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Islam as the New Frontier: America at Work in the World

The thing that gets me is that we want our institutions to be pure and not corrupt. And yet we do the things that we know are going to corrupt them.

Police Chief Jerry Cameron, critic of the "War on Drugs"[1]

We are witnessing the triumph of a dozen evil men over American democracy and a free press.

Paul Craig Roberts, Reagan conservative[2]

Bourgeois democracy dates from the French Constitution of 1793, which was its highest and most radical expression. Its defining principle is the division of man into the *citoyen* of public life and the *bourgeois* of private life – the one endowed with universal political rights, the other the expression of particular and unequal economic interests. This division is fundamental to bourgeois democracy as a historically determinate phenomenon. Its philosophical reflection is to be found in de Sade. It is interesting that writers like Adorno are so preoccupied with de Sade, because he is the philosophical equivalent of the Constitution of 1793.

Georg Lukács[3]

Five months before his beheading, the French revolutionary Robespierre argued that virtue without terror was useless. This was the political morality of the Revolution, he said, a revolution in the name of just Law and the universal Rights of Man. In those five months, between the writing and his execution, some 10,000 men and women would be killed. Lawlessly, ruthlessly, arbitrarily. The victims not so much of this or that particular ideology but of the intensifying power struggle among different revolutionary factions. This reminds us, when we forget, how easily the modern desire for justice gives birth to terrorism. And that the modern ideal of universal human rights has from the beginning been used to argue for their violation.

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Americanists have worked hard in recent decades to disrupt the notion of a unitary domestic American identity and history; yet the temptation to continue thinking of America on the global stage in unitary and coherent terms that emphasize her hegemonic intentions and effects – and others' resistance to these – remains strong. Not by accident, the primary mode for analyzing this dynamic is socio-historical. Such studies consider America at its (apparently) most concrete – as a very specific and particular constellation of institutions, peoples and histories linked to each other through their ties to a shared political system, overlapping social imaginaries and a specific, bounded territory. There are in fact many excellent studies being published at this moment from precisely this view, carefully examining the nature of current American political, religious and cultural developments and the histories shaping them.

My intent is another one, however. I want to step back from our habit of thinking of America as a nation-state in terms similar to those through which, until recently, we were used to envisioning the modern subject: that is, nation-state and

individual as self-conscious, autonomous and coherent actors at work in the world and on the stages of history. Just as we have had to rethink the nature of individual identity and agency, we need to rethink those of the nation-state active in the world. This is not to dismiss socio-historical approaches. Precisely because these share many of the same assumptions undergirding our international treaties and conventions, they remain crucial both to an understanding and a critique of the United States. But once America violates the most important, fundamental treaties and conventions – makes of others states' sovereignty a quaint relic, qualifies the Geneva conventions, allows the American president to place himself all but above the law of the land, and asserts that anti-American militants are unprotected by any law of any kind – then there is a different logic at work.

And this is the problem that concerns me. How should we think about what America is doing in the world today? And more particularly, how should we think about America's relation to Islam and the Islamic world, as this is being foregrounded by current events? In thinking about these questions, I very gradually become dissatisfied with purely socio-historical analyses because these seem, to me, to miss the most fundamental aspects of the forces shaping our world today, both in terms of their relation to our inherited structures of power and currently emergent ones. The following essay, then, is an attempt to begin thinking about this problem from a different angle, one that can address not only the specificity of America but its deep imbrication in the world, even as that world is rapidly shifting and tilting in quite new ways. So that at moments I will be very specific, very "local," and at others quite abstract. At the same time, the result is that I talk very little, in fact not at all, about Islam and the Islamic world itself; precisely because so much of what America is doing at the moment has little if anything to do with Islam itself and much more to do with the nature of global power relations and American self-

understanding. In this sense, this is a deeply incomplete essay, that would clearly be more fully responsive to current global dynamics if I would relate the argument made here to an analysis of the ways in which Islam and the Islamic world are likewise at work in the world today, in relation to inherited traditions, Islamic global desires and an America that is just as often as fantastic and imagined as America's vision of Islam is.

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The first and most important framework for this analysis is not the nature of American society and politics per se but rather globalization, as it is fundamentally transforming the setting within which our democratic societies function. Virtually all states and their societies now are subject to forces of pluralization, disaggregation, and destabilization which they do not have the means to direct. If prior to World War II, states were the motors of globalization, today globalization has become the driving force relative to which states need to position themselves. Correspondingly, the coherence of both the nation and the state are fracturing as, on the one hand, societies become multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and even multi-national and, on the other hand, states are retreating from an emphasis on social solidarity to clear the way for global market liberalism. Even as barriers to the movement of goods, people, crime and money across national boundaries are rapidly breaking down, however, the political and judicial structures needed to regulate these remain tied to state sovereignty. Under such conditions, even as the state remains tremendously powerful, the legitimacy of state authority – and the democracy through which such authority is enabled and enacted – is triply jeopardized: it becomes increasingly difficult for the state to present itself as representative of the nation; to ensure order, welfare and continuity through time; and to reflect back to the nation an image of itself as a coherent moral community.

While this is a challenge that America shares with other nation-states, the tendency within both scholarly analyses and public debates has been to focus on the particular American content and setting of this problem. This is not surprising, given the intensity with which the culture wars are being waged, the power with which they draw virtually all issues into their orbit, and how close they at moments seem to come to tearing America apart. Yet this both misses the crucial extent to which developments within America, *including the culture wars*, are part of global dynamics and makes it more difficult to analyze America's position and role within this whole system.

That is to say, America at work in the world today and its many effects are as much that world's creation as it is America's own doing. While in American Studies we are used to analyzing how America gives shape to itself and to a world that is variously resistant and welcoming, what is important to recognize is that America emerges as much out of the flow of forces, the play of power, shaping our world as out of anything she does herself. One of the most powerful dynamics of our world today is that between pluralist democratic politics and power politics, as these interrupt and reinforce each other within, between and beyond nation-states. And America embodies this dilemma as much as any other nation; and has as little and much chance of transcending it as any of us do. This perspective asks that we reconsider our strategy, not only politically but also intellectually. Thoughtful and incisive critiques of America – its government and institutions, its myths, its self-narration – remain essential, but we also need something more: an understanding of how America is itself caught up in the dynamics of a powerfully and dramatically shifting global field of power and desire that is greater than America itself.[4]

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At the very same moment as we do this, it is important to realize that from the beginning the line dividing America from the world has never been clear. The fundamental ambivalence of America lies in the fact that while it has been clearly bounded as a place – even as those boundaries have changed through expansion and conquest – the idea of America is unbounded. It both imagined itself as taking in the world and as remaking it; as absorbing the world and being absorbed by it.

So, in 1782 already, the American poet Philip Freneau imagined a North American empire that would create a brotherhood of nations by dispersing the wealth of the New World to the globe's four corners. And Timothy Dwight in 1794 would inspire New England with his vision of a world blissfully liberated and a mankind renovated by an American expansion that

> spread their freedom to the Asian sea
> ...
> O'er plains of slaughter, and o'er wilds of fear,
> Towns, cities, fanes, shall lift their towery pride
> ...
> And the starr'd ensign court Korean gales.
> ...
> And Tartar desarts hail the rising day;
> From the long torpor startled China wake;
> Her chains of misery rous'd Peruvia break;
> Man link to man; with bosom bosom twine;
> And one great bond the house of Adam join:
> The sacred promise full completion know,
> And peace, and piety, the world o'erflow.[5]

Even in such a simple early poem the fundamental components of America's national narrative are already present: linking territorial movement to the spread of socio-political ideas and ideals; conceiving the enemy not so much as a

specific, historical people but as an abstracted, negative way of life to be conquered and displaced; marking territorial accumulation and ideological dispersion by material and structural development; taking as America's destiny the liberation and socio-spiritual unification of mankind; and conceptualizing this as at once a worldly, material task, a natural imperative, and a divine promise. The crucial thing to note is the extent to which this early vision in fact has been informed by European Orientalism, refracted through America. Not simply westward did "the course of empire" take its way for the Americans, as the Irish idealist philosopher George Berkeley had phrased it in the 1720s and as Benjamin Franklin elaborated some fifty years later, but more specifically Asia-ward.[6] And the Asia that Dwight imagines is roughly Europe's Orient seen from the east. It is made up of specific nations and peoples, subject to specific natural formations and tormented by specific ills, all grossly stereotyped but also distinct, while the much more immediate American West is simply an ill-defined, because in fact utterly unstudied and unknown, expanse of slaughter and fear absent of particular peoples or nations.

Confronted with an unknown American interior, the eighteenth-century American imaginary extended and linked it to an already "known" Orient and the Pacific becomes not so much a buffer as a passageway to the Asian Other. So, the transposition of Europe's Orientalist fantasies and practices to America meant both the inversion, in geographic perspective and in moral valuation, of "East" and "West" – to such an extent that in later years, Western sectionalists would deride the East (Coast) and Europe as the repository of all the political and social ills (corruption, licentiousness, cultural exhaustion and so forth) that Europe conventionally assigned to the contemporary Orient – even as it undermined the standard Orientalist opposition, even the clear borderline, between Occident and Orient. Without, however, relinquishing the notion of empire. From its earliest years, then, the American

national narrative's vision of international freedom and renewal has had nestled within it the assumption of America's own expansion. Precisely the ambiguity of the borderline between America and Asia – and more broadly, between America and the world – is what sustains, into future centuries, the national narrative's and the political nation's ambiguous entwinement of liberation and imperialism.

By the mid-nineteenth century, a powerful ontological dimension has been added by melding a vision of heroic (and profitable) Western expansion to apocalyptic Christian redemption. Its chief articulator was William Gilpin – family friend to Andrew Jackson, brother of President Van Buren's Attorney General, crucial intermediary in the American occupation of the Oregon territory, expert advisor to such statesmen as Buchanan and Polk, veteran of the Mexican-American war and of expeditions against the Pawnees and Comanches and, in later years, intimate to President Abraham Lincoln and the first governor of Colorado Territory. In a letter from 1846 published by the government, he grandly declaimed his own vision of the Republican Empire of North America:

> The *untransacted* destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent – to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean – to animate the many hundred millions of its people, and to cheer them upward ... – to agitate these Herculean masses – to establish a new order in human affairs ... – to regenerate superannuated nations – ... to stir up the sleep of a hundred centuries – to teach old nations a new civilization – to confirm the destiny of the human race – to carry the career of mankind to its culminating point – to cause a stagnant people to be reborn – to perfect science – to emblazon history with the conquest of peace – to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind – to unite the world in one social family – to dissolve the spell of tyranny

> and exalt charity – to absolve the curse that weighs down humanity, and to shed blessings round the world.[7]

The passage's wild flurry of metaphors – from a man Henry Nash Smith recognizes as "the most ambitious student of the Far West during the second half of the nineteenth century" – interweaves a whole bevy of discursive and experiential worlds: the capitalist (redemptive imperialism as transaction, career, and accumulation), the scientific (redemptive imperialism as a new order and science), the romantically organic (regenerating, awakening, rebirthing), the social (human masses animated, cheered, and agitated; the social family united), the political (tyranny dissolved), the colonial (subduing, rushing over, emblazoning, conquering), the Christian (imperialism as charitable, absolving, and blessing), and the apocalyptic (imperialism as destiny, culmination, rebirth, glorifying, and exalting). Gilpin's harnessing of virtually all the conceptual realms at his disposal to the wagon of American imperialism as it rides gloriously into the Western sunset enacts discursively the very consumptive, accumulative, impossibly aggrandizing colonial process that he envisions geographically and socially. It also comes at just the moment that the United States is literally and dramatically expanding its grasp on the West by first defeating and then annexing a third of Mexico – while rejecting its neighbor's southern, more densely populated and "darker," two-thirds out of the conviction that such a non-white, non-Protestant, mongrelized people could at best undermine but never contribute anything of value to a democratic nation.

Then, as now, America's thought about itself and its thought about the other – and such thoughts' corresponding economic, socio-cultural, and political activities – have been closely linked. Correspondingly, even as America's domestic (self-)redemptive tradition has evolved, so has its global reach. In 1850, New York Senator William H. Seward declared that

> [t]he Atlantic States, through their commercial, social, and political affinities and sympathies, are steadily renovating the Governments and the social constitutions of Europe and Africa. The Pacific States must necessarily perform the same sublime and beneficent functions in Asia. If, then, the American people shall remain an undivided nation, the ripening civilization of the West, after a separation growing wider and wider for four thousand years, will, in its circuit of the world, meet again and mingle with the declining civilization of the East on our own free soil, and a new and more perfect civilization will arise to bless the earth, under the sway of our own cherished and beneficent democratic institutions.[8]

Significant here is not only Seward's passing equalization of Europe and Africa (equal, that is, in their inferiority to and dependence on America), but also the explicitly interracial and intercultural vision of America itself that he proposes. For the first time, America is a land not only expanding westward – as so many before had imagined – but simultaneously receiving the East into its own bosom, to mingle there with the West until America itself has been transformed into a "new and more perfect civilization." At the same time, Seward's fascination with an Amer-Asian renewal of civilization, as Gilpin's own preceding passion for merging the West and Asia, links him directly to contemporary European thought – both structurally and thematically. This becomes clear when, for example, we consider Said's discussion of Flaubert's final unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* at the point that one of its main characters argues that the future of mankind lies in renewing Europe by "soldering" its people with those of Asia:

> Although Bouvard's vision of Europe regenerated by Asia is not fully spelled out, it ... can be glossed in several important ways. Like many of the two men's other visions,

> this one is *global* and it is *reconstructive*; it represents what Flaubert felt to be the nineteenth-century predilection for the rebuilding of the world according to an imaginative vision sometimes accompanied by a special scientific technique... .
>
> What Bouvard has in mind – the regeneration of Europe by Asia – was a very influential Romantic idea. Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, for example, urged upon their countrymen, and upon Europeans in general, a detailed study of India, because, they said, its was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture. And from this defeat would arise a new, revitalized Europe: the Biblical imagery of death, rebirth, and redemption is evident in this prescription. Moreover, the Romantic Orientalist project was not merely a specific instance of a general tendency; it was a powerful shaper of the tendency itself ... But what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia's *use* to modern Europe. Thus anyone who, like Schlegel or Franz Bopp, mastered an Oriental language was a spiritual hero, a knight-errant bringing back to Europe a sense of the holy mission it had now lost. (114-15, emphasis in original)

This nineteenth-century passion to reconstruct and renew the world on a global scale – that at the same time links our will to our representation, while uniting Christian tradition with modern technology and society – is then a distinctly "Western" passion not only in the regional but also in the greater cultural sense. Certainly, America seeks not to be regenerated by Asia but to itself be the agent of renewal – and not only of Asia or Africa, but of Europe as well. At the moment, then, that the Romantic European Orientalists seek regeneration in ancient Asia, America takes the liberty of proffering itself – in a gesture that simultaneously expands upon and responds to Europe's own tradition of imagining America as the New World of hope

and possibility. This is not to dispute the fact that the inward-turned isolationism emerging from the mid-nineteenth century onward has also been an influential component of American self-conception and activity. But it is crucial to recognize that the isolationist voices in America gained their intensity precisely through their opposition to an equally influential and real global vision of American essence and destiny that elaborated on, even as it transformed, Europe's global vision.

In terms of actual American politics, Seward's vision had very specific consequences. So during the 1854 Congressional free-soil debate Seward argued that the slave powers must not be given control of the American heartland in order to keep it open for immigration from abroad, and most specifically for the million freemen from Asia who, he believed, would within two decades be streaming in every year. Some years later, as Secretary of State under first Lincoln and then Johnson, Seward not only approved the American seizure of the Midway Islands and acquisition of the Danish West Indies in 1867, the same year he negotiated the purchase of Alaska from the Russians (and hoped but failed to attach Canada to the United States), but in 1868 he achieved Congressional passage of the Burlingame Treaty with China – pledging Sino-American friendship and, more importantly, providing for free immigration between the two countries. And later governments would continue the line of Seward's expansionist vision: seeking, but failing to annex the Dominican Republic in 1869; gaining rights to a naval station on Samoa in 1887, and two years later meeting in Berlin to formally divide the island with Germany and Britain; aiding the American planters' rebellion in Hawaii in 1893, and the kingdom's subsequent annexation along with that of Wake Island and Samoa in 1898; becoming actively involved in the border-conflict between Venezuela and British Guyana in 1895, to the point of supplanting Venezuela in the negotiations with Britain; supporting the Cuban José

Martí's rebellion that same year; and within three years going to war with Spain not just in the Caribbean but in the Pacific as well.

Though President McKinley in 1898 presented his nation's military intervention as the action of "an impartial neutral" facilitating "a rational compromise between the contestants" in the interests of both humanity and American lives and business, America came out of the war acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines – the latter explicitly promoted as a stepping stone to China – as well as control of Cuba. So committed was America to maintaining its Pacific base for the sake of preserving access to Asian trade and spreading American principles that when the Philippine revolutionary hero Emilio Aguinaldo declared his nation's independence in 1899, the American response was swift and brutal: burning villages, torturing captives, corralling Filipinos into "reconcentration" camps, and implementing a take-no-prisoners policy that in two years resulted in 200,000 Filipino dead. Some four years later, worried by Japan's own Asian imperialist intentions, the U.S. signed the Taft-Katsura Agreement, recognizing Japanese hegemony over Korea in exchange for Japan's commitment to not undermine American interests in the Philippines.

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Crucially, this is a field of power and desire that is not only deeply American but in many ways just as deeply modern. This modernity is the second important framework, I want to suggest, for understanding America within a global setting. Though I do not have the space to fully develop this argument here, it is important to first note that America has had a rather ambivalent relation to modernity. While on the one hand, America has always and particularly since the nineteenth century been the most modern of countries, it at the same time has also held modernity at a distance precisely because modernity has been so deeply anchored in Europe. As a result

its primary historical narrative has been not so much that of "modernization" but of "Americanization." Modernization, while clearly important, has been secondary to what is the first and foremost ideological constellation – the meaning of "America" itself – as this shapes both social imagination and lived social relations. And yet, while modernity has not been the most central means to American self understanding (including within American Studies) – to the point where "modern" has sometimes become a dirty word, embodying all that is white and male and dead – it still has the potential to provide quite essential insights into contemporary America's dynamics.

So, remembering Robespierre, America's debacle in Iraq, as in the Philippines, should not surprise us. Not because of its imperialist qualities, however, whose deep and very public ambivalences make it so distinctly American, so different from the near-unanimous European conviction of rightful dominance in its day. But rather because America's desire to liberate by occupying and to democratize through force re-enacts all over again the primal scene of political modernity. One of the first to capture the nature of this scene was the philosopher Hegel, not by accident also the first modern philosopher to recognize the significance of both the Other and of history to the problem of modern being. Reflecting with great abstraction on the French Revolution, he argued that following revolution, Terror was inevitable. The violence necessary for breaking radically with the past and introducing true freedom persists even once inherited structures have been broken. And because it persists after it has served its purpose, the revolutionary violence inevitably turns to consume that which it brought into being and made possible, this new freedom. Without, however, completely annihilating it. Instead, because history advances on the back of error – the error of unrealized self-realization – such revolutionary violence, first for truth and then against it, will give birth to a new truth. Learning from terror's violence and destruction, transcending it,

this truth becomes one that enables a superior freedom because its violence now subjects itself to the law.

Today we lack Hegel's easy faith in the progressive essence of History. And in universal laws and the truthfulness and justice of abstraction. Yet the dynamics of liberation and violence on which he wrote are still very much at play. What Hegel foregrounds is the lawlessness inherent in modern liberation precisely because, by definition, its purpose in breaking with inherited conditions is to transgress and disrupt established power and authority; not, however, in order to abolish them, which would be impossible, but to redistribute them. And it is in this sense that American practice in Iraq – using *means* which at moments clearly constitute American state terrorism, in the interests of achieving liberal democratic and economic *ends* – is morally contradictory but fundamentally reenacts the logic of modern history and philosophy.

Benjamin's famous dictum that there is no document of civilization which is not also a document of barbarism is of course deeply relevant here. Crucially, for socio-political modernity the most important documents in this respect are our national constitutions and our bills of (human) rights. These, the very foundations of our democratic orders, Benjamin and Hegel both remind us, are the products not just of powerful emancipatory ideas and good intentions, but of brutal violence and terrorism. While this is to put it in extreme terms, these terms nonetheless precisely reflect historical events. So, to put it much more specifically, one of the first mistakes in Iraq, then, was to imagine that a Constitution was an emblem of order when, given the nature of its birth and circumstances, it actually could only be either irrelevant or the site of violence.

Following the excesses of the Terror in 1794, there were widespread criticisms of the Revolution, as today there are of American global militarism following Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and the hellish civil war that Iraq has become.

There are two points to note, however. The first is that under modernity our primary narrative of liberation is that of rupture, though that rupture may be radical (revolution) or gradual (reform). Which is to say, this is a narrative that naturalizes violence. Often, however, this is reframed as a logic that separates the realm of the historical and the moral, the immanent and the transcendent, the secular and the sacred – in America institutionalized as the quasi-absolute separation of Church and State – in the interests of enabling critical and productive agency. The argument here is that precisely this separation is what enables history and politics by, for example, making rational (and economic) self-interest the basis of politics rather than it being understood in terms of the disinterested performance of virtue, self-sacrifice, piety and so forth. At the same time, *in practice*, the integration of the political and the moral is reintroduced through the back door when a virtue is made of this separation and of liberating rupture. And when it is then suggested that only through these virtues – universalizing, eternalizing and sacralizing them – we can achieve peace, prosperity and happiness. This tension, between the secularization and sacralization of modern politics is at the heart of contemporary global developments and America's role in them.

At the heart of these developments is the emergence of a new political logic, a logic of salvation politics. One of the most important points about American global politics is the fact that the authorizing principle for American imperialist practices is not civilization, as it was for imperial Europe, but rather democracy. Which is to say the logic of American imperialism is not so much evolutionary as revolutionary, and its ultimate end is not so much maturation as representation. Where the British argued that the colonized were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves, America expands in the *name* of self-determination. Where the logic of European colonialism was developmental, that of American imperialism is liberal, its emphasis on freedom

and self-creation. Rather than the other being consigned to the imaginary waiting-room of history, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's fine image, the break with the past is to take place in the here and now. Liberty, constitutions, elections, equality, democracy, now.

The second point is that American imperialism is a millenarian imperialism. As so often with imperialism, it conceives itself as liberating, but in this case it is an impulse to liberation suffused with that deeply American hunger for redemption. To free the self and other from slavery and oppression as a fundamental moral imperative. Liberty not just as a legal structure, but as a way of life and a way of being human that is inherently accessible to all. This is both its appeal and its danger.

This is a yearning as deeply religious as it is political. The historical paradox is that the great theories of liberty developed under modernity sought to free themselves from religion, to contain its power and influence by subsuming it to the secular. So American activity in the world expresses this constant doubleness, a radical religiosity alongside a radical worldliness – a movement we see repeated in America's doubled passion for moral justification alongside market principles – in the same way that classic liberal thought is deeply committed to liberty through property, to ownership of the self through ownership of goods, including that good that is the body.

Crucially, as Talal Asad has shown, the word "sacred" while it existed in medieval times, was not a part of ordinary Christian daily life. Much more important was the notion of sanctity. Only in modern times, did this word come into widespread use, and then in relation to nothing less than the French Revolution and the formation of the French nation-state, among others. So the preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man calls these rights "natural, inalienable, and sacred." The right to property is likewise described as sacred. While more generally in the 19th century, the love of nation was also understood to be sacred

(and often still is). That is to say, the notion of the sacred, while taken from the religious realm, in fact signifies a secular rupture out of which emerged the modern nation-state. What the sacred refers to is, in the first instance, the sacralization of man and of the nation-state under modernity.[9]

A century later, in the context of European colonialism and the comparison of cultures and religions this generated, anthropologists too started to make use of the notion of the "sacred." Specifically, certain human practices were argued to be ones that make something sacred by investing it with a supernatural authority of its own. This meant that "the sacred" in anthropological analysis became an external transcendent power, in the larger context in which "religion" and "nature" were being theorized as universal categories. At the same time, "the sacred was at once a transcendent force that imposed itself on the subject and a space that must never, under threat of dire consequence, be violated – that is, profaned." The echoes of American international policies following 9/11 are quite loud here.

The important thing is that modernity at this point set itself precisely this task – to profane what was presented as religiously sacred, that is, sacralized superstition, in order to liberate mankind. "It may therefore be suggested," writes Talal Asad, "that 'profanation' is a kind of forcible emancipation from error and despotism... . By successfully unmasking pretended power (profaning it) universal reason displays its own status as legitimate power" (35). Furthermore, and here the market briefly returns, "by empowering new things, this status is further confirmed. So the sacred right to property was made universal after church estates and common lands were freed. And the sanctity of conscience was constituted as a universal principle" (35-36) In other words, at the very moment of becoming secular, these terms were transcendentalized.

And this brings me back to Hegel and the French Revolution, whom I read here as origin myths for America, implying along the way that their logic helps to explain the logic of America at

work in the world today. Perhaps this is surprising not only because the French Revolution and Hegel are deeply European in their sensibility and ideals, but because they post-date America's own Revolution. But history and logic are funny things. To advance sometimes we must go back. Walter Benjamin's fragments, scavenged from his forebears' trash heaps and burnished in the interests of a revolutionary future, come to mind. Benjamin too would go against history and, in doing so, do precisely what his famous angel of history cannot: return to the past and from there awaken the dead. For Benjamin, politics is among other things all about our conceptions of history. To place our hope in progress in any simplistic fashion, and in the politicians who would carry it out, is to be integrated into an uncontrollable apparatus whose outcome is fascism. So looking at America through the eyes of the French Terror and Hegel's phenomenology, inverting secular, chronological history in this way perhaps enables a different future. We'll see. But crucially, Benjamin's revolution becomes not a break with the past but a break with the present by means of the past. This is a break with the conception of history that underlies politicians' complicity with injustice, in order to discover the possibilities they say are impossible, the ones hidden in the dust of history.

Dust, the dust of history, is important in other ways too. Especially if we look at American history. A frontier, the American frontier as much as any other, is little more than a line in the sand. One that shifts as easily as dust in the wind. And is as ungraspable. This in contrast to borders, those official divides marked by guards, guns and wire. The problem with a border is that it never lines up with the ebb and flow of frontiers across its turgid line: cultural ones, political ones, artistic ones, all sorts. So that alongside every border hide a thousand frontiers, playing hide and seek with

the guards. Dust devils they are. Naughty, seductive and revolutionary.

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But let's return to America, to the problem of America (though actually I've been talking about it all along). At first sight, it would seem that America avoided the Terror which overtook the French Revolution. Certainly, the American Revolution had its share of wartime brutality and excesses. But it did not have anything like universal terror, anything like sheer mass murder, coursing this way and that, with little respect for class, gender or person. What we might consider, however, if this could be because *in America the Terror did not follow but preceded the Revolution*. That is, it began when there were created two apart classes of people – the Indian and the African slave – against whom all forms of lawlessness and inhumanity would be practiced, sometimes arbitrarily and in slip-shod fashion and at other times with cool and evil calculation. While throughout they were subject to the law, it was a law that as often as not either deprived them of full humanity, of that recognition which is the essence of democracy and social existence, or a law whose protections were simply set aside when inconvenient. It was a law whose status as absolute authority was 'lifted away', trumped and superseded by the logic of racial difference.

That is, in America, the effect of its socio-racial divide was to create two political spaces, on one side the realm of democratization and on the other that of terror. And ever since then, to borrow the words of Du Bois, America has been two souls in one body. So one could imagine that America's democracy was untainted by the French excesses only because in America those excesses played out in the space that was by convention and necessity (in the interests of racial violence) declared to be beyond the space of democracy, beyond the pale. At the same time, this division has not been absolute and much

of the public debate in America has returned to worry this question again and again: where to draw the line of freedom and of democracy? what are to be the spaces of its deployment and of its suspension? To the extent that America identifies itself with democracy, this problematic is also at the heart of the question of America's practice in the world: where to draw the line of America? What is to be the space of her deployment and her suspension?

These days, we of course experience this much more intensely and directly when through technology the whole world is directly connected in real time. It's this virtual connection that allowed people after 9/11, for example, in all different places in the world to say things like "today, we are all Americans." At the same time, what very concretely makes us all Americans – irrespective of where we live in the world or what color our passport is – is the fact that America has the possibility to intercede wherever in the world it sees fit, however it sees fit, disregarding the tradition of state relations that modernity developed so carefully and purposefully in the interests of peace. In this sense we have all become subject to American sovereignty and to the logic of American nationalism, wherever and whoever we might be.

Now, one fundamental narrative – and some argue it is the fundamental narrative – of the American nation is the frontier narrative. It is the frontier that has defined America's distinct experience and identity, giving it its national character of independent self-reliance, pragmatism, can-do energy, and continual possibility while at the same time inculcating it with a fundamental violence, a near-genocidal violence that comes from the fact that America came into being, literally and conceptually, through the eradication of the Indian. Within the framework of the frontier narrative, what is important to note is the highly contradictory place given to the Indian. On the one hand, the Indian is absolutely and overwhelmingly present as the threatening Other who might strike at any moment and

must be overcome in order that America itself not be overcome. So irrespective of whether there are actual Indians present, the Indian is continually and inescapably present as a permanent, overwhelming threat and as a call to self-definition and action. At the same time, the Indian is entirely absent – both in the form of an absence of Indian self-representation *and* in all those representations of America as an empty, fertile land waiting to be made livable by the arrival of Europeans.

Under globalization, as this entails also the globalization of America, the whole world is transformed into the American frontier, the site of America's encounter with the Indian, whoever that Indian might be. So, George Packer, in his book *Assassin's Gate* about the process of America becoming involved in Iraq, tells of how whenever he would go to an American military base in all different places, somebody would say to him – "welcome to injun country." The important point here is that "injun country" is highly malleable both in terms of its location and its content. In this sense "injun country" is a logic rather than a place. To be welcomed to injun country is to be welcomed to the American frontier as it transcends place and time. It is to make of the frontier a state of mind, an identity, and a logic of power and of violent encounter. Comparably, a recurrent theme of American neo-conservatives has been their worry about what is happening to Europe in relation to its Islamic immigrant communities. These conservatives make the argument that Europe is not defending itself against an Islamic onslaught and that this in turn constitutes a fundamental threat not just to the West but to the survival of America itself. So, Europe too is the new frontier in this new war. In this case, it concerns a very specific location and content. But one far removed from America's actual borders.

And at the same time as American globalization makes of the world a frontier, it also abolishes the frontier, it makes all space into the territory of the nation, of America. This is a matter of political rather than geographical territorialization, a process of

nation-formation that is at one and the same time a deeply, profoundly secular process and a sacred one. Sacred in the sense that it is a matter of territory becoming the site of and subject to the Law, the law beyond the state which authorizes the state, which the state embodies, and to which its citizens are required to submit themselves.[10]

* * *

In speaking of the American frontier and its historical evolution, one of the most important sites to consider is what is perhaps the most important internal frontier – the prison as it has become an extension of the ghetto. Crucial here is the way in which over the past thirty years a penal ideology has come to structure the way in which America "manages" racial and economic difference.[11]

In 1967, inmate count in American prisons was decreasing at the rate of about 1% a year. At the same time, the government, under Lyndon B. Johnson, was planning to increase this downward trend by increasing the use of probation and parole and the use of community sanctions. In 1973, this trend had ceased, but still a national advisory committee recommended to President Nixon that there be a ten-year moratorium on the construction of large correctional facilities and that juvenile detention be phased out. Prison was presented as having a "shocking record of failure" and there was "overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it." Quite ironically, in hindsight, the argument of radical sociologists of prison, such as Andrew Scull in 1977 was that such de-carceration was against the interests of subordinate groups because it allowed the state to dump its responsibility onto the local community. At around this time, too, Jessica Mitford wrote journalistic exposes of the lawlessness and horrors permeating America's "prison's business." Meanwhile the development of a radical prisoners' rights movement

further strengthened the sense that America's prisons were in crisis, as uprisings spread throughout the country and then went international.

And then something changed. Suddenly the prison population began to explode. If in 1971 there were 176 adults incarcerated per 100,000, by the year 2000 there would be more than 700. This is 40% higher than the rate in South Africa at the height of the Anti-Apartheid struggle and it is six to twelve times the rate in Europe. In the period 1985-1995, 1631 people were being incarcerated per week, by which time penitentiaries were operating at 146% of capacity. If in 1975 less than 400,000 Americans were behind bars, some thirty years later there would be more than 2,000,000 – while if you account for all the people under parole, etc. – 6,5 million Americans are now under correctional supervision (in 1975 1 million).

The reasons for these developments are of course complex. But they include both economic and cultural changes. At the economic level, what you see is a shift away from investment in education and social welfare and towards crime control and correctional institutions. At the same time, many of those who are now jailed have been jailed for petty crimes and misdemeanors that in the past would not have resulted in their incarceration. That means, in short, that prisons are being increasingly used to manage the poor and at the same time have shifted their purpose from resocialization to punishment. This has everything to do with moving from an economy of production to one of consumption. If under a production economy, the poor still constitute backup labor, in a consumption economy they have no possible use.

To put it very bluntly, then, prisons have become not only America's pre-eminent means for managing the poor – but for punishing them for their poverty – that is, both for their inability to contribute to a nation geared towards consumption and for their uselessness to such a nation. At the same time, the media has discovered the profitability of maintaining a fear of

crime and a fascination with crime at a peak. Politicians in turn profit from such fear by presenting themselves as the restorers of law and order, while private business and the small towns marginalized by the economic globalization of America, find a very welcome means to survival and employment. Prisons then, in all senses of the word, are good for business. And as the saying goes, what's good for business is good for America.

At the same time, this is not only an economic and cultural issue, but a deeply racial one. In 1989, for the first time in history, the majority of the American prison population was black. By 1995, Blacks were nearly seven times more likely than whites to be in prison. This shift is directly related to the shifts discussed above – that is, the black community remains disproportionately poor. Once prisons start playing a fundamental role in managing the poor, blacks will be among the first to be penalized. There is, however, a further connection: namely, the ghetto. Following Max Weber, we can say that the ghetto is built out of four elements – stigma, constraint, territorial confinement and institutional encasement. In short, to quote Loïc Wacquant, who is following Max Weber, the ghetto operates as an ethnoracial prison: it encages a dishonored category and severely curtails the life chances of its members in support of the "monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities" by the dominant group.

Within that space, the disdained minority is forced to develop its own institutions, way of life, and social strategies. At the same time, the function of the ghetto is to protect others in the city, the privileged, the powerful, from pollution – by tainted, but necessary, bodies – that is, the ghetto is what Richard Sennett calls an "urban condom."

This prophylactic function is, however, very similar to that of the prison, which likewise contains potential pollution, but now by those who have violated the *socio-moral* integrity of the society, its collective conscience. This conscience in America is

of course white and middle class. And the site for just such a violation in the 1970s was the ghetto. On the one hand, the achievements of the civil rights movement meant that the ghetto no longer could be depended on to contain the black masses – whose way out of the ghetto had now widened, if not opened completely. At the very same time, the ghettos became sites of a series of violent upheavals that likewise suggested that the ghetto walls no longer would contain the black threat. So, following Wacquant, "as the walls of the ghetto shook, ... , the walls of the prison were correspondingly strengthened" In this way the confinement and differentiation of blacks was maintained simultaneous with the advent of black civil rights.

Since then, the development has been one of mutual intrication – of slippage between prison and ghetto on the basis of their shared function and structure and "cultural syncretism" – such that "they now constitute a single *carceral continuum* which entraps a redundant population of younger black men who circulate in closed circuit between its two poles, in a cycle of marginality with devastating consequences."

Now, to return this to the larger question of America at work in the world, the important point is how this account of the "penalization" of American society foregrounds that what we see in Iraq and Abu Ghraib is not only American imperial dehumanization and racism at work, but much more specifically a matter of structural, institutional penalization and ghettoization. That is, *Iraq has been ghettoized*. This not only creates a permanent source of penal subject matter – that is, Iraqi and Muslim clients for American jails – but serves precisely the same interlinked interests as converge around the American prison system: the media profit through the spectacularization of violence and criminality; the politicians profit from asserting their authority and authorization in reestablishing law and order; and private business profit from the newly established prison and security regime generated in this way.

Iraq's ghettoization has been both spectacularly "successful" and a horrific failure. Iraq has in fact been transformed from a functioning if totalitarian society to one marked by waves of random violence and torture, most of which at this point are indigenous and primarily Muslim on Muslim. At the same time, rather than containing the threat of international Islamicist violence, the war in Iraq has broadened and sustained it. In this sense, Iraq marks not so much Iraq's ghettoization as its failed attempt.

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If Du Bois's insight was that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, then the problem of our century is America. This is putting it grandly, but is still useful. Wherever we go today, both outside and inside America, we encounter the challenge of what stance to take relative to this event of our time. In this sense, wherever we go in the world, we are in the space of America. The neo-conservatives at once recognized and implemented this when they asserted their right to preemptively attack any place and any person anywhere in the world, regardless of sovereignty, treaties or any other matter, if this was in America's interest. As Paul Craig Roberts and many others have argued, this was most certainly the work of a very specific group of intellectuals and politicians, intent on asserting the power of the American state on the world. In this sense, this has been a case of American power politics pure and simple. And an example of the utterly stupid destructiveness of greedy and arrogant power. What concerns me even more, however, is the question of how do we reign in America – and more generally, those forces that now transcend the limits of the state and as such are beyond the reach of democracy?

The months leading up to the American invasion of Iraq were filled with protests across the world, making clear to just what an extent we have become a global political community. At the

same time the impotence of our criticism and resistance is all too clear. We were not able to stop any of these events, nor are we able to today, however much we petition our politicians. In essence, we can only stand by and wait for the problems to stop and solve themselves. At the same time, pulling American-led troops out of Iraq and shutting down Guantanamo will neither end the violence, nor rebuild Iraq, nor give us any means of holding anyone accountable for the more than 50,000 Iraqis killed and the viciously careless destruction of its society in the name of protecting us from terrorism and spreading democracy. We lack both a means to global political action and a means to justice.

This raises the question of what are to be the fundamental means and ends of our politics, including the politics of America in the world, when the politics we have will not do and the politics we need do not yet exist. In this sense, our politicians and our democratic institutions, in sassing rather than sustaining the widespread global protest against the occupation of Iraq, have become obstacles to our agency in the world and to universal justice, rather than its method and embodiment. So in thinking about the nature of America today, we must consider this: that a significant part of the problem of America at work in the world is not so much America herself, but the failure of national democracies to translate into international democratic agency at a moment when we have all, potentially or actually, become subject to American global power.

While the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the closure of Abu Ghraib will address the particular issues we protested, both inside and outside America, these are only symptoms of the larger problem of living in a globalized world in which the forces shaping our lives are beyond the reach of the institutions we have for ensuring political, legal and socio-economic justice. At the same time, the nation which today embodies this dilemma most publicly, most globally, is America. In part this is

because of the particularity of her history and culture, which have everything to do with the complex relations between democracy and violence. In part, however, simply because we, the world, have need of her – have need of a nation which will take on the role of acting out for us the logic of our world. If we did not have America, we would have invented her.

NOTES

[1] LEAP promotional video, produced by Common Sense for Drug Policy <http://www.leap.cc/Multimedia/LEAPpromo.php> (25 February 2007)

[2] "Americans Have Lost Their Country" *Information Clearing House* (1 March 2007) http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article17216.htm (4 March 2007). Paul Craig Roberts was Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the Reagan administration, Associate Editor of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and Contributing Editor of *National Review*.

[3] "Lukács on His Life and Work," *New Left Review* I/68 (July-August 1971).

[4] This is a different practice than global history, as global history following Marx and Weber respectively, privileges either the economic or cultural essence as the explanatory factor of history. "Unlike Marx, Weber did not assume that there was an ultimately determining element in history, but, in his analysis of Protestantism's unique contribution to the development of capitalism, he saw rationalization as an evolutionary process. Weber was a comparativist, but he compared civilizational essences and not networks of historical interaction" (van der Veer 10).

[5] Timothy Dwight, *Greenfield Hill: A Poem* (New York, 1794) 52-3; cited in Smith 10.

[6] George Berkeley, "Verses on the Prospects of Planting Arts and Learning in America," *The Works of George Berkeley, D. D.*, ed. Alexander C. Fraser, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1901) IV, 364; cited in Smith 8.

[7] William Gilpin, *Mission of the North American People, Geographical, Social, and Political* (Philadelphia, 1874) 130; cited in Smith 37.

[8] Cited in Smith 166.

[9] See Asad 21-66.

[10] It is also of course the site of the Market, which itself also has a whole sacred and profane dynamic which I mention though I do not have the space to analyze it here.

[11] In this whole section, I rely heavily on the work and research of Loïc Wacquant, including, but not limited to, "Deadly"; "Penalization"; and "How." A number of Wacquant's articles offer variations and elaborations of his fundamental analysis of the function of ghettos and prisons in American society, so I offer a distilled version of this argument rather than specific references for each individual point.

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