

Pax Americana

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Abstract

This paper argues that the recent American war on Iraq could have been a just war if a more realistic plan to achieve utopia in Iraq had been in place prior to the conquest. Six extensions to just war theory are put forward that hold politicians' promises about 'freedom and democracy' to account.

Introduction

America is utopia achieved and the American way of life is famous the world over. Who wouldn't want to take a hit, pack a gun and chips and cruise a Chevy down Route 66? The sprawling suburbs with their green green grass; a land of wealth and opportunity; freedom and democracy; a wise and benevolent leader. The Americans have it all and everyone in the world wants it. Many Mexicans drown every year with their cold clutching fingers stretching out towards 'First World' happiness.

On the face of it, the spread of America across the world (by force, propaganda and cultural and meaty merchandise) should be a good thing. Granted, murdering thousands of Iraqi citizens and erasing their history is not an ideal way to bring utopia to them, but sometimes people have to be forced to be free. Roman military expansion enabled the barbarians to read Ovid in a hot bath and soon Iraq will be paradise too with Western goods, Western opportunities and Western happiness.

This paper will examine whether this spread of utopia is a good thing and, if it is, whether it is achievable. I will start with a brief examination of the Roman conquest of Europe

and then look at the American utopia in more detail and some of the problems with its expansion. Some suggestions for improving the spread of utopia and resisting it will then be put forward.

A Historical Precedent

In Caesar's account of the battle for Gaul, booty, glory, political power and immunity from prosecution were not cited as his primary motivations for conquest. No doubt he would much rather have paid his debts to society for the crimes that he committed during his first consulship and settled down to a peaceful farming life in the hills of Italy. But what could he do when the warlike Helvetii¹ threatened the rich farmlands of the Province with terrorism and mass destruction? He had no choice but to conquer the whole of Gaul and make the first expedition into Britain. Some would argue that Caesar's conquests had mixed motives and were not carried out entirely in self defence, but there can be no doubt that the romanization of Gaul and eventually Britain had profound social consequences for these regions.

There is a range of opinion about the impact of Rome on Britain, but it seems clear that at least amongst the middle and upper classes there was a considerable civilizing effect. War was endemic in Celtic Britain and the unwashed barbarians drank out of skulls, painted themselves blue with woad and sacrificed people in oak groves. With romanisation came baths, a substantial road network, political stability, centrally heated villas in the countryside, impressive public works and the prestige of being civilised and part of a greater empire. A utopia was imposed by force and the enculturated inhabitants came to appreciate it. As Churchill says in his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*:

For nearly three hundred years Britain, reconciled to the Roman system, enjoyed in many respects the happiest, most comfortable, and most enlightened times its inhabitants have had. ... In this period, ... well-to-do persons in Britain lived better than they ever did until late Victorian times.

¹ The ancestors of the modern Swiss.

In culture and learning Britain was a pale reflection of the Roman scene, not so lively as the Gallic. But there was law; there was order; there was warmth; there was food, and a long-established custom of life. The population was free from barbarism without being sunk in sloth or luxury. Some culture spread even to the villages. Roman habits percolated; the use of Roman utensils and even of Roman speech steadily grew. The British thought themselves as good Romans as any. Indeed, it may be said that of all the provinces few assimilated the Roman system with more aptitude than the Islanders. ...To be a citizen of Rome was to be a citizen of the world, raised upon a pedestal of unquestioned superiority above barbarians or slaves. Movement across the great Empire was as rapid as when Queen Victoria came to the throne, and no obstruction of frontiers, laws, currency or nationalism hindered it.

[Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Volume 1]

With this historical precedent in place, I will now examine some of the benefits of the spread of Western capitalism by force of arms.

Charity begins at Home and Spreads Elsewhere

But is this really what an achieved utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes indeed! What do you expect a 'successful' revolution to look like? It is a paradise. Santa Barbara is a paradise; Disneyland is a paradise; the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise.²

[Jean Baudrillard, *America*]

Charity begins at home and at the front doors of our cosy carpet-clad centrally-heated homes we grudgingly cough up fifty pence (or perhaps a pound if we are feeling generous) towards making the homes of other people just like our own. These other homes are

² Jean Baudrillard, *America*, translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2000), p. 98.

generally within 'Third World' or 'developing' countries and our charitable donation is basically a judgement on these homes as a *third rate, inferior* standard of living. Our fifty pence or pound will wing its way across the world and help to *develop* these other homes into a perfect simulacra of our own.

Since our civilization falls only a little short of paradise, it is not surprising that we make such efforts to introduce it into other countries. We have democracy, freedom, education, clean drinking water, some healthcare, abundant food and, apart from terrorism and foreign intervention, a relatively peaceful society. We have even convinced many of the inhabitants of less Westernised countries that our way of life is superior, and tens of thousands of men, women and children attempt to reach 'First World' happiness by crossing deserts, swimming rivers or paying people-smugglers to lock them into airless containers or hot trucks. One only has to read Carlos Fuentes' *The Crystal Frontier* to get a sense of this vision of the West that we all so smugly believe in; an enchanted utopia where 'Third World' dreams become reality:

The Lincoln convertible ... crossed the desert in order to break the illusory crystal divider, the glass membrane between Mexico and the United States, and continue along the superhighways of the north to the enchanted city, temptation in the desert, illuminated, brilliant, with a Neiman Marcus, a Saks, a Cartier, and a Marriott, where a luxury suite awaited the bride and groom: champagne and baskets of fruit, a sitting room, spacious closets, a king-size bed, lots of mirrors in which to admire Michelina ...

[Carlos Fuentes, *The Crystal Frontier*, p. 27]

It is clear that fifty pence, or even a relatively large number of fifty pences combined with extensive military supplies, is not going to do the whole job in bringing other countries up to our advanced level. Even the exploitative use of local labour is unlikely to achieve this anytime soon, although the argument is that sweatshop conditions will gradually improve, just

as they did in 19th Century industrial Britain.³ If we believe in our paradise found, then perhaps we, like the Romans, should explore other means of magnanimously helping our barbarian neighbours. Why, for example, should we not commit our taxes and military might to this objective? Everyone should be given a taste of America everywhere and so why are we so hostile when that jolly giant Uncle Sam lends a helping hand to this very process? More specifically why are we so hostile when Uncle Sam lends a helping hand to this process *in Iraq*?

According to the Western media, pre-colonial Iraq had a demonstrably inferior standard of living to America, there was little freedom or democracy and its oppressive leader massacred large numbers of civilians and would have massacred many more if his air power had not been restricted by other nations. Iraq was not a peaceful country, as the protracted war with Iran and the invasion of Kuwait demonstrate. Furthermore, Iraq oozes abundant supplies of black sticky wealth and so there is no economic reason why utopia should not be achieved within its borders. Since America had already realised a capitalist utopia, it did not seem entirely unjust that it should share its largesse and help Iraq to achieve utopia as well. All that was needed was a little push to replace the government with minimal civilian casualties, a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people and substantial investment by American companies. Soon Iraqis will be handing out charity at the front doors of their own ideal homes so that unfortunate countries elsewhere can be brought up to share their high standard of living.

Problems with the Spread of Utopia by Force of Arms

1) A first objection to the military expansion of utopia is that this kind of decision should be left to the affected citizens. If a people become convinced that Western life in the twenty-first century is the best of all possible worlds, then they can work to achieve this and do everything possible to encourage American investment and the downfall of their government. Although the pre-colonial government in Iraq used force, torture and secret police to maintain its rule, it still depended on the cooperation and support of a substantial number – perhaps

³ Starkly described by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,

even a majority - of its citizens. One man cannot repress twenty three million alone, however often he stamps his boot onto the ground and raises his clenched fist into the air. Since the Iraqi people did not want an American utopia enough to achieve it for themselves, America should not impose it on them by force.

This respect for the autonomy of states is one of the key principles of just war theory, as put forward by Michael Walzer. However, Walzer does allow that there are circumstances in which it is legitimate to violate the sovereignty of another state. According to Walzer, 'Humanitarian intervention is justified when it is a response (with reasonable expectation of success) to acts "that shock the moral conscience of mankind."' ⁴ He gives, as an example, India's intervention in Bangladesh in 1971 to stop a Punjabi army from massacring the Bengali people. This respect for the autonomy of states is an important caveat, and we would not want to intervene to achieve utopia in a country unless the number of deaths caused by the intervention is likely to be substantially less than the number of deaths that would occur without intervention. ⁵

2) A second potential problem is that interventionist wars generally have nothing to do with the achievement of utopia, but are motivated by paranoia, greed and a slack domestic economy. This is not a very telling objection since, as Walzer says, we cannot expect a state to start a war solely for humanitarian reasons, and there are almost no examples of this ever happening. An interventionist war can still be just as long as a Western-style utopia is a *by-product* of the invading state's selfish actions, and these selfish actions do not get in the way of achieving utopia.

3) A third objection is a more detailed reading of the West as utopia achieved. Baudrillard's thesis that America exists as utopia achieved correctly diagnoses the way Americans relate to their country as the promised land; the place where paradise – i.e. the American way of life - actually happens. However, the fact that people relate to their country

⁴ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, p. 107.

⁵ This calculation will have to be made for an appropriate time span, perhaps ten years, and will have to take into account the improvements in healthcare, vaccination programs and so on that would be the result of Westernising the society.

as utopia achieved does not mean that utopia is actually achieved there. Downtown LA is an expanse of dirty and decaying streets lined with homeless people, hookers and madmen; even the mythical Sunset Boulevard is just an endless succession of parking lots encircled by identical nail parlours, Seven Elevens and so on. Perhaps the Prozac-popping rich are in a state of bliss behind their iron curtains in Beverley Hills, but there is not much evidence of utopia elsewhere in this city of dreams and depressing reality.

4) A related difficulty is that although the social indicators of poverty demonstrate that America has a higher standard of living, happiness may depend more upon the differences *between* people's incomes than upon the absolute amount. According to Lars Osberg, poverty in developed countries is not a state of absolute deprivation; it is *relative* to the satisfactions that are considered to be normal in a society:

In very poor countries poverty can be understood in terms of absolute deprivation of food, clothing, and shelter, but in developed economies poverty is best understood as an income sufficiently below the norms of society that a "decent" life does not appear feasible.⁶

Fortunately this relative poverty can be eliminated by ensuring that the least well-off members of society receive at least half the median income. In the United States this is not the case and so Americans might actually suffer more from poverty than the people in the country that they are invading, even though on average they may have a higher standard of living. If Denmark or Sweden offered to achieve utopia in Iraq we would be much more optimistic about their chances.⁷ Back to Viking times, perhaps, although it is doubtful whether these early raiders did much to achieve utopia in Britain.

5) A fifth objection is that, according to Hardt and Negri among others, interventions do not aim at the achievement of utopia, but at the subjection of countries within the global

⁶ Lars Osberg, *Economic Inequality in the United States*, p. 69.

⁷ According to the CIA World Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>) the GNI index for Denmark is 24.8, that for Sweden 25 and that for the US, 40.8.

system of capitalism. America's war on Iraq was part of a more general expansion of what Hardt and Negri call Empire and should be judged within this larger context. The question we should be asking is whether Empire is utopia achieved and, if so, whether its expansion with the help of America and non-governmental organizations is a good thing. At least in its early stages, the expansion of Empire is not likely to be a good thing for the countries involved. It is one thing to offer a country freedom of speech and middle class suburban life, quite another to condemn its population to decades of sweatshop labour and industrialisation. If the expansion of Empire extends the negative effects of capitalism without making the American dream into other countries' reality, then we have little reason to support it.

6) Finally, in the case of the American intervention in Iraq, there is the fact that America's record of achieving utopia anywhere outside of its own borders is extremely poor. America has made countless armed and unarmed interventions in other countries and not one of them has led to anything like the limited utopia that it has achieved at home. It could be argued in America's defence that the Romans took a long time to make Britain into paradise, but this does not avoid the problem since the U.S. has been interfering in Nicaragua for over one hundred and fifty years (since Walker set up a slave state there in 1855) with few if any noticeable beneficial effects.

Responses to these Problems

Faced with these difficulties, we can either fix the problems with the spread of utopia to other countries, prevent the spread of our utopia to other countries or give up on the idea that our society has achieved utopia and attempt to resist it.

The first option expands our critical and moral judgements to include an evaluation of whether a particular war is likely to bring about utopia, and holds political leaders to account if their interventions fail to achieve this. In the case of Iraq, the war was not unjust because a powerful country aggressively invaded an innocent one to grab oil. It was unjust because the starting conditions of the war meant there was little likelihood that utopia would be achieved at

the end of it. A war can only be considered just if a number of conditions obtain prior to the first intervention. My suggestions for these conditions are as follows:

1. The intervening country has to demonstrate that it has already achieved utopia within its own borders. As mentioned earlier, if Denmark or Sweden had been the sole aggressors in Iraq it would have been a different matter entirely.
2. The invading country has to demonstrate a track record in achieving utopia by military force.
3. The intervening country must set out a detailed plan prior to invasion that explains how utopia is going to be achieved with military force. This should include an assessment of the number of people likely to be killed in the war, the number of people likely to be killed if the current government remains in power and a timescale for the reconstruction of the country.
4. The intervening country must set aside a realistic amount of money for the realisation of this plan.
5. The intervening country must consult about this plan as far as possible with the citizens who will be affected (through web voting for example) and with advisors from other countries, the UN, non-governmental organisations and so on.
6. The intervening country must make a commitment to educate the population in the capitalist way of life for as long as it takes to convert them to this way of thinking. Western utopia is a certain way of relating to private property and politics and this may have to be taught if it is to last.

The strength of this extension of just war theory is that it already forms part of the claims made by American and British politicians and it offers a way of holding them strictly to account. The hearts and minds of the Iraqi people would have been much more receptive to American bullets and propaganda if these six conditions had obtained at the start of the conflict.

If this modest suggestion for extending the notion of a just war is thought to be too idealistic, perhaps we should attempt to *limit* the expansion of our utopia into other nations. The difficulty is that we cannot believe in our utopia without at some level becoming involved in its inevitable spread. Good Christians that we are, we cannot affirm our own way of life without sharing it with other people. How can we stand by whilst infants in other countries die, even when we know that our charitable contributions will bring about profound social change. We cannot provide money for electricity, vaccination and education and then express horror at the transformation into a tourist attraction of a traditional way of life. Even if we could refrain from any form of intervention at all – probably against the wishes of the affected ‘Third World’ countries – it is possible that our utopia can only be *sustained* by intervening elsewhere. This is the Marxist position that capitalism has only managed to avoid its internal contradictions by expanding into ‘Third World’ countries, dumping its ‘goods’ on their markets and exploiting their cheap labour.

If we cannot successfully spread our Western utopia or avoid its spread, perhaps we should resist the mournful, monotonous superficial paradise that we enjoy at home. Perhaps our faith in our society is just a set of empty slogans that we repeat to ourselves to hide our empty dissatisfied lives. Perhaps charity is a desperate effort to rid ourselves of the material things that bring us misery; an attempt to cast off our burden onto another, at least for a little while, until the next pay check oppresses us again.

A first line of resistance against capitalist dystopia could be some positive power of the multitude to resist the evil forces of Empire. According to Hardt and Negri:

The action of the multitude becomes political primarily when it begins to confront directly and with an adequate consciousness the central repressive operations of Empire. It is a matter of recognizing and engaging the imperial initiatives and not allowing them continually to reestablish order; it is a matter of crossing and breaking down the limits and segmentations that are imposed on the new collective labor

power; it is a matter of gathering together these experiences of resistance and wielding them in concert against the nerve centers of imperial command.

[Negri & Hardt, *Empire*, p. 399]

Whilst Hardt and Negri's diagnosis of modern capitalism is extremely acute, their response to it is at times rather naïve and completely ignores the multitudes' *desire* for Empire and their wholehearted complicity in its system. Multitudes across the world just want bigger breasts and better television sets to watch them on and they work tirelessly to achieve these goals within the framework of Empire. The creativity of the multitudes is wholly in the service of Empire and not something that could be turned against it.

A more radical analysis of the potential of the masses is offered by Baudrillard, who suggests that they resist any attempt to control or oppress them through sheer inertia. In *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* Baudrillard describes the masses as "a gigantic black hole which inexorably inflects, bends and distorts all energy and light radiation approaching it: an implosive sphere, in which the curvature of space accelerates, in which all dimensions curve back on themselves and "involve" to the point of annihilation".⁸ However, an anonymous unrepresentable mass is not going to liberate me or the millions like me from my belief that I have achieved a limited form of utopia, even if it can prevent this achievement of utopia from being converted into an effective political idea.

Finally we might take up Hakim Bey's thought of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, which has links with the work of Wittgenstein, Deleuze and Foucault. The temporary autonomous zone is an ideological space that is carved out transiently and independently from the dominant ideologies. As long we think in terms of freedom, democracy and rights we will remain trapped in some version of our mournful melancholic paradise and continue to engulf others within it. By thinking outside of these categories and perhaps even by living in a temporary physical autonomous zone of some kind, a transient limited 'liberation' can be achieved. Of course these kinds of alternative thought spaces will be represented by the

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, p. 9.

hegemonising mainstream as schizophrenic delusions or something similar, but the failure of the mainstream to adequately represent schizo-political positions is actually one of their strengths.

Conclusion

Interesting as these exits from paradise are, I have little faith in their ability to do anything more than transform a few individuals. We are burger boys and girls at heart, addicted to the goods and lifestyle of capitalist society. Since we cannot escape from utopia without radical self-transformation, and cannot avoid taking this utopia to others, perhaps it is time to start judging wars on the basis of their achievement of utopia using the extensions to just war theory that I have put forward in paper.