Comments on Reyna: from string beings to empire *au vinaigre*

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How refreshing to see this piece after so much language poured onto the pages of journals and books to demonstrate that we are in an entirely new universe, a millennial capitalism where globalization finally reigns supreme. Reyna is old-fashioned for many. He uses Marx and even, God help us, Lenin, whom he attempts to rescue by finding another route to the same conclusions concerning the highest stage of capitalism or at least the inevitability of imperialist wars. This is carried off by totally changing gears into a general theoretical landscape called SBT or 'string being theory' which is summarized succinctly in the pages of the article and needs no elaboration here except to add that it does sound like the theory of a common vegetable. It is not clear to me in what way this approach solves any of the problems at hand, especially the big one, how to account for the current global situation. A couple of interesting aspects of this approach are located in the complete separation of what is called force from power. The former is defined as the capacity immanent in social forms that allows them to be antecedent events that cause subsequent ones. Force is the root of all causation and power is simply the product of force(s), a condition of having caused so to speak. This is quite abstract and without any particular 'cultural' content, i.e., any specificity as in the different ways of getting things done.

Culture is introduced here as a kind of information set that tells us *what is* and *what to do about what is*. In another language this is very

close to classical anthropology or the historical structuralism of Sahlins (1976, 1981). The force/power complex defines the properties of events in which culture is the major resource. One might ask here to what extent these abstractions and their interrelation represent anything particularly new in reality or simply recapitulate in a new form what is already known about the world. Another important term in Reyna's discussion is desire which combines in the brain emotions and information into what might better be called intentionality, that which actually sets force in motion. Where desire is localized in powerful actors it is called *délires*. There is then, of course, the *enjeu* of forces, violent force, political force, cultural force (via information). There is also transmutation of one kind of force into another ... gravitating it would seem toward violence as the force of last resort. Reyna's model is of a kind of arena, a playing field, in which actors vie with one another for dominance. There is no system here but an identification of potential forms and relations.

So what has this to do with Lenin whose approach, flawed as ever, was totally concrete, describing the reality of colonial competition, export of capital and power politics? Reyna seeks to refine the Leninist thesis of the inevitability of imperialist war by adding some more complexity to the argument. If I were to disagree here at the start I would say that Lenin was not terribly theoretical. *Imperialism* was a pamphlet, after all, and it would have made more sense to tackle

the more sophisticated work of Luxemburg who offers a much more systematic approach to the problem. For Lenin, imperialism is the product of the over-ripening of capitalism itself, the formation of monopolies as capital becomes increasingly centralized, the export of capital in search of expansive possibilities where none exist at home, the politics necessary to ensure this in the form of colonialism, and the wars that must ensue because of competition among core states for control of the periphery. Luxemburg on the contrary saw imperialism as a constant feature of capitalist reproduction in which new sources of cheap labor and especially markets have to be available to complete the basic cycle of reproduction of capital unless the entire process is financed by credit which could quickly lead to bankruptcy. For both Lenin and Luxemburg, violence is part of the game, but Lenin cannot account for the bloody history of capitalism in the five centuries preceding World War I, the replacement of one hegemon by another, or the wars of conquest, all of which have nothing to do with monopoly capitalism as he defined it.

Now while it might well be argued that Lenin is lacking in his empirical analysis, he is certainly clear on the basic cause of violence, which lies in competition. There is, of course, an enormous literature on the relation between economic cycles and warfare, from Modelski's (1987) and Goldstein's (1988) to Kondratieff's and recently Bobbit's 'Achilles shield' (2002), all of which are systemic histories of warfare, the latter going back to Ancient Greece. There is also the recent short but powerfully argued work on the subject by David Harvey (2003) that touches on the logical relations between American militarism, political manipulation, and economic decline.

Reyna's approach to this issue is less concerned with the specific logics of what I would call reproduction and instead focuses on more general propositions that might refer to such logics without accounting for them. An important issue is broached here but I am not sure if it is completely clear. In order for economic accumulation across state borders to occur one needs more than simply economic relations, one needs empire or a politically structured field

that would enable such accumulation. There is a comparative aspect of this analysis necessarily truncated for the sake of emphasis on the contemporary world. The division is classical, between capitalist and precapitalist or here pre-modern imperialisms. The latter is defined as a direct political extraction of economic 'force'. One might ask why force? Unless he means labor power. The issue is debatable in my opinion. There is increasing evidence that the dynamics of some ancient economies were very much like world capitalist systems (Friedman 2000, 2005). Substantivist divisions are out of date here in empirical terms and have been in recession since the 1980s. There is an argument that empire and imperialism are the same thing, going so far as to add international hegemony to this as well. But I think the distinctions are quite important. The process of imperial rule whether direct or indirect is a political organization that is an expensive operation having all kinds of repercussions in the form of the formation of the local colonial and then postcolonial state and the emergence of colonial cultures and public spheres including constitutions and court systems. In this sense Britain was surely a real formal empire even if it instituted indirect rule in the rural areas.

The US with its military bases and comprador classes is something quite different, closer in political terms to the postcolonial world and often more efficient in terms of resource exploitation. Most empires lose money as institutional arrangements even if capitalist actors within them make profits. This is obvious in the current US attempts to formalize its control over the Middle East. The balance of empire may be negative even if Halliburton makes a killing. Imperialism reduced to the bare minimum of compradorism is a slimmed down version of empire. The ideology of the league of nations was very much part of this latter development which was in fact conceived within the British imperial elite (if we follow the analysis of Quigley 1981) who foresaw the necessity of transforming the empire into a more informal structure based on nation-states, i.e., what has come to be called imperialism in its American

version. In this sense the Truman Doctrine was very much an extension of the plans laid down by Cecil Rhodes's Society of the Elect, and by his intellectual assistant Lord Milner. Hegemony in world systemic terms is not the same as either empire or imperialism. It refers to the relations of power and authority/leadership among states. Thus, the US relation to Europe and Japan can be understood in terms of hegemony. Within such hegemonic relations, which are best described as asymmetrical alliances, individual states can maintain their own imperialist or imperial relations with their peripheries. It is of course true that imperial hierarchies are hegemonic structures, but they are also much more than that.

The case of the relation between Europe and the US is instructive here. Reyna states that France has since 1945 been "reluctantly part of the US empire". But what went on here was the dismantling of the French empire itself, but only in part, since at least in Africa it was transformed into "*la Franceafrique*" in which the merging of colonial and metropolitan elites was crucial (under the socialists no less). But it is not at all clear why the relation between the two central powers is imperial. This was the period of the Marshall plan. Now in Leninist terms this massive import of US capital means that the US takes over the French economy (i.e., Friedman 1978; McMichael, Petras, and Rhodes 1974; Poulantzas 1974; Warren 1973). But in fact this capital by and large remained in the target country where the profits were reinvested, leading to a situation in which France and other countries became major competitors with the already then declining US. Here is one very important reason why hegemony cannot be confused with imperialism. It also implies that imperialism is a state of affairs and one that is difficult to reproduce which is why violence often becomes necessary.

Here is where the really good part comes. Reyna states, as many are finally beginning to admit, that US economic power is declining (Wallerstein 2003). Few, however, are willing to see the historical systematicity of this phenomenon. Just as the UK went from world workshop to world exporter of capital between the mid-nineteenth century and 1914, the US followed

suit from the early 1950s until today. In 1914 the UK thought it was the undisputed military power in the world with a vast empire as well. This was challenged, of course, in World War I. The US has thought of itself as the undisputed military power of the world following the collapse of Soviet power, but since that time it has succeeded only in bombing a great deal without winning anything in particular—what Joxe (2004) has referred to as an 'empire of chaos'. The UK had a better military record than the US has today in a similar situation of trying to repair its declining hegemony. Attack Iraq, yes, but what about China, which is fast becoming the world's next workshop, even if it lasts only for a few years. Recent figures that show China's percentages of production in the world market are as follows:

Tractors	83
Clocks/watches	75
Toys	70
Penicillin	60
Cameras	55
Vitamin C	50
Laptop computers	50
Telephones	50
Air conditioners	30
Televisions	29
Washing machines	24
Refrigerators	16
Furniture	16
Steel	15

Diaspora 30 million

Overseas Chinese are responsible for 75 percent of all foreign investment in China.

Overseas Chinese control 60–70 percent of the GDP of Indonesia.

This is evidence of a powerful logic—one that is represented in simplified form in figure 1. This is a simple model of expansion/contraction of hegemony in which the end of any cycle entails the export or globalization of capital. The cycles may slow down, or as is usual, speed up with time-space compression. And within this process, hegemons tend to be the military

FIGURE 1 Shifting hegemony and systemic limits

powers for the entire arena. Arrighi, Silver, and Ahmad (1999), in fact, argue that the great weakness of such hegemons is that they protect their client states at great expense while the latter eat their way into the larger world economy, profiting from the overreach of the hegemon. This model also includes another important argument found in Reyna's discussion, which is the way in which the growth of accumulation strains the overall ecological equilibrium of the relation between man and environment. The envelope in the curves refers to this basic limitation, one that is often overcome by shifting technologies and the emergence of new resource bases (coal in the Industrial Revolution, possibly fusion today).

Mechanisms of imperial survival

Extensive lending, discussed as a prime case of imperial relations by Luxemburg, was something that the Romans did in Greece, leading to the latter's total dependency on the former. In the period of Hellenistic decline, Roman

merchants lent out enormous sums of money for consumption in a situation where no revenues were forthcoming to repay. This led to the transfer of real capital, land, and resources to the lenders as well as to the impoverishment of the population. The British were able to build the Suez Canal on the basis of Egyptian debt service as the result of similar kinds of loans. Today the same phenomenon is associated with so-called economic hit men (Frank 2005; Perkins 2004) who have for a number of years been sent by Washington to drive Third World countries into total indebtedness with the resultant loss of control over their own resources. Frank has brilliantly and aggressively argued that a whole slew of operations keep the US afloat in conditions in which it should be on the brink of economic collapse. Its foreign debt is entirely in dollars while it plays the game of value added in which goods produced in cheap labor countries become more expensive as they enter the circuits of the US market thus adding enormous monetary wealth to the US GDP, etc. And there is plenty to protect. US consumer debt is equal

to the country's GNP and its federal debt is upward of seven trillion dollars. This is clearly a case of imperial overreach. Imperial survival is often a question of precisely the substitution of political-military control for real economic hegemony. There are empires such as the Assyrian and others in which military control was the major source of accumulation, but such empires only work if there is a positive economic balance. If military outlays and costs of maintenance outstrip the return flow of wealth, empires weaken and wither.

The US is already in this position at the start of its latest military venture, borrowing enormous sums of money just to maintain the machinery. The mechanisms of military power that enable financial manipulation of debt are crucial in keeping a weakening imperial hegemon afloat. This is the power of hegemony itself, one that institutionalizes certain practices, from Eurodollars to deals in which protection is traded for economic advantage. Reyna's insistence on the pivotal issue of oil is of course important to note. Hegemonic loss of control over significant regions of the world must, of necessity, provoke decisive action and military aggression is the form of such action. Declining strategic resources inspire panic among those who know that world order must be maintained, even at the cost of substantial chaos. But oil is not the only problem for the maintenance of hegemony. There is a more general process of loss of dominance over large parts of the world that become reoriented to new powers as in the case of the relation between Iran and China, the danger of the loose canon that is Central Asia, and most recently the new 'alliance' between India and China with the expressed goal of world dominance of some kind—all of this is part of the imperial jitters that make regimes like that of Bush a logical product of declining hegemony.

The United States today is clearly the most aggressive power in the world, seeking, as so many of its public documents such as *The new American century* imply, to restore its power. But it is not likely that this will work. Maybe things can be staved off for a while but the future is, as the neocons are fully aware, not so bright. Reyna's

argument on the shift to the violent mode is perfectly accurate here, everything from the militarization of US spheres of control, to the increasing use of violence in hot zones. But it costs far too much money to maintain. The US in this sense is fighting an uphill battle to say the least, forcing allies to finance its galloping debt. But this is of course an unstable situation as well, since it leads to a devaluation of the dollar in the long run and all the problems involved in overreach. This is why empires have always declined. And in the case of the US it is a very quick process indeed. If empire is a stopgap measure, the financial gap may well put a stop to empire before it can do more than create disorder. The result is only more chaos in a world that is already in disarray. China sits by and gloats, perhaps, with its rising middle classes, as India does, but of course the world market is still of one piece, so whatever happens in one part of the center of the system is bound to affect the other parts. If there is a crisis, we are all in the same boat. But when the ark lands, we may very well be in a different landscape of power even if I suspect that, enslaved to Freud's repetition compulsion, we will still be doing the same kinds of things. Conrad was probably right about the current (Friedman 2004).

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