than ever it is necessary to make concrete what post-structuralists may refer to as a ‘de-territorialised ethics’. For if there is to be a political response to empire it must get to grips with the manner in which empire is no longer predicated upon the horizontal plane with its attendant boundaries. But this is for a future paper!