

I'd Hate to See What Malevolent Hegemony Would Look Like

Kevin Carson

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Vivek Chibber at *Boston Review* has an excellent takedown of Niall Ferguson and his dreams of benevolent empire. Not only Ferguson, but a whole raft of other neocons like John Lewis Gaddis and Charles Krauthammer, put forth the old British Empire as a model for “benevolent American hegemony.” But Chibber reminds us that the Brits weren't so benevolent as all that.

In the case of India, Chibber points to a British policy of taxing the peasantry to the breaking point and dismantling traditional structures for famine relief; this mismanagement led to far worse death tolls from famine under British rule than had been the case previously.

According to Chibber, Ferguson judges the Empire's legacy mainly by the self-congratulatory rhetoric of its leaders, rather than by its actual performance:

Ferguson makes it sound as if colonial authorities stuck around basically because they were readying their wards for self-rule. And it is easy to find lengthy disquisitions from Macaulay, Churchill, Smuts, and the like to this effect. Indeed, whenever he feels compelled to present evidence for his view, Ferguson quotes from them, rather than referring to the historical record. We very quickly encounter Churchill enunciating the general principle behind British colonialism: “to reclaim from barbarism fertile regions and large populations ... to give peace to warring tribes” and so on. Soon thereafter, Macaulay is drafted to the campaign, declaring, “never will I attempt to avert or to retard” Indian self-rule, which, when it comes, “will be the proudest day in Indian history.”

Once demands for self-rule emerged in Asia and Africa, authorities responded with violence. From the early decades of the 20th century, progress toward self-rule proceeded in lockstep with the strength of the movements demanding it. But Ferguson makes no reference at all to either the massive independence movements that finally rid the world of British colonialism, or to the quality of the British response to them. But even the briefest consideration of these phenomena undermines the notion that the colonizers were educating the “natives” in the ways of self-rule.

Although the neocons gleefully point to the ethnic and religious strife in post-colonial nations as evidence of their unfitness for self-rule, Chibber argued that colonial authorities deliberately encouraged these antagonisms in order to divide and weaken the anti-colonial movement.

When confronted with anti-colonial mobilizations, the British would make political concessions on the one hand, while taking steps to divide the opposition on the other. In India, the divide-and-rule strategy exploited existing religious divisions by communalizing the vote. From the passage of the Minto-Morley reforms in 1909, the advancement of the independence movement also brought in train a deepening of Hindu-Muslim tensions, as electoral mobilization—limited though the elections were—pitted communities against each other.

Post-colonial Africa, for Ferguson, is a failed experiment. But perhaps, like India, it was set up to fail. And indeed, according to Chibber, the British not only exploited and intensified ethnic tensions—they also systematically dismantled all the mechanisms of civil society that had restrained such tensions.

For the British, the central dilemma, as Mahmood Mamdani has reminded us, was to figure out how “a tiny and foreign minority [can] rule over an indigenous majority.” The natural strategy was to rely heavily on local elites—tribal chiefs, landlords, and especially the priestly strata—and thereby reinforce the symbolic, cultural, and legal traditions that sanctioned rule by these elites. In India, it meant using local caste and religious divisions and giving them a salience that they had never enjoyed before. In Africa, this entailed a splintering of civil law and political rights on ethnic and tribal criteria, relying ever more strongly on the despotic rule of chiefs and hardening indigenous linguistic and cultural divisions.

Consider the process of hardening in the case of equatorial Africa, Ferguson’s preferred target for re-colonization. Chiefs were certainly in place before the British arrival. But in pre-colonial times, chiefly power was circumscribed and balanced by both lateral checks—consisting of kinsmen, administrative functionaries, and clan bodies—and vertical checks, consisting of village councils and public assemblies. These institutions did not by any means democratize pre-colonial polities; but they did impose real social constraints on chiefly rule and thus imbue it with a degree of legitimacy. The chief was the paramount power, but his power was constantly negotiated with peers and subordinates.

Colonial rule either severely weakened or simply dissolved these social constraints. The colonial authorities needed to have clearly identifiable nodes of power through which they could exercise their rule, and these local functionaries could not be accountable to anyone but the colonizer. So the clan bodies, village councils, and public assemblies were either dissolved or made toothless against the chiefs. What remained was a stern, vertical line of authority from the colonial office, though the district administrator, to the chief—all according to London’s desires. Locally, the indigenous state structure was turned into what Mamdani has appropriately called a decentralized despotism, as chiefs were endowed with unprecedented power.

So much for the much-ballyhooed “education in self-rule.”

One important area that Chibber neglects is the sheer scale of land-robbery by the British Empire. The process is described very well in “Development as Enclosure” [*The Ecologist* (July/August 1992)]:

Throughout the colonies, it became standard practice to declare all “uncultivated” land to be the property of the colonial administration. At a stroke, local communities were denied legal title to lands they had traditionally set aside as fallow and to the forests, grazing lands and streams they relied upon for hunting, gathering, fishing and herding.

Where, as was frequently the case, the colonial authorities found that the lands they sought to exploit were already “cultivated”, the problem was remedied by restricting the indigenous population to tracts of low quality land deemed unsuitable for European settlement. In Kenya, such “reserves” were “structured to allow the Europeans, who accounted for less than one per cent of the population, to have full access to the agriculturally rich uplands that constituted 20 per cent of the country. In Southern Rhodesia, white colonists, who constituted just five per cent of the population, became the new owners of two-thirds of the land... Once secured, the commons appropriated by the colonial administration were typically leased out to commercial concerns for plantations, mining and logging, or sold to white settlers.

At the same time, poll taxes or excise taxes on staple commodities were levied to force subsistence farmers to sell their labor in the cash economy in order to pay them.

The chief defect of neoconservative enthusiasts for empire like Ferguson and his ilk, is their breathtaking naivete in believing that “benevolent hegemony” is even possible (or their utter cynicism in pretending to believe it). David Gordon makes the same point about Deepak Lal’s argument in *In Praise of Empires*. Lal’s thesis (according to Gordon—I haven’t read the book) is something along these lines:

International trade is essential to prosperity. But given a high degree of disorder, large scale trade cannot occur, or at least will be greatly impeded. Throughout history, empires have been the main means by which order has been preserved and trade promoted: “By creating order over a large economic space, empires have inevitably generated [Adam] Smithian intensive growth” (p. 43).

Applied to the present, Lal’s argument becomes this: International trade requires an imperial power. Only the United States has the resources to maintain hegemonic control. Therefore, the United States ought exercise imperial power.

In other words, empires impose what Thomas Barnett calls “connectivity” on the world. But it can’t be just any old empire. Like Ferguson, Lal distinguishes between good and bad empires:

Good empires are what Michael Oakeshott calls civil associations. They are content to preserve order. The bad empires are, in Oakeshott’s terms, enterprise associations.

These people obviously don't take very seriously the tendency of power to corrupt. What state in history has ever failed to promote, under the loftiest justifications, the private interests of those controlling it? Since the governments of both 19th century Britain and the contemporary U.S. have been controlled by state capitalist elites, what possible reason do we have to doubt that any version of "free markets" and "free trade" they support would promote the interests of those elites?

To see how benevolent U.S. hegemony actually is, we need go no further than Iraq. Naomi Klein has written about the systematic crony capitalist looting carried out by Bremer's occupation regime there; I have posted on it here. On the sorts of "liberal institutions" the neocons want to export to Iraq, I've written here.

Worse, any objective survey of U.S. engagement in the Third World since 1945 will point to the tens upon tens of thousands of death squad victims in Central America, the tens of thousands killed by Operation Condor in South America, and the hundreds of thousands killed by Suharto in Indonesia. Not to mention Marcos, Mobutu, etc., etc., etc.

As Donald Johnson wrote in a very astute comment on the Maxspeak thread:

Someone needs write a new Black Book of Capitalist Imperialism to put next to the Black Book of Communism.

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