



Globalization or Empire: New Tendencies in Contemporary Capitalism?¹

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Despite the fact that contemporary social paradigms emphasize the importance of particularity and specific topics in order to describe reality, it is remarkable how two knowledgeable researchers have joined their experiences and studies in the effort to develop new directions for understanding the global order. In times when the moment and the here and the now are important, they use an historical perspective that seeks to understand the evolution of the world, in an attempt to analyse in detail the passage from the modern to the post-modern period, from Imperialism to Empire, as a strong effort to understand movements in society and changes in space. Under this context, Hardt and Negri intend to develop new trends for understanding contemporary capitalism in what is considered an unbounded and open space.

Those who adopt a critical perspective might be excited and stimulated to encounter this alternative investigation that explains contemporary capitalism to us. Nevertheless there are different problematic features of the book that it is necessary to recognize. Their attempt to go beyond Marx in the explanation of capitalism is far too ambitious, resulting sometimes in general and superficial explanations and at other

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times, in fact, in real misunderstandings. From this perspective, I focus my commentary on three superficial or erroneous explanations of the processes analysed: one relates to identity and the conformation of community groups in Mexico as explained by euro-centric positions; the second relates to colonialism and post-colonialism in Latin America; and the third focuses the discussion on public-private issues in neo-liberal times, referring to the State, natural resources and the aspatiality of processes in post-modern times.

As a Mexican and Latin American geographer, I could not understand why we have to go back to the Roman Empire in order to explain how Lenin's imperialism theory rests heavily on the fixed boundaries of the national state, and where the alternative, they say, is implicit: either world communist revolution or Empire (p. 234). Especially if we recognize there were many other Empires in the antique world such as the Aztec, the Mayan and the Peruvian in Latin America, and the Chinese and Japanese in Asia, why do we make reference only to the Roman Empire for explaining an important period in the history of humanity? As far as I know, these other empires share the same characteristics given by the authors for the Roman Empire: a lack of boundaries as we know them in the modern period; a tendency to conquer spaces and to operate in all registers of the social order (pp. xiv-xv), and a political ideology joining the centre and the colonies (Carrasco, 2000, 183-192).

In making a general explanation of the conditions of the evolution of the world, hints of Euro-centrism were evident in various discussions throughout the book, discussions lacking a deep knowledge of the differences of others who do not share the general tendencies of the 'centre' discussed in this text. Is there then a lack of postmodernism in the book? If so, that might be in opposition to some of the main statements with which they begin the first passage of the text. The way that the concept of nation was born in some countries of Latin America not only speaks of subaltern nationalism, where the sense of community has been before, and is still important now (pp. 105-107); it also includes a sense of group identity inherited from the pre-Colombian periods, confronting now the trends toward privatisation of land, and the destruction of the social organization of communities, particularly those where the Indian traditions are still alive. Contrary to the statements made by the authors in *Empire*, that sense of community is not the same for all the groups of North America; since not all the groups came from Aztlan, the place from which the groups who migrated to the Valley of Mexico came (mainly the Aztecs), one cannot explain the origin and the generation of a single identity for all of the country, called "La Raza" as it is explained in the book. There are probably some histories which speak of some Mexican American groups coming from the centre of the country, but not of others who migrated to America from the south (people from Oaxaca for example) (García Martínez, 2000, 244-281), or of the identity of the Indians still living in the south of México. We can find some of their histories in books such as *Crónicas intergalácticas* (1996).

The concept of identity developed through the history of the Aztlan movement of Indians to the Valley of Mexico has a nationalistic framework opposed to that of Empire. It was 'produced' by institutionalised politicians in order to generate links

and the possibility of gathering together other identities, especially of Indians who came from the south and not from the north. It originated in order to generate boundaries, and, in fact, it relates with only part of the country in order to institutionalise its history and identity (Bernal, 2000, 143-149). In that sense, I think that even if the authors included other spaces to explain a global empire, instead of doing it through their differences, they are speaking of a unidirectional and unified vision, Euro-centric of course, of the contextual framework to understand the passages of the history of two parts of Latin America (Mexico and Peru), instead of using different contexts of passages leading to the same *Empire* perspective.

Second, when later the authors speak about the limits of the theories developed in the Third World in order to understand innovations and antagonisms of labour in the First and the Second World (p. 264), such as dependency theory derived from the Latin American experience, world systems and theories of underdevelopment, they have assumed, in the first part of the book, that, for us Latin Americans, colonialism is also the context in which we can understand the passages to contemporary capitalism, as implicitly was stated for other realities, in such a way that the hybrid constitution of society is one of the fundamental characteristics of the period of Empire.

In that sense, I would like to remind readers of two things: that colonialism in Latin America (I exclude the United States as another process) started in the fifteenth century, before the industrialization of Europe, and finished in the nineteenth century, when modernization was a reality in the old world (García Martínez, 2000). Second, since that time, through a hybridisation process our social composition and imaginaries, identities and feelings dramatically changed, a change we still have with us today (Manrique, 2000, 236-240). In that sense, hybridisation for us is not a new process as the authors state that it is for the rest of the world during Empire. The context of our modernization was not, of course, that of colonization, as they stated that post-colonialism is now for the rest of the periphery, but of course dependency, underdevelopment and since then our marginal participation in the world system.

Therefore, even if I agree with the authors that the potential for revolution is not owned solely by the Third World, as they assume that these theories declare, but rather in conjunction with the imaginaries and perspectives of the First and Second Worlds, there is an enormous lack of understanding on the part of the authors concerning the context in which modernization took place in Latin America. On the contrary, as I have stated in different papers, we have to go back to those frameworks developed in our realities in order to give an overall understanding of the historical perspective of the processes we face at the present time (for examples, see Ramírez, 2003), just in the same way in which Europe and the developed centres have to return to the Roman Empire in order to understand what is happening today. In that sense, regarding spatial analysis we have to take into account specific contexts for each analysis. The general visions must be sensible to the fact that each space has its particular context, although different and particular perspectives could be united again, in a dialectical manner, under diverse characteristics within the same general tendency.

Third and last, in different parts of the book (mainly in Part Two) the authors talk about the conformation of the Nation-State and sovereignty. Nevertheless, there are very few statements about the neoliberal trend and the concomitant privatisation of energy, communications and services (p. 301). In that sense, they assume that: "Private property, despite its juridical powers, cannot help becoming an ever more abstract and transcendental concept and thus more detached from reality" (p. 302). And previously, using Jameson's position, they say: "that is what you have when modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." Here again they are speaking from a Euro-centrist and Northern perspective, and taking into consideration my experience as a Mexican and Latin American, we must take that asseveration in different directions and ask ourselves: What happens with countries where modernization is incomplete? Or with places in which different forms of production are overlapping? Is private property of land not important anymore? With modernization, has nature really gone for good? What is the role of the State in the privatisation of resources? Can we categorize as postmodern those areas where modernization has not yet arrived, and speak of postmodern demands regarding the appropriation and use of natural resources and not of services, networks and communications?

The answers to these questions are of vital importance in our realities, mixing a broad variety of problems and situations, linking to controversies over the spatial and the fixed in hybrid realities; they might explain the way in which global capital rules the world market through the contradictions generated by neoliberalism and the neoliberal State through the privatisation of land and natural resources, generating demands of different types as well as access and diverse possibilities for the use of natural resources (Burguete, 2000).

Let me write of one example. In Mexico, there is a strong debate in the political arena about the importance and the economic necessity of privatising the electricity sector, one of the most important vestiges of the Welfare State. The Right-wing government insists that privatisation is important in order to make the sector efficient and productive, despite well-documented experiences of poor results stemming from the privatisation of electricity services in the rest of the capitalist world.

Nevertheless, there is at the same time a strong demand for electricity from the United States, which requires a non-regulated system to facilitate access to Mexican surpluses as well as the private control of the natural resources used to generate the electricity: the water located mainly in the south, where the Indian communities have their lands. Historically, the land and the resources that it contains, such as water and wood, are part of Indian peoples' patrimony, they are 'natural' but at the same time are social, the community organises their use, exploitation and conservation (Burguete, 2000).

Electricity is one of the resources controlled and sent by networks that can be considered aspatial. But if we realize the importance of the natural resources needed for power generation, in this sense the water, among others, I do not think we can

argue about the aspatiality behind contemporary capitalism. On the contrary, what is really behind this process, in its planning and organization, and in the appropriation and transformation of natural resources, as held in what is called the Puebla-Panama Plan (Presidencia de la República, 2000), is strong pressure from the United States Government for control of the places which own the resources – oil included – in order to generate other activities leading to privatisation of the land as well. There is great opposition to these policies and to the plans on which they are based, not only in the south of the country but also in the trade unions of the electrical workers and in the urban consumers who have seen their electricity rates increase dramatically, and where the main point of this opposition is in the defence of natural resources and the sovereignty of the land where they are found.

Are these postmodern demands? In fact, I do not know, although it is one of the arguments developed by the poststructuralists over the raising of the south and the indigenous movements for defending lands and resources in Chiapas and other places. Nevertheless, the point is that in those realities, land and natural resources are still intimately tied together; they have not gone for good, and they are part of the conflict generated by the generalized privatisation of the State in neo-liberal times. In that sense, I assume that, at least in non-modernized realities, the new subjectivities of the proletariat still have a spatialized material base. Within this context we must analyse in greater detail the impact of the neoliberal State's movement to the right, particularly those of the Latin American countries along with the Mexican state together with Republicans in the United States. In a change of scale, it is important as well to differentiate the complex processes of privatisation we are facing in our latitudes, as part of the position of Empire that is developed against our countries and our lands. The sense of the private, the public and the communal has another meaning and another perspective, and of course this is of extreme importance in our countries.

Nowadays there are many examples of arguments that favour a general interpretation of contemporary capitalism. Nevertheless, it would be of great relevance to support such interpretations had they included a broad and inclusive group of people talking about their particularities from their own perspectives, rather than to generate once again "the Euro-centric vision" of an Empire from the North and the Center.

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