

GOOD INTENTIONS

Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism

The New Imperialism, Volume 4

Edited by
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Front cover image: According to the official caption, this is US Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Porfirio Nino, from Maritime Civil Affairs Team 104, who practices speaking Kinyarwanda, one of the official languages of Rwanda, during a civil observation mission in Bunyamanza, Rwanda, August 7, 2009. (DoD photo by Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Jon E. McMillan, US Navy. Public domain.) This particular photograph was also used as the lead image for a 2011 presentation by AFRICOM titled, "United States Africa Command: The First Three Years". On the image the following words were superimposed: "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu' I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.~ Zulu proverb"

Back cover image: According to the official caption, these are US Airmen assigned to the 23rd Equipment Maintenance Squadron, 75th Aircraft Maintenance Unit "downloading" an A-10C Thunderbolt II aircraft during an operational readiness exercise at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, August 4, 2009. (DoD photo by Airman 1st Class Joshua Green, US Air Force. Public domain.)

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CHAPTER 5

The International Economic Sovereignty of the United States of America: Integrating the Exception into Our Understanding of Empire



Karine Perron

Championing itself as the leader of capitalism, more obviously so since the Cold War, the US has led the world into an era of neoliberalism in which the free market is deemed to be the ultimate way to prosperity (Ellwood, 2010). In fact, after memories were cleared of the factors that led the US into the Great Depression of the 1930s, the end of World War II was followed by the rebirth of the belief in the free market, a belief which was best expressed through the creation of the Bretton Woods trio: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the latter succeeded by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since then, the US has controlled a good deal of the financial world and it can be argued that the country has both written the rules and enforced them.

However, a simple look at the course of US economic history allows one to realize that the US feels free to break the rules of capitalism it advocates whenever the occasion demands it for the benefit of the country and especially its corporations. Michael Ignatieff has addressed the excep-

tionality of US capacity to both be an advocate of human rights, while disrespecting them on multiple occasions: “What needs explaining is the paradox of being simultaneously a leader and an outlier” (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 2). It is with this paradox in mind that this chapter examines what we might call a state of exceptionalism: the various ways in which the US influences the international economy in its favour and imposes on the rest of the world rules it does not apply to itself. The role of multilateral international economic and politic institutions in which the US holds sway, with a focus on the IMF, will first be examined. Then, the claims of the US to economic liberalism will be contrasted with the managed trade policy that has actually been applied and the way the WTO has been both advocated and disregarded according to the situation. The overthrow of the government of Guatemala in 1954, as just one notorious case, will provide an example of the extent to which the US has gone to control the economic and political direction of dissident countries and to protect American corporate interests (Kinzer, 2006). Finally, the US strategy of enlargement will be used to open up a discussion about the significance of this international economic control, as well as the implications of the US deciding on the exception.

US Influence in Multilateral Economic Institutions: The International Monetary Fund

International economic institutions have proven to be some of the most effective organisms through which the US has advanced its economic agenda. After World War II, there was a desire among developed countries to create a set of rules that would prevent crises such as that of the 1930s (Ellwood, 2010). The “challenge of peace,” as the post-war period was heralded, was to produce economic growth and to locate markets for the productive capacity of the US in a period when vast regions of Europe and

Asia were badly damaged by war (Nixon, 1971; Ellwood, 2010). These realities shaped the goals of the Bretton Woods meeting in 1944, and the proposals that followed set the tone of early post-war US liberalism, including the implementation of a fixed exchange rate with the US dollar as the international currency, and free trade as the ideology (Harvey, 2003; Ellwood, 2010). The IMF and the World Bank were born out of the Bretton Woods meeting and were meant to promote free trade. They were also powerful instruments for the US to use to its advantage (Harvey, 2003). This fact did not, however, come as a surprise to everyone present at this meeting:

“Keynes, Britain’s delegate to the meeting, advocated a balanced world trade system with strict controls on the movement of capital across borders. He held that the free movement of all goods and capital, advocated most powerfully by the US delegation, would inevitably lead to inequalities and instabilities”. (Ellwood, 2010, p. 36)

The IMF was designed by the representatives attending the Bretton Woods meeting, and the US had the strongest voice. The functioning of the organization itself gives a clear idea of the weight of America in the decision-making process: voting power is directly correlated with the member country’s monetary contribution to the Fund (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2014). To illustrate this, when the IMF was first founded, the American quota, on which the number of allocated votes is based, was \$2.75 billion, over twice that of the closest member country’s quota, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which was \$1.2 billion (IMF, 2011, Schedule A). Today, there are 188 member countries of the IMF, and the US still possesses by far the largest voting share, with 16.75% of votes. The second country in terms of voting power is Japan, with 6.23% (IMF, 2014). If there were to be any doubts about the degree of control America has over the IMF, the information available on the official website of the organization should help to dispel them.

The IMF states as its objective (among others) the creation of economic stability and growth. In order to allow this, the organization deems it necessary to break down trade barriers and unfair competition tactics, such as the devaluation of national currencies (IMF, 2011, Article 1). It is interesting to note that these objectives were disregarded by the US on various occasions since the foundation of the Fund. The *Job Development Act* of 1971, also called the Nixon Shock, was an obvious case, since it implied the President's unilateral decision to abolish the Gold Standard (the direct convertibility of gold into US dollars) precisely in order to devalue the dollar and dramatically reduce the US' foreign debt. This measure led to the end of the fixed exchange rate and a return of floating rates and risky speculations (Harvey, 2003, p. 62; Ellwood, 2010). The President was well aware of the repercussions of this decision on international trade, as demonstrated by this quote from his address to the nation: "Now, this action will not win us any friends among the international money traders. But our primary concern is with the American workers, and with fair competition around the world....As a result of these actions, the product of American labor will be more competitive, and the unfair edge that some of our foreign competition has will be removed" (Nixon, 1971). The meaning of "fair competition" fluctuated; it was apparently contingent on the economic situation of the US. Another issue with which the IMF concerns itself are the economic policies of the countries to which it lends money (IMF, 2014). Structural adjustment measures imposed by the IMF include the devaluation of the national currency; significant cuts in government spending, such as social services and subsidies for products that meet basic needs; privatization of state-owned enterprises and reduction of the public sector; and, of course, the abolition of trade barriers (Ellwood, 2010). While in 1999 the Structural Adjustment Facility was replaced with the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, and the measures have officially been rendered more social-friendly (IMF, 2009), multiple studies have shown the disastrous social effects of such measures,

and the IMF itself has been forced to recognize their ineffectiveness in some cases (IMF, 2013; Stevis, 2013/6/5). However, debtor nations were not given the privilege of choice:

“Countries were forced to adopt the austerity measures if they wanted to get the IMF ‘seal of approval’. Without it they would be ostracized to the fringes of the global economy”. (Ellwood, 2010, p. 56)

Again, when examining structural adjustment measures advocated by the IMF, one quickly notices that the US has not been a model for these measures when it itself has been in economic difficulty, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. The country with the largest debt in the world apparently saw no contradictions in continually promoting economic liberalism and spending \$350 billion dollars in a bailout of private banks, and proposing the largest budget deficit since World War II (Meyerson & Roberto, 2009). As David Harvey summarizes:

“Any other country in the world that exhibited such macroeconomic conditions would by now have been subjected to ruthless austerity and structural adjustment procedures by the IMF. But the IMF is the United States”. (Harvey, 2003, p. 72)

Clearly the US, in not considering itself bound by the same obligations as others, decides that it is the exception.

Unilateral Decisions: Using and Disregarding WTO

While the IMF plays a central role in multilateral international economic decisions and influence, most trade agreements are made on the bilateral level (Laïdi, 2008). Considering the necessity for US companies to sell their products outside the home country, because of the domestic market saturation, US trade policy consists of what can be called an offensive or market access strategy (Laïdi,

2008). In fact, most of the trade interests of the country are about exporting American products and services to other countries, with as little in the way trade barriers as possible. However, as we will see, the US also has defensive interests, and its advocacy for market liberalization has limitations when it comes to imports of products that compete with American-made merchandise (Ashbee & Waddan, 2010).

When conflicts arise between member nations concerning trade, the World Trade Organization comes into play, and it has been particularly useful for the US in the last 20 years. The WTO offers a number of advantages for the US, both in terms of effectiveness towards reaching its trade goals of opening markets abroad and in terms of perceived international legitimacy in doing so. In fact, unlike the IMF, voting power in the WTO is not as glaringly skewed and the rulings are based on law rather than on internal policies (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2014). According to Sanchez (2002), resorting to the WTO for dispute resolution, as opposed to so-called “managed trade policies,” which include the dispositions of Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 (International Trade Administration [ITA], 2013), is ideal for the US in terms of projecting legitimacy regarding US trade policy decisions, as the WTO’s ruling system is objectively equitable. Sanchez expresses this opinion as a critique of the Clinton administration’s policies, which relied heavily on unilateral market-opening strategies that consisted of threatening noncompliant countries with trade sanctions, such as retaliatory taxes on certain products (Sanchez, 2002; ITA, 2013). Japan was one of the countries most heavily targeted by US pressure to open up its market to American products during the Clinton years, and it was the country that proved most responsive to retaliation threats (Zeng, 2002). Remarkably, Japan was also successfully constructed in the American population’s mind as the country most likely to challenge US economic dominance with its unfair competition tactics. This belief, fallacious to say the least, made the application of Section 301 acceptable to the public regardless of

the pretended commitment to free trade (Sanchez, 2002; Zeng, 2002). For the 42nd President of the US, free trade was to be applied only when it served US interests, and this belief arguably has stayed consistently in place with the following administrations. We will get back to this in the following section. Yet, notwithstanding US entitlement to making exceptions for itself, this openly unilateral trade-first policy has not been particularly effective in terms of international acceptance (Sanchez, 2002), which is why the resort to the WTO has become increasingly important thereafter (WTO, 2014).

However equitable the rules of the WTO might appear to be on paper – because its system is based on the capacity of the countries in a quarrel to make their legal cases in front of the Dispute Resolution Body (WTO, 2014) – the economic capacity of the countries in question definitely influences the process and the results. Ellwood takes notice of this situation: “All nations have the right to use DRB to pursue their economic self-interest. But the fact is that the world’s major trading nations are also its most powerful economic actors. So the tendency is for the strong to use the new rules to dominate the weaker countries” (2010, p. 43). Moreover, nearly all the propositions of the 16 multi-lateral agreements that all 159 members of the WTO have agreed to largely favour the offensive interests of richer countries such as the US (Laïdi, 2008), which is congruent with the first point of the description of the activities of the WTO stating that the reduction or elimination of obstacles to trade is a primary goal (WTO, 2014).

Abundant examples of occasions the US brought countries reluctant to open up their markets to American exports in front of the WTO’s Dispute Resolution Body and won its case can be found in Ellwood (2010) and Harvey (2003), as well as in the archives of the WTO (WTO, 2014). Ranking higher in the interests of this chapter, of course, are the cases in which the US disrespected the rules set by the WTO. One such instance can be found quite recently in the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) of 2009 presented by the Obama administration to counter the dis-

astrous effects of the 2008 financial crisis (Ashbee & Waddan, 2010). Indeed, the stimulus package included a “buy American” stipulation that demanded the use of local steel and iron rather than cheaper foreign material (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2009). These provisions, of course, disrespected the conditions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that the US had signed with Mexico and Canada (Ashbee & Waddan, 2010).

This disregard for the free trade agreement should not necessarily have come as a surprise, since another case of the US privileging American steel for the construction of its infrastructure occurred a few years earlier: “US abandonment of the spirit if not the letter of the WTO rules against protectionism by the imposition of tariffs on steel imports in 2002 was a particularly ominous sign” (Harvey, 2003, p. 71). The WTO’s Dispute Settlement Body ruled in November 2003 that the decision was illegal (WTO, 2003), whereas the Bush administration disagreed and ignored both the WTO’s decision and the European Union’s threats of retaliation (Tran, 2003/11/11). A month later, and a little under two years after the imposition of the tariffs, the President lifted them (Bush, 2003; WTO, 2003). Never did he formally accept the WTO’s decision (Bush, 2003), which is quite telling as the Bush administration was a fervent proponent of free trade ideology (Ashbee & Waddan, 2010).

Regime Change

The previous sections intended to present the ways in which the US seeks to achieve its economic goals through both multilateral means, with the use of the IMF, and through bilateral agreements settled by the WTO. What is striking from the examples provided is the inconsistency of the US’ policy regarding free trade, which is at once strongly advocated or ignored according to the situation. In spite of official statements from Presidents, of IMF deci-

sions, or of the brutal opening of foreign markets by means that go from economic sanctions to overthrowing governments that refused to grant market access to American corporations (Kinzer, 2006), there is no such thing as a US commitment to free trade *as such*. What there is, however, is a commitment to American corporate interests and to the belief in the right of America to decide on exceptions (Chomsky, 1993).

Stephen Kinzer provides numerous cases in which the US not only exercised influence in countries to advance corporate interests, but planned and executed the overthrow of governments (Kinzer, 2006). The example of Guatemala in 1954 is especially useful in showing to what lengths the US will go to enhance its corporate interests, especially given how blatant the facts of US intervention were, even sixty years ago when the American economy unlikely would have been qualified as weak. The government of Guatemala was democratically elected and nationalist, and its president was not willing to abide to any and all US demands. The United Fruit Company, an American corporation, dominated the Guatemalan economy: it was responsible for the great majority of banana exports and consequently much of the employment (Kinzer, 2006). What became an issue between the government and the United Fruit Company, however, were the millions of acres of land that the company owned but did not use, while parts of the population of Guatemala were landless and going hungry. The government demanded that United Fruit sell it the land at the price evaluated by the company in its last tax returns (Kinzer, 2006). United Fruit refused, arguing that the land was worth a lot more than had been declared, but the President moved ahead with the law reform, which led the corporation to seek the assistance of the US government with which it had close ties. In the midst of the Cold War, little effort was required to convince the US government that the decision of the Guatemalan President was a result of anti-American sentiment and pressure from the Soviet Union (Kinzer, 2006). Regardless of how American leaders

have taken pride in their work towards defending democracy in Guatemala (Lake, 1993), the truth is that an overthrow of the democratically elected government was then prepared and executed, and a dictatorship that would prioritize American interests over national ones was established (Brockett, 2002; Kinzer, 2006). The US promised Guatemala to become a “showcase for democracy,” but reality was that the goal of liberalization of the economy, or “anticommunism,” had priority over democratization (Brockett, 2002). The priority given to economic interests over the development of democracy was mentioned by Harvey when he wrote about the contradiction of the US strategy from 1945 to 1970 to expand its influence around the world: “whenever there was a conflict between democracy, on the one hand, and order and stability built on propertied interests on the other, the US always opted for the latter” (Harvey, 2003, p. 59).

The Strategy of Enlargement

One might be tempted to believe that the end of the Cold War could have brought changes to the foreign and economic policies of the US, given the passing of the “communist threat”. Anthony Lake, a foreign policy and national security advisor for the Clinton administration, addressed the question of American post-Cold War vision (Chomsky, 1993; Lake, 1993). In his discourse Lake clearly outlined a vision of the global role the US should play. He first reminded us that Bill Clinton, who was president at the time, promised to work towards heightened US engagement internationally with his priorities being economic growth, national security, and the promotion of democracy (Lake, 1993). It is interesting to note how these three objectives effectively become one, as he clearly indicated what was at stake: “Whether Americans’ real incomes double every 26 years, as they did in the 1960s, or every 36 years, as they did during the late ‘70s and ‘80s” (Lake, 1993). According to Giorgio Agamben, anything

that is seen as endangering national security justifies the declaration of a state of exception, and to paraphrase Bal-ladore-Pallieri (as cited in Agamben, 2003) and Schmitt (2005), the notion of exception rests upon the concept of necessity, which is entirely subjective and contingent on what the decision-maker wishes to achieve. Therefore, declaring economic growth to be the main concern of the US' strategy of enlargement has important implications for national security policies.

The leadership of the US has always deployed the definition of exception in the international sphere. When examining US economic policy, it is clear that free trade agreements and international economic policies favourable to American corporations are considered to be of high priority. Moreover, Lake's discourse clearly states that the most important threat the US faces since the end of the Cold War is lethargic economic growth, and consequently identifies the strengthening and broadening of the community of market democracies, as well as the fight against anti-capitalist states, as the way to achieve economic growth (Lake, 1993). It is irrefutable that economic growth has become a question of national security for the US: both the actions and the discourses of US leaders point to this direction. Following this idea is the fact that the protection of national security, which includes economic growth, is reason enough to install a state of exception that has slowly come to be permanent. Whereas states of exception have been declared numerous times in the past, such as during the civil war, when Lincoln suspended Habeas Corpus, and during World War I, when President Wilson assumed even broader powers, there was a shift during the Great Depression when the state of exception was for the first time defended on economic grounds. In fact in his inaugural discourse Roosevelt addressed the economic crisis metaphorically as a war: "I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe" (Roosevelt, 1933). The heri-

tage of installing measures of exception to situations of economic duress was continued by Nixon in the 1970s (Ellwood, 2010), and by the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), enacted in 1977 under Carter (Office of the Law Revision Counsel of the United States House of Representatives [OLRC], 1977). The IEEPA has legally allowed the President of the United States, in cases of emergency, to use a series of economic measures that usually would be prohibited:

“Any authority granted to the President by section 1702 of this title may be exercised to deal with any unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States, if the President declares a national emergency with respect to such threat”. (OLRC, 1977, Title 50, Section 1701)

The IEEPA has been used against at least 30 countries and groups, on several occasions in most of these particular cases, and many of the measures are still effective today (OLRC, 1977). National security issues and emergencies appear to be extremely recurrent and long lasting for the US.

Discussion

The evidence presented in the previous sections point towards the conclusion that the US strategy of enlargement and of economic growth heavily relies on declarations of exceptions, whether official or not. US action within the IMF and the influence it has over the policies of the organization, as well as its power to impose structural adjustment programs on other countries while itself disregarding the measures advocated by the IMF, give an idea of how the US can both set the rules and break them. The same can be said about American leadership’s relation with the WTO: simultaneously advocating for the princi-

ples of the WTO, and using force to open up select markets to American exports, and yet disrespecting the WTO's decisions when they are not to its advantage. The enactment and multiple uses of Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 and of IEEPA of 1977 only reinforces how large the scope of what constitutes national security and measures of exception can be for the US. When other options have failed or have been deemed not to resolve the problem swiftly enough, declassified documents prove that overthrows have been executed in order to protect and expand American corporate interests.

The primary purpose of this chapter was to show US exceptionalism when it comes to neoliberalism, that is, by sidestepping neoliberal prescriptions whenever convenient while upholding them globally. Neoliberalism is advocated and enforced solely if it is to the advantage of US corporations. The rules can and will be broken whenever they do not serve US corporate interests. Official statements barely, if at all, disguise this reality, as demonstrated by Lake's discourse, in which he both advocates international rules and subtracts the US from them: "But for any official with responsibilities for our security policies, only one overriding factor can determine whether the US should act multilaterally or unilaterally, and that is American interests" (Lake, 1993). In *Political Theology*, Schmitt (2005) discussed sovereignty in these terms: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (p. 5). It is a question of who appropriates for oneself the power to decide what constitutes order and safety without being significantly challenged (Schmitt, 2005). For the US, order and safety necessitate market economies and democracy, as well as American leadership, which Lake believes is desired and appreciated throughout the world (Lake, 1993). This leadership consequently entails that the US sets out the rules, but is also empowered to deviate from them when it judges it necessary. The information provided in this chapter leads us to the conclusion that the US is sovereign, since it shows little hesitation to decide on undertak-

ing exceptional measures on economic grounds, and has furthermore made exceptions a recurrent practice.

While the discussion of this chapter was limited to the economic aspect of exceptions and US hegemony, it could be extended to the political and military realms. Lake's discourse can be used as an interesting starting point, since it specifically addresses the idea that the US is the dominant power in the contemporary world, and mentions its unrivalled military might, while in the same breath argues that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is one of the major threats the world faces (Lake, 1993). He clearly states the aspiration to expand the scope of US influence and the intention to engage militarily in other countries' intra-national ethnic conflicts (Lake, 1993). "American exceptionalism" is more than an overly proud and arrogant self-reflection (Hongju Koh, 2003). US hegemonic ambitions are barely hidden and the idea of an American empire is now endorsed and advocated by a number of influential writers (Boot, 2001/10/15; Kaplan, 2001; Ignatieff, 2005). The power of the US to frequently decide on exceptions in the international economic realm is a significant feature of its international sovereignty; this type of sovereignty should be understood as integral part of the meaning of contemporary empire.

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