

**RÉSUMÉ**

**‘Empire américain’ et ‘l’impérialisme étatsunien’ après la guerre en Iraq : L’état américain dans l’ordre mondial contemporain**

Dan O’Meara

*Cet article s’appuie sur les différentes variables qui sont au centre des terminologies ‘empire américain’ et ‘impérialisme étatsunien’ pour montrer que ceux-ci sont des concepts plutôt que des réalités ontologiques. Ces concepts tirent leur essence des conjonctures historiques passées, des règles et des formes de résistance, des pratiques économiques et culturelles ainsi que des politiques étatiques. Ils reflètent des stratégies épistémologiques dont les validités contemporaines peuvent facilement être remises en question.*

*Ainsi, même si perçues comme ‘informel’, ou comme décentrés, ou ‘sans sens profond’, les notions d’un ‘empire’ américain ou d’un impérialisme américain sont rien de moins que de faibles analogies historiques qui obscurcissent plus qu’ils ne révèlent. Ils sont plutôt des catégories qui nous induisent en erreur quand nous faisons l’analyse de l’émergence du nouvel ordre mondial et tentons d’y former des plans d’actions.*

*En mettant en lumière les divers points saillants ontologiques de cette littérature, cet article entend présenter une analyse alternative des éléments précis quant au présent État américain et son rôle dans la politique internationale.*

## **‘American Empire’ and ‘US Imperialism’ after the war in Iraq?: The American state in the contemporary global order**

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### *Abstract*

*This article takes issue with several widely varying accounts of ‘American empire’ and ‘US imperialism’ to argue that both are concepts rather than ontological realities. Anchored in concrete but bygone historical conjunctures, forms of rule and resistance, cultural practices, and economic and state policies, such concepts reflect particular epistemological strategies whose contemporary validity can most charitably be described as questionable. Thus, whether conceived as ‘informal’ or as decentred or ‘without an address’, notions of American ‘empire’ and US imperialism are, at best, little more than weak historical analogies which obfuscate more than they reveal, and are thus confusing and misleading categories through which to analyse the emerging global order, let alone act within it. Through highlighting various ontological issues in this literature, the article presents an alternative account of the specificity of the current American state and its role in global politics.*

*‘Empire’ is a powerful and a dangerous word. It has a rich and ambiguous history. It has strong polemical connotations now as in the past (Lieven 2001: 413).*

*[T]he world would look very different today if the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany had ended up as its hegemon after World War II. Indeed, important things would have been different even if Great Britain had done so. Accordingly, contra neorealism, I suggest that the fact of American hegemony was every bit as important as the fact of American hegemony in the shaping of the post-World War II order (Ruggie 1998:14 — original emphasis).*

And just they ['Men'] seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed... they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them the names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language (Marx 1968: 96).

...building global or supranational policies or alternative political positions on outdated images such as that of empire could have mistaken if not catastrophic consequences (Agnew 2005:8).

### **Introduction**

The belligerent, seemingly expansionist and unilateralist foreign policies of the Bush administration following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have stimulated a veritable industry dealing with the tightly linked issues of empire and imperialism. Influential journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The National Interest* regularly publish articles discussing the 'new' American Empire. With an ironic bow to the notorious "Project for the New American Century", one US publishing house has launched *The American Empire Project*, publishing 12 books under this imprint since 2004.<sup>2</sup> A Google search of the term "American empire" produced over 44 million pages devoted to the issue.

If the current interest in empire and imperialism is vast, the range and extent of recent writings and commentary on these themes is truly astonishing. With remarkably few exceptions (Nitzan & Bichler 2004; Ikenberry 2004; Agnew 2005) politicians, activists, commentators and analysts across every imaginable political and/or cultural spectrum seem to agree that ours is truly the age of a 'new' American Empire and of American imperialism (aided and abetted by its subaltern British variant).

US Vice-President Cheney has invoked the sacred republican texts of Benjamin Franklin to bestow nothing less than divine blessing on the new American empire.<sup>3</sup> The two 'fundamental propositions' proclaimed by the Cheney-sponsored "Project for the New American Century" promote the view that "American leadership is good both for America and for the

world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle.”<sup>4</sup> A significant effort to encourage the US to take up the white man’s burden and to legitimize this new American empire has sprung from the nostalgic panegyric the idealised glories of Britain’s lost empire and the UK’s allegedly benign, benevolent and selfless rule over much of the globe (Ferguson 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Such imperialist apologia finds echo among at least one vigorous proponent of human rights and failed aspirant to the post of Prime Minister of Canada (Ignatieff 2003).

The distinguished American novelist and essayist, Gore Vidal, has long argued that, at least since the 1898 Spanish-American war, the US has transformed itself from a republic into a militarized empire (*inter alia*, Vidal 1987, 2000).<sup>6</sup> Vidal’s once-iconoclastic views have now found echo among some former pillars of the US foreign policy establishment (Johnson 2000, 2004). At least one other prominent American novelist has taken up the theme that the imperialistic policies of the Bush administration are a deliberate attempt to pervert the Republic and its Constitution (Smiley 2005). This idea that the American society is now riven by a struggle between the liberal and imperialistic tendencies in its political culture finds resonance among academic analysts (Ikenberry 2002, 2004). Other academic critics have pointed to the failures of the American empire (Barber 2003), its incoherence (Mann 2003) and breakdown (Todd 2003).

Moving beyond the cultural and academic mainstream, at least three leftwing tendencies have focused, in very different ways, on empire. Since Edward Said first delineated the field, one of the major themes of post-colonial studies has been to interrogate the cultural practices associated with the formation and maintenance of empire (Said 1978, 1993; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989). Secondly, the publication in 2000 of an ambitious attempt to fuse marxism and post-structuralism in a new theory of ‘decentred’ Empire (Hardt & Negri 2000) elicited both intense debate and interpretation (Passavant & Dean 2004) and furious efforts by a range of more conventional marxists to denounce the errors of this ‘new communist manifesto’ (Callinicos 2001; Zizek 2001; Coates 2002). Provoked in part by Hardt and Negri and in part by the invasion of Iraq and the explicitly imperialistic rhetoric of the Bush administration, other marxists have launched a lively debate over just what empire and imperialism entail today,

how they are linked with global capitalist accumulation, and the particular role of the United States in this latest variant of imperialism (Wood 2002 and 2003; Panitch & Leys 2003). Still other left-wing opponents of US policy criticize any attempt to locate this 'new imperialism' within the 'empire of capital', insisting rather on the 'geopolitics of empire' (Foster 2006).

### **The Problem**

If the majority of contributions to this immense literature appear to be in broad agreement that some kind of American empire exists, they also generally concur that the American Empire of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is 'new' in a dual sense. Firstly, it is different from all previously existing empires — ranging from the Roman to the post-fifteenth century European land and overseas empires. Moreover, comparing two collections of essays highly critical of US imperialism published thirty-four years apart (Fann & Hodges 1971; Gardner & Young 2005) shows that while the *idea* of an American empire and US imperialism are not new, the *content* of both appears to have changed substantially since the 1970s. In other words, while many agree that the US has long been an empire (though there is vast disagreement on exactly when the acquisition of empire began), there now seems to be broad consensus that, with globalization, this American empire has mutated into something new.

Despite such consensus on the existence and uniqueness of the contemporary, these myriad analyses are equally noteworthy for the absence of any broad agreement on just what exactly such a 'new' or 'informal' or 'decentred' American empire consists, let alone what its wellsprings, dynamics, logic and potential trajectories might be. As is well known, when Lenin wrote *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism* in 1916, he drew not just on the writings of other marxist theorists of imperialism such as Luxemburg, Hilferding and Bukharin, but equally (if not principally) on the liberal economist J.A. Hobson. At that time, most analysts had a clear understanding of just what the British Empire consisted, of its ideology, of the degree of the British state's commitment to imperial defence, of how the empire and imperialism were rooted in British culture, of the popular appeal of Empire among the population, and of the willingness of young British and colonial males to risk death in its 'defence'. There was likewise no question that the Empire was fundamental to the evolu-

tion and functioning of British capitalism. No such agreement exists today.

Such lack of agreement over the meaning, wellsprings, content, dynamics, logic and limits of American imperialism and empire is no accident. It reflects profound conceptual confusion located in each of these widely differing notions of empire and imperialism, let alone the significance of attaching the signifier ‘American’ to each. This confusion is located at two levels. The first is *ontological*: whether a US empire exists and, if it does, what are its origins?; of what does it consist?; what are its properties, propensities, dynamics, reproductive logic, contradictions and potential trajectories and consequences? Such ontological imprecision itself grows out of *epistemological confusion* — i.e. what are the procedures and practices which enable any analyst to claim to know that there is or is not such a thing as a US empire, whether formal or informal, or with a fixed abode or no address.

These are not just issues of ‘mere’ theory. They bear directly on the crucial question of how should we live and how should we act in a world increasingly beset with terrorism, militaristic and increasingly aggressive American unilateralism, intra-state armed conflict, state breakdown, globalization, existing and looming pandemics and the existential threat to human life embodied in the degradation of the environment. My profound scepticism over the utility of the concepts of ‘American empire’ and ‘US imperialism’ is not inspired by any admiration for US foreign policy. I am personally appalled by much that the United States government, its various agencies and major corporate interests have done in world politics since 1945, particularly in the Third World into which I was born. I am convinced that the policies of the current US administration represent the gravest dangers to global peace and human security since 1945. However, as someone who saw a number of friends die violently because Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in the 1980 Presidential election, I am also persuaded that differences *between* US administrations matter profoundly. For the purposes of this paper, this leads me to believe that before we can answer the questions of how we should live in this alleged ‘age of empire’, it is necessary to ask the following elementary question: How do the concepts of an American empire and US imperialism help us understand the emerging global order, the impact of US policies on our world and on the options open to us? In other words, do the *con-*

cepts of American ‘empire’ and US imperialism change anything in our analysis and understanding of current and potential US policies? What is at issue here is the *analytic utility* of these concepts.

It seems to me that if one holds that the United States is an imperialist power bent on empire, it essentially makes little or no analytical difference who occupies the White House, whether the President lies about weapons of mass destruction, or even whether America illegally invades Iraq. These things are analytically irrelevant because the ontological presumption of the givenness of US ‘imperialism’ functions to explain everything in US foreign policy. Most observers seem to agree that had the candidate who won the most votes in the 2000 Presidential election actually ended up in the Oval office, it is unlikely that Al Gore’s response to the outrages of 9/11 would have included an invasion of Iraq. But, for those who hinge their analysis of US actions around the concept of imperialism, whether Gore would have done so or not, whatever he and his administration would or would not have done in fact, or whatever any US administration does or does not do, can all be reduced to and derived from the ‘imperial’ ambitions of the US. Once the US is defined as imperialist, *everything it does* is by definition, imperialist. The concept of ‘imperialism’ cannot explain that fateful decision to go to war (or not, as the case may be). The concepts of ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ are so vast, their content so nebulous, that in supposedly explaining everything, they clarify nothing.

No paper of a reasonable length can hope to review the vast literature on these issues. Rather, my purpose is to highlight some ontological issues in this literature in a modest effort to bring some conceptual clarity to the debate, and so improve our understanding of the evolution and consequences of US foreign policy.

### **Empire as Ontology**

“[N]one but the most egregiously naïve can doubt any longer that the United States is the geopolitical centre of a vast technological empire, the largest and most powerful to date.” (Doughty 2003)

The lack of clarity and consensus over ‘American empire’ in fact reflects wide ranging disagreement concerning a number of sub-debates, which themselves pose several distinct ontological questions.

a) *Empire or hegemony?*

The first of these sub-debates turns on the relative merits of viewing current US militarized unilateralism as a function of ‘*empire*’ (and/or of ‘US imperialism), or as a corollary of American ‘*hegemony*’. To put this another way, is the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century global order itself dominated by (or indeed the same as) an ‘American empire’, or is it a highly complex set of relationships in which the American state plays a hegemonic role?

Reasoning largely by analogy, Niall Ferguson argues for ‘*empire*’ (both as an ontological fact and a moral and political necessity – Ferguson 2003b), while John Agnew explicitly *theorizes* the difference between ‘*empire*’ and ‘*hegemony*’, and provides an empirically grounded argument in favour of the latter (Agnew 2005). However, the vast bulk of this literature makes little conceptual or empirical distinction between these terms. To cite just one example, insisting on the need to *theorize* ‘imperialism’, a recent marxist analysis of the “increasingly un-concealed” nature of American empire offers no definition of either ‘*empire*’ or ‘*hegemony*’, elides constantly and without distinction between them, and appears to take both as synonymous with the external actions of what the authors label “the American imperial state” in sustaining and disciplining the “global capitalist order” (Panitch & Gindin 2003). Moreover, a close reading of this text leaves the distinct impression that the real explanatory work gets done by notions of hegemony and US “leadership”. This neatly closes the explanatory circle. Empire and imperialism = hegemony = US foreign policy = the instrument for the reconstruction and reproduction of ‘the global capitalist order’ = empire: and so we go round the mulberry bush!

This confusion between ‘*hegemony*’ and ‘*empire*’ stems of course from the so-called ‘informal’ nature of the American empire. Much of this discussion turns around the clearly different nature of *bounded space and territory* characteristic of the prior European land and overseas empires on the one hand, and the lack of a formal American empire with distinct, closed and defended boundaries on the other. While this is clearly a hugely important issue, it can be posed in these terms only because it takes for granted much of the *mythology of American exceptionalism*. Here I refer to the prevailing popular myth that unlike all other modern states, at its creation the US renounced foreign entanglements and empire, and that the republic was founded on notions



of equality rather than of *dominium* and *imperium*.

Much of the domestic opposition to the policies of the Bush administration is rooted in hankering after such republican exceptionalism, the desire to recover the pre-1898 pristine Republic and the ‘genuinely American’ from supposedly foreign notions such as ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’. Clearly here we are also posing questions of *origins* and of *identity*. Any discussion of these latter questions further raises the ontological issue of the *specificity* of the American state both at the moment of its birth and throughout its growth since 1789. These, in turn, pose important questions concerning the evolving *normative* and *institutional* frameworks of the American state.

To put these ontological issues of space and territory, of origins, of identity, of the specificity of the American state and of its normative and institutional frameworks into the proper context, is it first necessary to render explicit the terms and issues of the second sub-debate in the literature on empire and imperialism.

#### ***b) Capital-logic or state-centric logic***

This second sub-debate in the literature turns around the issue of whether the dynamics of 21<sup>st</sup> century global power struggles are most fruitfully seen as located in the logic of global capitalism or in the specificity of *the political*, and more particularly of the American state, or even — as Hardt and Negri argue — in globalized ‘network power’ that has somehow transcended both capitalism and American power. This debate is of particular, though not exclusive, interest to those who view the questions of empire and imperialism through lenses tinged with variants of marxism.

Some of the revised versions of imperialism = the present form of capitalism are fairly crude. Thus David Harvey’s notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ boils down the argument that the US lost its global superiority in production in the 1970s and is now losing financial dominance, “leaving it with military might alone” (Harvey 2003: 82-83). This turns ‘it’ into a predator who uses dispossession as the principal means of accumulation.<sup>7</sup> In particular ‘it’ seeks to ‘control oil supplies as a means to counter the power shifts threatened within the global economy’ (Harvey 2003 80-81).<sup>8</sup>

Other marxists see US imperialism as more than mere rapacious mercantilism. For Ellen Wood, the policies of the Bush

administration are an “extension, however extreme and self-defeating, of the logic inherent in US foreign policy” since 1945. This inherent foreign policy logic is itself explained as “rooted in...the systemic logic of capitalism” (Wood 2003: x). Moreover, since “the economic power of capital has detached itself from extra-economic force”, in today’s ‘empire of capital’, the globalized economy is sustained by a system of multiple sovereign states acting as “conduits of capitalist imperatives” (Wood 2002: 24). However, some of these states are insufficiently integrated into global capitalism, leaving them liable to rebel against the rule of global capital — hence the need for extra-economic and especially military coercion. The role of the US in the empire of capital is to demonstrate its hegemony in order to keep the unruly in line, and to show, “by frequent displays of military force, that it can go anywhere at any time, and do great damage” (Iraq!?, North Korea!?) (Wood 2002: 19). This leads to “war without end”. The Bush doctrine exemplifies the “specific shape” of the “new imperialism”, i.e. “the complex and contradictory relationship between capital’s expansive economic power and the more limited reach of the extra-economic force that sustains it” (Wood 2003:6).<sup>9</sup> This neatly reverses conventional Realist notions of imperial or strategic overreach by appearing to argue that the principal weakness of empire is its lack of sufficient “extra-economic coercion” rather than economic inability to finance the defence of its strategic engagements.

While agreeing that “there is a structural logic to capitalism”, Panitch and Gindin nevertheless argue for a “new theory of imperialism” which will allow for a “full appreciation of the historical factors that have led to the formation of a unique American informal empire”. They replace the *capital logic* of previous marxist theories of imperialism with a *state-centric* one: “[c]apitalist imperialism, then, needs to be understood through an extension of the theory of the capitalist state, rather than derived directly from the theory of economic stages or crises” (Panitch & Gindin 2003: 7, original emphasis). This leads them to locate the dynamics of contemporary imperialism in the *specificities* of the American state (as opposed to other capitalist states).



I think Panitch and Gindin are right to argue that an understanding of what they call ‘American empire’ needs to be located in the historical specificity of the American state. Their concept of the state is more sophisticated than Wood’s reduction-

ist notion of the state as a conduit of capitalist imperatives and of the US as the disciplining ‘extra-economic force’ sustaining the ‘rule of global capital’.

However, there are problems with their understanding of this specificity. The first is the failure to carry out on their proclaimed need to distinguish between ‘imperialism as a whole’ and US imperialism (the latter is the guarantor of the former is about as far as they get). More seriously, however, what they present is not so much a *theory* of the state (American or other), but their reading of the historical reasons which enabled the US to come to assume the role as the principal organizing and disciplining force in the reconstruction and reproduction of global capitalism during and after World War II. Perhaps even more seriously for authors who insist on the need for a *political* theory of imperialism, there is an almost total absence of politics in their account (aside from the occasional claim that the Treasury Department replaced the Pentagon as the key apparatus of the US state). Their analysis of the *specificity* of the American state fails to account for the (changing?) social composition, underlying political forces and internal struggles within that state, let alone the significance of state as opposed to federal power. The real explanatory heavy lifting in their ‘theory’ of the state as well as in their account of the specificity of the US ‘imperial state’ gets done by the needs of capital accumulation; economic determinism is smuggled back in but in the guise of a theory of the state.

Panitch and Gindin not only elide between ‘hegemony’, ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ without defining any of them, but like most writers on this issue, they use the signifiers ‘United States’ and ‘American’ without distinguishing between several different meanings of these terms. At times they are used to refer to the American state per se, at others to a particular US administration, at still others to this or that collection of (‘American’) corporate interests, at still others to the actions of certain elements within the complex bureaucratic apparatus of the American state. This failure to distinguish between the various possible sets of agents embodied in these signifiers is the equivalent of mixing not only apples and oranges, but broccoli, meat, abattoir, consumer, regulatory agencies, Texas oil men and corporate US capital all under one umbrella, and to elide unproblematically between them.

It seems clear to me that any *political* theory of American empire and US imperialism needs to differentiate between these



different uses of the term ‘United States’. If not, the default position is either a Wood-like functionalism (the state can be reduced to and derived from the extra-economic force necessary to keep ‘global capitalism’ or ‘imperialism as a whole’ functioning), or an implicit rational actor model – the political actors in charge of the state unproblematically arrive at rational decisions which serve the global interests of capital-in-general.

These ‘new’ theories of ‘new’ imperialism tell us very little that is in fact new. Given these weaknesses, it is hard to disagree that

The ‘United States’ may be strong or weak, *but is it not a capitalist empire*. The capitalists who happen to live there are decreasingly ‘American’ in terms of what they own, and many of those who own ‘American’ assets live elsewhere. The ‘United States’ has no savings to export; it desperately needs those of others. U.S. based capitalists do not unleash their government against other core countries, and when the U.S. does go to war — in Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan or Iraq — the purpose is neither conquest, nor the ‘exploitation’ of the conquered

It is not that capitalism has grown more ‘complicated’. It has become *different*. The capitalist *nomos* has changed. It is time to change our theories. (Nitzan & Bichler 2004: 63-64. Original emphasis)

In this spirit of changing our theories, and in an effort to stress the *political* dimensions of the emerging global order, the rest of this article sketches the elements which seem to me to be essential to such an analysis of this specificity of the United States. Here, again, we enter highly contested terrain. I will simply outline what seems to me to be useful ways of conceiving these related issues of the link between empire, the origins of the US state, American identity and the specificity of the US political (constitutional) system (à propos of Hardt and Negri’s views on the centrality of the US constitutional model). Probably to the astonishment of the few who might actually read this text, and who might have some knowledge of the intellectual history of the US, I draw on insights proffered by two men who were respec-

tively painted as intellectual icons by those who shared their very different premises and world views — the marxist historian William Appleman Williams, and *the* political scientist of conservative western political order, Samuel P. Huntington. Moreover, into this highly unorthodox mix, I will stir a central idea borrowed from a postmodernist critic of US foreign policy, David Campbell.

### **The Specificity of the American State**

Williams locates the origins of the ideological, economic, social and political evolution of the US in the fact that the establishment and development of European settlement on the eastern seaboard was explicitly conditioned by the *mercantilist* policies of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Restoration British government. This mercantilist ethos of Britain's imperial policies was internalized by the dominant social groups within the various colonies, and it largely inspired the struggle for independence.

This means a number of things. Firstly, it implies that America was born as an empire, that norms of expansion and exceptionalism always lay at the heart of an evolving American identity and Lockean concept natural rights.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the important differences between them, the leaders who framed the consensus of first the Continental Congresses and then of the US Constitution itself all agreed with Samuel Adams that they were involved in the business of writing “a constitution to form a great [American] empire” (Williams 1961: 116). Thus, for Williams, from the outset of the first colonial settlements, through the founding of the United States and its continental conquests and expansion — the Louisiana and Alaska purchases and aggressive 19<sup>th</sup> Century wars for land and colonies with native peoples, Mexico and Spain — continuing through the numerous 20<sup>th</sup> Century US military interventions in Latin America, right up to the wars in Indochina, the very construction of the US republic was predicated on empire ‘as a way of life’: an expansionist and exceptionalist world view of *entitlement* which was fundamentally ingrained not just in the dominant economic, social and political elites, but in the underlying norms of all American political culture and institutions (Williams 1980).<sup>11</sup>

Williams adds a further key element to this understanding of the evolution and workings of the mercantilist American republic: “each of the thirteen colonies traveled its own road to in-

dependence” (Williams 1961: 109). Stressing that the social composition specific to each colony was crucial to each’s own particular vision of the political constitution of the coming republic, he underlines the critical significance of federalism to the external policies of the evolving republic. This has huge implications for, *inter alia*, issues of *interest* and *identity*. Unlike their British, or French, or even Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch imperial equivalents (but similar to some degree to those of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), throughout much of the existence of the evolving republican ‘empire’ which was the United States, its dominant social, economic and political elites defined both their particular interests and identities in *local* rather than national terms. ‘All politics is local’ is more than just an aphorism of American politics; it is one of the keys to understanding both its domestic and foreign policies, even in an age of globalization.

This is where Samuel Huntington comes in. Perhaps the only thing that I agree with in Huntington’s controversial *oeuvre* is his characterization of the institutional armature of the American federation. Far from being a democratic republic, Huntington argues that the framers of the US Constitution set in place an institutional framework modeled on and akin to that imported by the first anglophone settlers — Tudor England under Elizabeth I (Huntington 1968: 93-139). A powerful presidency, responsible for external affairs and federal government but checked by the locally-rooted representatives seated in the House of Representative (and particularly its control of the budget), almost exactly reproduced the powers and position of the Tudor monarch with respect to the House of Commons. The US Senate (whose members were initially appointed by state governments rather than elected) was in turn modelled on Westminster’s House of Lords, but given even wider powers to constrain the actions of both the popularly elected lower chamber and the executive branch of government, and in particular, the foreign policies of the latter. US constitutional federalism likewise replicated the locally-rooted power and interests of the Tudor landed aristocracy, the yeomanry and the urban merchant class, and their collective ability to constrain the power and policies of the central government. The Jacksonian spoils system equally reflects how such locally-rooted political elites used both the evolving party system and institutions of federal government to reward vassals and courtiers, thereby consolidating their own local power base. In both cases,

the power and effectiveness of the central government depends on its ability to deal with and satisfy the interests of such locally-rooted power structures.

Huntington's parallel can be taken even further. Once King James VI of Scotland assumed the English throne as James I in 1603 and the *English* state was transformed into a *British* one, the need to reconcile minority Scottish interests with those of England, whilst simultaneously dealing with the grab for power by the Stuart monarchy, anticipated American efforts to balance state rights with those of an increasingly powerful presidency. In both situations, the inability of this constitutional architecture to reconcile these competing locally-rooted interests (and identities) in national institutions and to impose the authority of the central government over them, was a significant cause of an extremely bloody civil war. In both Britain and America, the particular form of the modern and capitalist state was midwived through an unstable compromise of these civil wars as an 'unfinished revolution', one leaving much of the locally-rooted power structure and local identities in place.<sup>12</sup>

This points to the need to integrate at least three elements into any understanding of the evolving American state – identity, interests, and institutions. I agree with Panitch and Gindin on the need to locate the *specificity* of the American as opposed to other major states from the moment of the birth of the former in 1789. As argued below, I likewise agree on the need to locate the "economic and cultural formation of... the American state" (Panitch & Gindin 2003: 10), though I draw very different conclusions from this. However, it seems to me that Panitch and Gindin are fundamentally in error in arguing that what made 'the American imperial state' unique among the 18<sup>th</sup> Century states was that from the moment of its formation "the constitutional framework of the new American state gave great powers to the central government to expand trade and make war" (Panitch & Gindin 2003: 10). This misses the crucial Madisonian point of US federalism: the constitutional powers allocated to the states, to the House of Representatives and to the Senate were explicitly framed to consolidate and protect local interests through the role of state-based representation in federal institutions. While the Constitution does indeed formally allocate power over war-making and trade to the federal government, it also ensures that this power is *shared* between the legislative and executive branches of

government rather than centralized in the hands of the executive. The President and the Congress exercise these powers *in concert* with each other. In other words, the federal executive is required to act in and through Congress, the members of which latter institutions draw their political support and power from locally-based interests.

Thus, starting with John Adams's and Jefferson's struggle to get Congress to approve and finance the construction of a navy at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, through to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the current war in Iraq, President and Congress (and other actors) have waged ongoing battles over the warmaking powers of the federal government. Likewise for commercial policy. Beginning with Hamilton's efforts to set up a national bank, through the titanic Jacksonian-era struggles over the United States Bank, 19<sup>th</sup> Century battles over the tariff, right until to current disputes involving the US and various trading 'partners', acting through their locally-elected representatives in Congress (let alone lobby groups), locally-based interest have contested, modified, and occasionally overturned the 'national' trade policies of the federal government.<sup>13</sup> In other words, rather than being *given* power over warmaking and trade, the executive branch of the federal government can only exercise such in constant negotiation and accommodation with the polymorphous power centres of American politics. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, those who exercised executive power in Britain and in France faced no such constraints.

This suggests that Panitch and Gindin are wrong in arguing that the specificity of the US state lies in the fact that it was the world's first explicitly and deliberately *capitalist* state. Rather than being created to serve the interests of an emerging capitalist class, the birth of the US state was midwived through a fractious coalition between different sets of American *mercantilist* interests, and as a fragile compromise between these opposing regional and local interests. During the first seventy-five years of the existence of the Republic, the fragility of this 'national' government was constantly underlined by the vigorous affirmation of states rights, culminating in the most bloody conflict in which the American state has yet been involved, the civil war of 1861-1865.

Hardt and Negri see in US constitutionalism (with its plurality of interests competing in a decentred and amorphous institutional structure) the model of both globalization and a new



communism immanent within it. Ironically, such Madisonian network power arises less out of American capitalism than from the abiding influence of the mercantilist patrimony of this state. While, as Appleman Williams brilliantly shows, this federal structure eventually adapted itself to capitalism and then to global power, to paraphrase a famous passage in Marx, the mercantilist traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the practices, politics, rituals and policies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century American state – no matter who occupies the White House. And of these nightmares, none is more draining and diverting than the recurring motif of ‘all politics is local’.

If we frame these locally-rooted interests and forms of representation and political contestation in terms of the cultural forms which they take and of the normative structures through which they operate, then an entirely different reading of ‘US imperialism’ becomes possible. David Campbell has persuasively argued that US foreign policy throughout the Cold War was *not* a response to a (perceived or real) external Soviet threat nor an emanation of strategic calculations of US ‘national interest’ on some geopolitical chessboard. Rather, given the local basis of identities in America, of federal representation, and of the ‘culture wars’ which have ravaged the republic since 1789, US foreign policy is fruitfully understood as an ongoing discursive strategy to forge something which has always been highly fragile – i.e. an American *national identity* (Campbell 1998).

One does not have to be a postmodernist to see the historical validity of this argument. Forged in a fratricidal revolutionary war in which hundreds of thousands of ‘Americans’ loyal to the crown were thrown out of their homeland, American society has always been driven over myriad competing visions of what ‘real American’ values are. From the Missouri compromise through the Civil War, battles over the tariff, the ‘cross of gold’, the immense issue of race, to George Bush *père*’s denunciation of the people of Massachusetts as ‘outside of the mainstream’ during the 1988 presidential election, and the never-ending debate over the role of religion in public life, issues of *identity* have been the object of particularly fierce struggles in the US. A country which set up standing legislative bodies to sniff out ‘un-American activities’ by American citizens and which decimated its principal cultural industry in the process, is one not sure of and confident in its own identity.

This highlights the point that identity is always made up of a couplet — a discourse of Self defined in counterpoint to the Other, with the latter frequently depicted as constituting an existential threat to the discursively constructed Self. Identity and threatening otherness usually go hand in hand. They are, of course, recurring themes in US social life and foreign policy.

Meshing together these insights of Williams, Huntington and Campbell leads to conclusions about the specificity of the US state very different from those of Panitch and Gindin. The ways in which the United States has acted in international and global politics since 1789 were and remain as much shaped by the dynamics of *local* politics as by any grand ‘imperialist’ project to govern global capitalism and discipline rogue states. Grand discourses of identity and external threat are always mediated through the dynamics of these local politics.

However, for the sake of argument, let us assume for a moment that Panitch and Gindin are right: that the very historical specificity of what they term ‘the American imperial state’ *has* allowed it to emerge as the ‘unique *agent*’ capable of exercising the ‘leadership’ (hegemony) to put in place during and after World War II a “set of structures” necessary to the ‘reconstruction of global capitalism’ after the “disasters of the Depression and the Second World War” (Panitch & Gindin 2003: 10).

A number of interesting historical points can be made about such a claim. Firstly, the key ‘set of structures’ to such reconstruction of global capitalism was the architecture of the Bretton Woods system. Panitch and Gindin rightly stress the central role of the head of the American delegation, Harry Dexter White, in imposing the American vision of the post-war economic order on the Bretton Woods conference. They cannot be unaware that, like Robert Oppenheimer, White’s career was destroyed and his life shortened by accusations from the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that he was a Soviet agent. Whatever the truth of these allegations,<sup>14</sup> they are highly revealing of the kind of reasoning underlying Panitch and Gindin’s argument. Either the ‘set of structures’ imposed on the world by the US in order to rescue global capitalism were conceived and set in place by a Soviet agent at the height of the Cold War — and just when the Soviet Union rejected membership in these institutions and obliged its client governments in Poland and Czechoslovakia to

renounce their own acceptance of these provisions. Or, a key architect of the reconstruction of global capitalism was destroyed by the ‘blowback’ effects of local politics on national strategists (McCarthyism), with a future US president (and himself key architect of globalization, one Richard M. Nixon), leading the pack baying for the blood of the mandarins of the State and Treasury Departments.

To make my point another way, *politics and political process* matter. Panitch and Gindin’s notion of a grand American strategy or *project* to rescue global capitalism is not derived from an analysis of actual political and ideological struggles in the American state. In other words, it is not derived — as they insist any theory of American empire and US imperialism should be — from the specificity of the political and cultural formation and evolution of the American state, nor even from the historical trajectory of class struggle within American society. Rather, their notion seems derived from a logic *imputed* to American capitalism and to a questionable reading of the place and role of the American state and economy in ‘global capitalism’.<sup>15</sup>

If, however, we are to take seriously this notion of the specificity of the American state, a further set of observations can be made concerning ‘its’ presumed ‘project’ to rescue global capitalism and to forge *and police* its ‘informal empire’. These refer to the role of the armed forces within the apparatus of the American state, the military capabilities of that state since 1945, and what the US wars in Vietnam, Somalia and Iraq reveal concerning the limits of American power, to take these in reverse order.

The overweening American military preponderance since the end of the Cold War conceals the essential limits to American power, limits which Donald Rumsfeld’s technologist fantasies and the doctrine of Revolution in Military Affairs sought to address but failed to eradicate. Despite overwhelming technological predominance, the United States is again learning the painful lesson that its armed forces *cannot* “go anywhere at any time” (Wood 2002: 19 ). American ability to wage war remains limited by factors similar to those which forced Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow — the refusal of the enemy (whether Vietnamese, Somali or Iraqi) to ‘recognize’ their own defeat; the increasing unwillingness of young American males to put their lives on the line in wars whose logic and rationale escapes

them;<sup>16</sup> the increasing dependence on the foreign creditors (principally Chinese and Japanese) who now sustain US trade and budgetary deficits and essentially finance its defence budget; the Pentagon's own breathtaking strategic, tactical and logistical incompetence in the planning and conduct of the invasion and occupation of Iraq (Ricks 2006). Simply put, while Americans seem to possess neither the stomach nor the purse necessary to pursue the 'war without end' allegedly inscribed in the logic of the 'empire of capital' (Wood 2003), let alone a coherent strategy to win such a war, their current principal opponents appear to lack none of the above.

In this context, notions of some grand imperialist strategy — whether supposedly aimed at securing global capitalism, or accumulation through dispossession, or even securing US control over a strategic area of the globe — suffers from two fundamental explanatory flaws. First, it eliminates all politics and all political process from policy. In doing so, it ironically also exactly replicates the fundamental assumption underlying Realist theories of international relations: that of the state as an anthropomorphized, rational actor who elaborates precise goals and coherent strategy based on a clear-eyed calculation of his own resources and position relative to that of his adversaries. Any reading of the build-up, conduct and consequences of the current American military adventure in Iraq cannot fail to be struck by the vast confusion, lack of clarity over goals, objectives and aims of the intervention, and the profoundly bitter and ongoing bureaucratic battles within and between the bureaucratic apparatuses of that state over the invasion and occupation. Interpreting the paranoid fantasies of the Bush administration and its vast incompetence as evidence of some grand imperialist strategy, or as inscribed in the logic of capitalist accumulation, is not only unacceptable post-hoc reasoning, it fails to account for what happened let alone indicate possible alternatives. In short, it is ontologically absurd, epistemologically incoherent and normatively misleading.

This brings me back to the specificity of the institutional arrangements of the 'American imperial state' and Campbell's notion of *identity* as the spur to foreign policy. For much of its history, and unlike all other major powers, the US possessed an insignificant standing army. To the limited extent that it projected power beyond North America, it did so through the Navy. This is significant for three reasons. Firstly, despite the significant cul-

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tural change wrought by the Cold War (see two paragraphs hence), large numbers of Americans remain wary of foreign military entanglements, particularly those smacking of great power politics.<sup>17</sup> The political weight of this significant minority, and ability to locate their anti-militarist position within a struggle over American cultural values, was something unknown in the empires of other ‘great powers’.

Secondly, while the infant Republic was shaken by fierce political struggles over how to finance the construction, maintenance and operations of a navy (let alone its conquest of ‘Islamic terrorists’, then known as ‘Barbary pirates’), until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the bureaucratic presence of the military within the apparatus and budget of the American state was relatively small compared to those of other major powers. In 1939 the US possessed the world’s second navy. Yet its army was only seventeenth in size, and its small and technologically backward air force was but a dependent branch of that army. World War II changed all this. Apart from the fact that the US emerged from the war with an unrivalled capacity to project power to and on every continent (including a monopoly of nuclear weapons), the relative technological backwardness of its armed forces and defence industries had been replaced by insurmountable advantage over all potential future rivals. However, this was initially achieved essentially on the cheap — through acquiring British technology, weapons research, intelligence and armaments expertise at firesale prices (Ponting 1990), — and drawing on the scientific expertise of a huge pool of *émigré* Europeans.

In the process, and this is my third point, the relative bureaucratic power and standing of the military (and particularly the newly minted Air Force) within American state was transformed, as was the overall bureaucratic and budgetary logic and political culture of that state (Rothkopf 2005: 4-107). Onto the perennial squabbles for turf of the localized focus of American politics was now grafted a new ultimate ideological warrant serving to legitimize or delegitimize the position of various actors —national security. Henceforth — and with an intensity and in ways that had not appeared even when the very survival of the Union was in question between 1861 and 1865 — political turf wars and local issues could be settled, or individual ambitions realized or broken, through ritualized invocation of this new holy cow suddenly elevated to the highest place in the pantheon of ‘real American’

values.

I suggested above that from the outset the discursive construction of American identity has always played out in counterpoint to a discourse of a demonized Other ('the British; 'the French; 'the Spanish'; 'the Indians', etc). However, two things were new about the post-1945 construction of American identity. On the one hand, the discursively constructed Other now came to be represented not just as the embodiment of the opposite of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny ('the best hope of mankind'), but now depicted as a *profound existential threat* to the continued existence of the republic and all it stood for. On the other hand, this potential mortal threat to American values was now depicted as being both *global* (initially 'world communism', and now 'global terrorism') and *internal* ('un-American' Americans, whether communist, socialist or Muslim). In this sense, the post-1945 elevation of 'national security' to the status of official state ideology has fundamentally secured the primacy of the interests of the entire national security apparatus (the military, the intelligence agencies, the network of corporations, think tanks and academics and 'experts' who draw their living and reputation from them), and acted as a basic disciplining tool to constrain domestic politics (and delegitimize any political positions to the left of the right wing of the Democratic Party).

This overweening normative structuring of US politics through 'national security' since 1947 has concealed a further crucial aspect of the role and place of the military in the evolution of the US state since the stirrings of rebellion against the British in the early 1770s. With the exception of the highly unequal wars of conquest against native Americans, the various land grabs from Mexico, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American war of 1898, the United States has fought only three wars by itself — the attack on north African principalities in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century (known as the war against the Barbary pirates), and the invasions of Grenada and of Panama under Reagan and Bush *père*. In every other instance, the US has either intervened in somebody else's already ongoing war, or relied on major allies. It has never been in the position of Britain in 1588 or 1807 or 1940, nor of France in 1870.

It is in this sense that Chalmers Johnson's understanding of American empire becomes pertinent. Johnson locates this empire not in some hegemonic American place within global capital,

nor even in the US's disciplining role as the global policeman of capital-in-general (or, as Panitch and Gindin would have it, "imperialism" as a whole). Rather, for Johnson, the US empire is principally a *bureaucratic* one. The transformation of the entire US national security establishment during and following World War II has created a transcontinental and quintessentially American bureaucratic empire. With 750 bases on five continents, clients and intelligence sources in almost every country, and hence immense budgets, territory and prestige to defend, it is this *militarized* bureaucratic culture and interests which both lie at the heart of this empire, and produce the effect of 'blowback' — virtually global resistance to US policies and presence (Johnson 2004, 2000).

It was the inability of British capitalism to sustain the defence of its transcontinental empire which led both to Britain's imperial sunset and to the famous 'special relationship' with the US (Ponting 1990; O'Meara & Lavallée 2005). It seems to me obvious that any analysis of empire is obliged to focus on the ability of the *agent* of that empire to defend...

To defend what? This is where the crucial issues of both *bounded space and territory* on the one hand, and *globalization* on the other come in. Apart from Chalmers Johnson who does present a clearly defined notion of space and territory, most theories of American empire slide around the issue by advancing some version of 'informal' empire. However this is a mere semantic trick, one so elastic that it is able to evade any questioning. More importantly, it further allows analysts to avoid a key issue posed by globalization — how the latter has transformed the spatial location and exercise of both economic and social power, and indeed of culture itself. With the exception of the critical geopolitics of Agnew and others (Agnew 2005: Agnew & Corbridge 1995), and the very different understanding of empire presented by Hardt and Negri (2000), few analysts have grappled seriously with this issue.

One does not have to swallow the Turner thesis on the frontier to understand that the relationship of the American republic to space and frontier has always been different to those of European and Asian states. Indeed the very mental horizon of 'openness', of unbounded space and unlimited opportunity, has been fundamentally rooted in both the mercantilist patrimony and American political and popular culture since the outset of the

European settlement of 'the New World'. As echoed in the key leitmotifs of 20<sup>th</sup> Century US foreign policy of 'the Open Door' and liberalization, such an apparently unbounded worldview has always contained a frequently paranoid obsession with, and fear of, Otherness — again echoed with startling frequency in American popular culture.

### Conclusion

I cannot hope to deal with the crucial issue of culture here. Rather, in the guise of a conclusion, I wish but to flag two final ontological questions implicit in these debates, but which have not been sufficiently brought out — those of *agency* and of *interests*.

The agency/structure question garnered much attention in International Relations theory during the late 1980s and 1990s. Without wishing to reopen these debates, it seems to me clear that much of the literature on empire and imperialism remains trapped in highly structuralist ontologies. The existence of empire is read off from a *presumed* logic of structure — either of global capitalism or of discourse.<sup>18</sup> If politics and process are absent from this, agency likewise goes missing-in-action.

Agency is crucial to any notion of interest — unless of course a dehumanised (and in this case, purely imagined) structure can be said to have interests in mechanical and/or purely functionalist form. Paraphrasing Marx, people make their own history, but not as they please. Interests can never be considered in abstract. Whatever else goes into making them up, as lived and acted upon by human agents, *interests* are always located in and bounded by some definition of *space and locality* (even global). The interests of real breathing human agents always embody, and in many senses grow out of, an evolving concept of the *identity* of the various agents promoting such interests. Both interests and identity are set in *distinct cultural and normative contexts*, are promoted through and constrained by both various levels of *institutional and bureaucratic architecture*, are framed in *opposition* or *relative* to other interests and identities, and are realized — or not — in a *competitive process* with such opposing interests. In these latter terms, then, interests often imply a *strategic calculation* concerning *the other*, and his or her identity, objectives and resources.

Both rational choice analysis of conventional Interna-



tional Relations theories and orthodox Marxism fall into the similar trap of reading policy and or strategic projects from an un-problematized view of interest. The result is the elimination of all process and of politics from the actual analysis of interest. If we are to avoid what might be called apolitical science in which outcome is presumed to be a direct function of interest — whether calculated by *homo economicus* or mere class agents — it is essential to examine the evolution of interest through all of these prisms.

This article has taken issue with almost all of the widely varying accounts to argue that ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ are *concepts* rather than ontological realities. Anchored in concrete but bygone historical conjunctures, forms of rule and resistance, cultural practices, and economic and state policies, such concepts reflect particular epistemological strategies whose contemporary validity can most charitably be described as questionable. Thus, whether conceived as ‘informal’ or as decentred or ‘without an address’, notions of American ‘empire’ and US imperialism are, at best, little more than *weak historical analogies*. They may furnish moral comfort to both the proponents and opponents of current US policy, but they obfuscate more than they reveal, and are thus confusing and misleading categories through which to analyse the emerging global order, let alone act within it.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Département de Science Politique, Université du Québec à Montréal. The original draft of this article was presented to a panel on *Race, Ethnicity and Gender in an Age of Empire* at the 47th Convention of the International Studies Association in San Diego, 22-26 March 2006. I am grateful to David Grondin, Peter Vale and this journal’s anonymous reader(s) for their comments and suggestions. All errors and failings in the article are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Books, a subsidiary of Henry Holt <http://www.americanempireproject.com/americanempireproject.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Dick and Lynne Cheney’s Christmas card cites Benjamin Franklin as follows: “If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice; is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?” (quoted in Young 2005: 32).

<sup>4</sup> *Project for the New American Century*, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>

- <sup>5</sup> An historian by profession, Ferguson turns a Nelsonian blind eye to the historical realities of British imperialism. His view of Empire admits of no massacres (such as Amritsar), no genocide (such as that of Boer women and children 1900-1902), no induced mass starvation and emigration through famine (Ireland 1847-1849), no 'narco-empire' (Simon Schama's characterization of the opium wars and state-run opium production — right into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century — and opium trade to finance British commerce, its control of India and domination of China, and the great British addiction to tea. Schama 2002: 456-457)
- <sup>6</sup> Vidal's cycle of American history novels and almost all of his numerous essay collections deal with this theme.
- <sup>7</sup> I return below to the ontological elision embodied in attaching the signifiers 'American' and/or 'the United States' to notions of empire and imperialism.
- <sup>8</sup> For a succinct but devastating critique of Harvey's economic analysis, see Nitzan & Bichler (2004: 8-10).
- <sup>9</sup> Dialectical analysis goes out the window in this marxist presentation of the 'essence of capitalist imperialism'. The entire point of Marx's understanding of power was to show the inadmissibility of separating economic from political power, and the need for an analysis of the totality, rather than a functionalist deduction of the latter from the former.
- <sup>10</sup> Empire, expansion and dominion were integral elements of the property-seeking individualism proclaimed by the principal philosopher of the early American worldview, John Locke (Williams 1961: 61-65).
- <sup>11</sup> The most cogent statement of this argument is Williams (1980). In his *chef d'oeuvre* Williams explores the 'contours of American history' from 1660 to the Cold War (Williams 1961).
- <sup>12</sup> Though during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the British state largely succeeded in undoing the political power of the landed aristocracy, and so was able to centralize power far more effectively than was the case in the US. However, as the festering sore of Northern Ireland and recent devolution measures towards Scotland and Wales indicate, regional power centres and identities remain an important feature of British politics.
- <sup>13</sup> To the extent that in its recent 'softwood lumber' dispute with Canada, the federal government felt so politically constrained by local political interests as to ignore its own treaty commit-

ments and successive rulings of various international trade dispute resolution bodies set up by itself.

<sup>14</sup> White died of a heart attack three days after testifying before the House Un-American Affairs Committee that he was not a Soviet agent. In 1997, a bipartisan US Senate Commission on Government Secrecy, chaired by Democratic Senator Daniel Moynihan concluded: "The complicity [in the KGB's 'Venona conspiracy'] of Alger Hiss of the State Department seems settled. As does that of Harry Dexter White of the Treasury Department". *Moynihan Commission on Government Secrecy, Appendix A, 7. The Cold War*, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/library/moynihan/appa7.html>. Also see the comment on this issue in a history of the KGB supposedly-based on internal KGB documents (Andrew & Mitrokhin 1999: 139-144).

<sup>15</sup> For a trenchant critique of their economic argument, see Nizan & Bichler (2004: 7-8).

<sup>16</sup> This also points to another significant transformation: what John Keegan once labeled as the 'citizen-soldier' of modernity (Keegan 1990) has been transformed into the 'consumer-citizen'.

<sup>17</sup> The more dogmatic Realist theorists of international politics frequently bemoan the reticence of Americans to embrace the supposed cold truths of the logic of international anarchy and the implacable necessity of 'power politics' (Mearsheimer 1994/1995).

<sup>18</sup> Though this lies beyond the scope of this article, Hard and Negri's notion of Empire without address takes this structuralist logic to extremes, completely eliminating agency and ascribing all to the logic of (largely legal) discourse.

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