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THE NEW IMPERIAL CHALLENGE

Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS

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CONTENTS

	Preface	vii
Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin	Global Capitalism and American Empire	1
Aijaz Ahmad	Imperialism of Our Time	43
David Harvey	The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession	63
Gregory Albo	The Old and New Economics of Imperialism	88
Noam Chomsky	Truths and Myths about the Invasion of Iraq	114
Amy Bartholomew and Jennifer Breakspeare	Human Rights as Swords of Empire	125
Paul Rogers	The US Military Posture: ‘A Uniquely Benign Imperialism’?	146
Michael T. Klare	Blood for Oil: The Bush-Cheney Energy Strategy	166
John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark	Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism	186
Tina Wallace	NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism?	202
John S. Saul	Globalization, Imperialism, Development: False Binaries and Radical Resolutions	220
Emad El-Din Aysha	The Limits and Contradictions of ‘Americanization’	245
Bob Sutcliffe	Crossing Borders in the New Imperialism	261

PREFACE

This, the 40th volume of the *Socialist Register*, was originally planned in the spring of 2001, well before September 11, 2001, let alone the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It seemed to us that an increasingly serious limitation of contemporary socialist thought was its lack of conceptual tools capable of analyzing the nature of imperialism today, rather than recycling theories developed in a much earlier era. Our aim was to produce a volume that would help make socialist theory and analysis realistic, and socialist activism focused and coherent, in the opening years of a new century marked by US-led globalization and a new and more overt form of US imperialism.

The need for theory to inform practice is particularly acute at times of rapid and comprehensive change such as we are now experiencing. Perhaps the arbitrary division of time into centuries makes any ‘turn of the century’ seem a moment of exceptional change, yet it is striking that so many socialist thinkers had precisely the same feeling a hundred years ago, when imperialism was also a chief focus of their concern. Many non-Marxists as well as Marxists at that time saw global capitalism as in flux, or in crisis, and imperialism as its newly-defining moment. The range of thinkers involved then, and the scope of the work they undertook, should have warned us not to embark lightly on the similar task we were proposing to undertake a hundred years later, but it was only when we started commissioning contributions that we realized fully how much it was a task for many volumes, by many authors. Our response was to decide that we could at least devote two successive volumes to the theme.

The title of the *Socialist Register 2004*, ‘The New Imperial Challenge’, refers not only to the new challenges to human well-being and self-determination presented by American imperialism today, but also the challenge to the left to develop a better theory of imperialism and its relation to globalized capitalism. The 2005 *Socialist Register*, tentatively entitled ‘The New Imperial Order’, will explore the cartography of contemporary imperialism – its nature and its impact in various regions of the world – with a particular focus on finance and culture.

Our decision to take up the issue of imperialism was made only too timely by subsequent events. Bush's declaration of a 'war on terror' after the destruction of the World Trade Centre, followed by the United States' assumption of a right to wage 'pre-emptive wars', reflect the unrivalled military power of the USA, deployed by a rightwing administration with unprecedented global ambitions and willing to use that power with remarkably little thought for the consequences. This indeed calls for urgent and realistic assessment – especially since the US is also rapidly developing ever more devastating armaments, including space-based weapons which, as Noam Chomsky chillingly puts in his essay in this volume, 'may well bring biology's experiment with human intelligence to an inglorious end.' Indeed war-making – whether by the US itself, or by the states to which US weaponry is exported – seems almost to have become a 'natural' manifestation of American capitalism.

The logic of this is not new. In his study of the allies' mass bombing of Germany in World War II, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, W.G. Sebald describes how the bombing campaign was the product of a vast technical and organizational mobilization which took on its own implacable momentum, brushing aside the mounting evidence that in spite of its unspeakable cost in civilian lives and the total destruction of German cities it was militarily ineffective. The personnel involved, from arms factory workers to the bomber crews themselves, could be involved only on the basis of accepting, in one way or another, that the entire process was somehow natural. Sebald cites the reaction of a US Air Force officer, Brigadier Frederick L. Anderson, who was interviewed by a German journalist in Halberstadt in 1952. When asked if it would have made any difference if the town had flown a huge white flag of surrender from the top of its tallest church spire, Anderson replied that the bombs were 'expensive items'; 'in practice', he said, 'they couldn't have been dropped over mountains or open country after so much labor had gone into making them at home.' No one contemplating the assembly of overwhelming US military power in the Persian Gulf, in 1991 and again in 2003, could doubt that a similar logic is again at play today. It is not easy to dismiss Sebald's concluding question: whether the human catastrophes produced so regularly and predictably by this industrially-driven logic should not be thought of as 'anticipations' of 'the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature.'

We do not believe such a cataclysmic outcome is inevitable. We take heart from Eric Hobsbawm's much-cited overview of the new American empire, in the June 2003 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which concludes with the thought that 'the only thing of which we are absolutely certain is that historically it will be a temporary phenomenon, as all ... other empires have been.' Clearly, however, its defeat in good time depends on the left's ability to identify the contradictions – economic, political and ecological – of twenty-first century imperialism, and to develop effective counter-strategies in light of them. Unless the left can do this, the main response may increasingly – and ever more tragi-

cally – come from reactionary and atavistic elements. For despite its seemingly overwhelming oppressive power, American imperialism is beset by serious problems. One is the sheer cost, even for the US, of maintaining the military strength required for its new imperial ambitions. Another is the improbability of the total world order – pro-American, consumerist, resting stably on a veneer of electoral democracy – which the Bush administration appears to envisage, and the counter-productive nature of the use of brute force to achieve this unlikely political end. Even more important, perhaps, is the delegitimation that is increasingly likely to befall all the governments which the US must rely upon to govern its global empire. To find ways to intervene effectively in light of these contradictions, and to develop the capacities to do so, is the true imperial challenge to humanity.

Among our contributors, Sam Gindin holds the Packer Visiting Chair in Social Justice at York University, Toronto; Aijaz Ahmad teaches in the School of Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. David Harvey is with the Centre for Place, Culture, and Politics and teaches in the Anthropology Programme at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Greg Albo teaches Political Science at York University; and Noam Chomsky is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Amy Bartholomew teaches in the Department of Law, and Jennifer Breakspear is a graduate student in its Legal Studies programme, at Carleton University in Ottawa. Paul Rogers teaches Peace Studies at Bradford University; and Michael Klare teaches Peace & World Security Studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, MA. Tina Wallace is a research associate in International Gender Studies, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University; and John Bellamy Foster teaches in the Department of Sociology at the University of Oregon, where Brett Clark is a graduate student. John Saul is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at York University. Emad El-Din Aysha writes for *The Egyptian Gazette* and until recently taught at the American University in Cairo. Bob Sutcliffe is an independent economic researcher who until recently taught at the University of the Basque Country in Bilbao.

Every preface to the *Register* over the past forty years has included the caveat that neither the editors nor the contributors necessarily agree with everything that appears in the volume. In introducing this caveat in their preface to the 1964 volume, Ralph Miliband and John Saville explained that they thought it was necessary to make clear that the editors' own 'definite and committed point of view', which obviously coloured their choice of contributors as well as what they themselves wrote, would in no way 'imprison discussion with a narrow framework.' We are pleased that the 'wide range of ideas and arguments' this policy was intended to promote continues to characterize the *Register*, and not least its 40th volume, and we thank all our contributors for making this possible.

We also want to thank Tony Zurbrugg and Adrian Howe at Merlin Press, not only for their hard work and skill in editing this volume, but for continuing, and indeed enhancing, the intimate relationship between Merlin Press and the

Socialist Register established by Merlin's founder, Martin Eve. Among the numerous improvements they have introduced have been imaginative new cover designs, and we are especially grateful to Louis Mackay for designing one for this volume that brilliantly captures what is perhaps the new American empire's most distinctive yet also most problematic characteristic, of seeking to rule through other states. A note he sent to us, in relation to the question of which countries' flags ought to be featured on the cover, expressed this rather aptly: 'It seems to me that the imperial order that is aspired to is one in which American power is unchallenged, and unchallengeable ... That would require North Korea and its fellow traveller on the axis of evil, France, to fall into line. I think the image works better if it includes countries that are not already allies, but are destined to become allies, in a world in which the US has *only* allies at the level of nation states. Then enemies can only be within.'

That the *Register* has flourished for four decades has been due to regular infusions of new blood – not least through the innovation in 1996 of contributing editors. We want particularly to thank both our contributing and our corresponding editors – including Bill Fletcher, Jr, currently Executive Director of the Trans-Africa Forum in Washington, D.C., who joined us as a new contributing editor last year – for their advice on this volume. We are also especially grateful to Alan Zuege, one of our contributing editors at York University, for once again deploying his exceptional skills as editorial assistant for this volume. Finally, we want to thank our contributing editor George Comninel for monitoring the list-serv socialist-register@yorku.ca (where items of interest on current affairs are posted daily and where discussions of *Register* essays are encouraged), and Marsha Niemeijer for maintaining the *Socialist Register* website <http://www.yorku.ca/socreg/>.

The *Socialist Register*'s 40th anniversary comes immediately after the *Economist*'s 160th. Long before the *Register* reaches that venerable age we trust that it will have become a journal of mainstream popular opinion. As it enters its fifth decade, this is what keeps all of us going.

July 2003

L.P.

C.L.