

Marxist strategies against the policing of Empire:  
A view from the centre<sup>1</sup>

Yahya M. Madra

December 4, 2001

If we take seriously the diagnosis made in Hardt and Negri's recent book, *Empire*, we will need to situate the War in Afghanistan not only in the context of Gulf War but also in the context of the Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo. Such an approach definitely will not invalidate the marxian class analyses that go a long way to expose the direct role of the oil interests behind this bloody war which will probably culminate in the hunger-led genocide of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it will complicate the work of Marxists.

These wars—let's call them post-Cold War wars—are somewhat different from the pre-Cold War wars that Lenin was writing about. Lenin read the War of 1914–1918 as the culmination of an inter-imperialist rivalry. Accordingly, he situated them within an economic analysis of imperialism. Today, while I think that class analyses of different forms of extraction of surplus value and unequal exchange are still relevant, I also think that they have to be situated in the context of the Empire. Inter-imperialist rivalry, according to Lenin, meant struggle over surplus value either by means of increasing the rate of exploitation by means of cheapening the wage goods in the imperial centre or by securing cheaper raw materials. This has not changed today. But, today, the War in Afghanistan is as much as a struggle over surplus value (or maybe more directly over rents) as it is a part of sustained effort by the Empire to secure its conditions of existence of smooth functioning. The mere observation that this string of operations has already become a part and parcel of our society of spectacle should not be taken as a banal baudriillardian remark. These wars are horrifying not only because of their immediate material effects at ground zero but also because of the particular function that they serve in installing fear and/or a sense of security in living rooms across the world. These wars are as much about policing the Empire as they are about securing the oil reserves in Central Asia.

When Hardt and Negri are referring to Empire, they are not simply referring to the US capitalists and the US. What they have in mind is a whole set of institutions including the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and the multi-national corporations. These institutions require a smooth functioning of property rights and markets. The US military presence and might serves the purpose of securing these two basic institutions of capitalism around the globe. While Kautsky's prognosis about the end of the inter-Imperialist rivalry has come to be true, we are definitely not at that peaceful phase of capitalism, namely "ultra-imperialism". As a reminder that we are not yet in that "ultra-imperialist" phase, the most significant effect of September 11 is the fact that it blew a hole in the very centre of the police force of the Empire. I would go so far as to argue that the War in Afghanistan was inevitable only because US had to affirm itself in its role as the police force of the Empire. All the celebration about the heroism of NYPD and the FD could also be read as a part of that desire to affirm itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on and influenced by the ongoing conversations with Antonio Callari, Stephen Healy, and Erik Olsen. The usual caveat applies.

*Discourses of the Empire: Policing the Globe*

'Nothing will ever be the same after September 11' sounds like the most ethnocentric lamentation of a tragedy. 'We will never forget this, and we will make you to never forget' has been the official follow-up therapeutical inculcation (telkin) that seems to be so naturally derived from it. It indeed shows how too easily a patriotic mourning lends itself into a national healing based on the hatred of the other, into the wish of vengeance that the other suffers, preferably much more.

Yet, after all, perhaps it is true that nothing will ever be the same after September 11. And this is not because, US will watch over with impunity, and dictate unilaterally that every one of its possible enemies suffers at least as much as it did. No. This will be because all the other nations will be all too willing to carry out the international mission that is spelled out by US: that is getting rid of the truly global enemies which only on the surface seem to wear their domestic masks. The other nations of the world would not be doing this just out of respect, or out of fear for US. No. They will be doing it, because they all have their own internal enemies to get rid of, their own domestic social problems to suppress. They have already had them, before September 11. But, now they have a better opportunity to couch the motivations behind their internal cleansing within the language of contributing to the international security, to the global humanitarian intervention. There is less chance of receiving international retribution or condemnation for turning to random and selective acts of violence.

One thing that is not getting enough press coverage in US progressive, left-leaning analyses, is precisely these ways in which different governments are reappropriating the war against terrorism signifier to redefine their repressive policies in a new and globally acclaimed mission. The capitalist-militarist governments all around the world have enough of an agency, and illegitimacy to deploy the war against terrorism as they see fit, to crunch any political, cultural or economic opposition at home as well as to dispatch military threats to their neighbors. In this respect, they are not just the blind followers of US hegemonic interests, but makes of their own destinies, but in the name of a higher good: global security.

Under the banner of the war against terrorism, Malaysia condemns the radical Islamic PAS for harboring terrorism, Japan sails two modern destroyers to the Indian ocean for the first time since WW2, and passes a new anti-terrorism law both of which serve as a threat to its neighbors. China demonizes Muslim Uighur opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang and presents the movement as supported and trained by Osama bin Laden. Putin's advisor Sergei Karganov could publicly declare that "after the bombing of Afghanistan, the American and the British have lost the moral right to criticize Russia on the way it is conducting the Chechen war. It is very likely that two years from now, Russian soldiers have to do just what the Americans are doing for us today.". While Britain opts out of Article 5 on the European convention on Human Rights, which bans arbitrary detention without a formal public trial, in Nicaragua, the campaign against the former Sandinista leader, Ortega, in the recent elections was rallied under the banner of opposing the former terrorists to come to power. Backed also by US support, and the likes of Jeb Bush who attacked Ortega because he "neither understands, nor embraces the basic concepts of freedom, democracy and free enterprise. Ortega has a relationship

of more than 30 years with states and individuals who shelter and condone international terrorism.”, war against terrorism campaign contributed to Ortega’s loss of election. In Zimbabwe, Mugabe is to introduce new security laws that provide death penalty for terrorist who are the British and the white farmers. In Turkey, a new boost of nationalism makes its appearance as the country is getting ready to play the good, secular Muslim country that boasts about, and prepares to teach his experienced past of “war against Kurdish, and militant leftist terrorism” to inexperienced US, and to the condescending European Union.

One does not need to go so far as to concoct a conspiracy theory in order to entertain the idea that US enjoys ideological benefits from the string of operations in the post-Cold War that is in excess of the immediate benefits of each and every operation. US officials are not being cynical when they are talking about the necessity of securing the conditions of existence of “freedom, democracy, and free enterprise”. In fact, I believe that they are thoroughly sincere about this. And I believe that we as Marxist should take their sincerity seriously.

Therefore if to expose the struggle over surplus value is one necessary strategy, another one is to take seriously a discourse that the Empire is mobilising to justify its bloody policing practice. The discourse of human rights is a constant theme that is being mobilised in order to justify this string of operations. Even in a critical Hollywood representation of Gulf War, *Three Kings*, the human rights violations of the Baas government in Iraq is taken as a given. Under the aegis of Clintonesque Third Way neo-liberalism, the war in Kosovo was justified even by many on the left as an operation to defend human rights. The War in Afghanistan is not anymore a mere hot pursuit of terrorists. It is also a war waged for not only the rights of women to buy cosmetics but also for the rights of body builders to expose their shiny pumped up muscles.

As countries prove to US that they are faithfully subscribing themselves to the “anonymous” war against terrorism in their own ways of repressing their domestic oppositions, they would in turn demand more favors and aid from US, while, simultaneously, putting the responsibility of increased instabilities and discontent of their country on US for its alleged coercion of these benevolent governments to turn their back against their own population. So after all, in an ironic way, US may end up being the loser of its selectively used invention: “war against terrorism” and “siding with the civilized world”.

#### *Human rights as a terrain of struggle*

A point of departure in order to think about Marxist strategies is to remind ourselves that Human Rights is a terrain of struggle. The meaning of Human Rights, what it actually consists of has always been contested and changed over the last two centuries. The key justification of the Empire and its policing operations is ultimately resonating as a necessary and “unpleasant” defence of some conception of human rights. Without doubt, the recent debate on civil liberties is just another staging of the contradictions unleashed by the ambivalent status of what really human rights are about.

Nevertheless, the precise Marxian point has always been not only to reject the way in which labour power is treated as a “thing”, as a “commodity”, but also the way in which

the “hidden abode of production” has been treated as a private sphere where human rights are violently suspended. Maybe, the moment the spokespersons for the Empire and its police force are indignantly and sincerely claiming to be acting in the name of human rights should be the precise moment that we begin to raise issues about the horrific violation of human rights in the very heart of the Empire. A violation which is, in fact, constitutive of the Empire.

The list of unfinished and ensuing national acts against terror admittedly makes the current global situation even more threatening and complicated than it seems. It certainly multiplies the burden on the shoulders of us, the radicals, who are trying to lay out political strategies, and produce languages of intervention against the current war in Afghanistan. But, simultaneously, it also expands the horizon of intervention for the radicals. After all, as much as we fight against the war in Afghanistan, should not we be struggling against the right-wing Danish Progress Party’s call for a ‘Muslim-free’ Denmark in the name of preventing the import of Islamic terrorism? As much as we are to condemn Sharon’s attempt at legitimizing the colonization of the Palestinian people in a statement, “we are together with the US and the British, because one should fight terror”, need not we be opposed to Seoul’s proclamation of new anti-terror measures that is directed against North Korea?

US might seem to be the instigator of the recent global crises, however, it is not the center, or the mastermind of it. Hence, radicals should not only focus their energies to what US is doing. They should not be content with a mere anti-US ideology, neither need they be restricted to the anti-war discourse. Important as these agendas are, the radical struggle can and need to be targeted against a multitude of class, ethnic, nationalist oppressions which are connected through the networks of the Empire, as Hardt and Negri would put it. In current conjuncture, the connection is laid out in the common language of the ‘war against terrorism’ that seem to accommodate so many diverse agendas of domination.

Only then, we as radicals could give a new meaning to the statement “Nothing will ever be the same after September 11”, because then we would be struggling at many fronts, through the pores of the Empire, to make sure that there will not be similar September 11s ANYWHERE!, not just US. And only then, the move, as Zizek demands, from "A thing like this should not happen HERE!" to "A thing like this should not happen ANYWHERE!" could be actualized as a universal ethical statement.