A Theoretical War: Accounting for American Imperialism in the Middle East

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Abstract

This review surveys two decades of academic research on the question of contemporary imperialism and holds it up against the historical record of America’s increasingly violent entanglements in the Middle East over the course of the previous half century, though particularly since 2001. While early contributions to this literature emerged from a different context than the one they often sought or were expected to explain, others attributed a simplistic and problematic understanding of the relationship between US foreign policy and the political-economy of petroleum. Later contributions then eschewed a close analysis of imperialism in the Middle East in favor of a broader accounting of the dynamics of global capitalism. This review ultimately critiques the widespread assumption that the vitality of hegemony and capital must be assessed in relation to their ability to secure control and homogenous conditions of reproduction. A more robust understanding must be based in an approach that views the economic and the political not as fundamental units of analysis but as sites of struggle in the historical and contemporary constitution of imperialism.

Keywords

capitalism – empire – energy security – hegemony – militarization – oil

1 Introduction

The North Atlantic’s intellectual classes, particularly those who perform the essential task of engaging in ideological labor at the behest of state and
capitalist power (Gramsci, 2000: p. 300), appear to have reached a near universal consensus that the United States’ preeminent global position is coming to an end. There is equally as much conviction among supporters and critics of American supremacy that US policies towards the Middle East since 2001 have played an important role in laying the groundwork for this profound shift in geopolitics. Historical analysis tell us that this is not the first time the American empire has been called into question. The end of US involvement in Vietnam in the 1970s, the challenge of West German and Japanese capital in the 1980s, and even globalization itself in the 1990s were all cast as imminent threats to American preponderance, if not heralds of decline. And while the putative counter-hegemony of China looms over the pervasive sense of American imperial anxiety, it is the alleged failures of the United States to impose its policies on the Middle East that are said to reveal a diminished world power. Over the course of roughly two decades, the world has quickly transitioned from one order, based on widespread recognition of America’s standing as a new kind of imperial power, to another order, where the durability of America’s standing seems to be highly in doubt (for background on these earlier debates, see Nexon and Wright, 2007; Barkawi, 2010; Desai, 2023: p. 226–227; on more recent debates, see Fusaro, 2018; Cooley and Nexon, 2020).

The logic or logics behind America’s half-century growing entanglements in the Middle East—an “imaginative geography” (Said, 1978) stretching from the western Himalayas to the western edge of the Sahara Desert, a geography elaborated in part by those very entanglements (Mundy, 2019)—has been subject to countless studies, particularly as that relationship became more complex and violent from 2001 onward. Military historian Andrew Bacevich (2014) posed this question in a simple but intriguing way: why is it that almost all US soldiers lost in combat since the 1980s died in the Middle East, whereas almost none died there in the preliminary decades of the Cold War? To frame the question of American imperialism as a matter of where the United States projects and uses its military might (and does not) is of course a simplification. As such, it elides over the extent to which a substantial body of literature, as will be seen below, has challenged narrow understandings of contemporary imperialism as being reduced to the foreign policies and military interventions of a capitalist hegemon. But even if we do live in a global empire of trans-national capital liberated from the shackles of the state form, America’s violent entanglement with the Middle East then demands even more of an accounting. How can we, on the one hand, reconcile a “logic of sustaining and expanding the conditions for a global capitalism that originally underlay the development and maintenance of overwhelming U.S. military power” with the fact that, on the other, “the wars that America has since fought have been in places quite marginal
to the dynamics of global capitalism” (Panitch, 2014: p. 25)? While it might be difficult to describe as “marginal” the region containing the most abundant reserves of hydrocarbons in the world, an even more challenging question arises when one considers what has actually unfolded across Northern Africa and Southwest Asia since the dawn of neoliberalism in the 1970s. The intensive securitization of the region (militarization, wars, and foreign interventions), led by the United States, has coincided with the emergence of a global system of petroleum extraction, refinement, circulation, and consumption that, more than any other time in the history of the commodity, began to approximate an actual open market.

The purpose of this review is then to assess whether or not accounts of contemporary imperialism offer us tools to understand these developments in the Middle East vis-à-vis the changes witnessed in the last half-century of global capitalism. The critique that follows identifies a number of points at which the explanatory capacity of these theories fails to constellate the actual historical record and the political-economy of petroleum into a coherent and compelling picture. What this review highlights is a number of problematic but widely shared assumptions that have led analysis astray. The first set is about the conditions that allow for the functioning and coordination of global supremacy and capital accumulation. Contrary to the tacitly held notion that contemporary imperialism primarily seeks to create a world of stability and uniformity, America’s violent entanglement with the Middle East suggests the opposite. Instability and heterogeneity are just as often prerequisites when it comes to manufacturing the conditions that make possible the extraction and reproduction of power and profit. This review thus explores the extent to which late imperialism gains traction in the world through the heterogeneous constitution of security, identities, and territories, as elucidated by the Middle East’s violent entanglement with American imperialism. The other set of debilitating assumptions identified by this review is an ongoing impasse between economic reductionists and political-economic dualists in the effort to account for the nature of late imperialism. By way of conclusion, this review proposes a rethinking of the relationship between “the economic” and “the political”—and the ostensible boundary between them—as sites of power and resistance in the ongoing elaboration and contestation of imperialism.

2 Securitization or Insecuritization?

Historical developments prior to events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) had, in several ways, helped set the stage for the discourse of a new imperialism. On
the one hand, there was the way in which North Atlantic hegemony and US military supremacy was consolidated and legitimated by interventions in the name of humanitarianism over the course of the prior decade. The initially haphazard embrace of such intervention in the early 1990s (Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, etc.) eventually gave way to more or less unapologetic military actions in Kosovo, East Timor, and Sierra Leone, all of which were articulated under the emerging banner of a global responsibility to protect (e.g., Chomsky, 2000; Johnson, 2001; for a review of these interventions, see Ottaway and Lacina, 2003). Liberal interventionist champions of the responsibility to protect would later seek to draw a sharp line between their advocacy for “good” imperialism—particularly vis-à-vis the civil war in the Darfur region of Sudan from 2002 onward (for critique, see Mamdani, 2009)—versus the “bad” imperialism of the George W. Bush administration’s war in Iraq (e.g., Power, 2008). A synthesis of both types would eventually converge again in the Middle East. North Atlantic involvement in the civil wars in Libya and Syria from 2011 onward was rationalized by 1990s liberal interventionist discourses of a humanitarian responsibility to protect and post-9/11 neoconservative discourses of spreading freedom through coercive regime change.

On the other hand, a dense and lengthy postmodernist treatise that theorized globalization as an emerging “empire” without an imperial center, a sovereignless sovereignty, garnered high levels of elite attention across the media, the academy, and in policy circles, not only in the months before 9/11 but also those that followed (Hardt and Negri, 2000).1 Four years later, in a mass-market follow-up work published amid the deepening crisis of the US occupation of Iraq, the authors, Hardt and Negri (2004), extended their Foucauldian framework in order to understand how a permanent state of war became integral to the reproduction of a biopolitical empire from the 1970s onward. A central aspect of this new empire is the allegedly growing indistinction between, one, civil and international wars and, two, war-making and peaceful social order, the latter embodied in permanent states of emergency/exception. By premising such mythologies of Westphalian sovereignty and reifying the war/peace distinction, their argument simply reproduces the standard worldview of International Relations theory, which historical sociologists long ago debunked as ahistorical and uncritically Eurocentric (Tilly, 1985; Barkawi, 2016). Even one “realist” scholar-practitioner foreign policy dismissed Westphalia as little more than political folklore (Krasner, 1999). The key ideological function of the Westphalian myth, which was largely invented during the Cold War, was

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1 For example, Hardt was a guest on a prominent public affairs program, The Charlie Rose Show, on July 24, 2001.
to obscure the racial, colonial basis of modern global politics as it emerged prior to the collapse of the European empires and then brought into terminal crisis by Nazi Germany and the growing instability of segregationism in settler-colonies like South Africa, Algeria, and the United States (Anievas et al., 2015; Vitalis, 2015; Bhambra, 2020; Barder, 2021). Moreover, Hardt and Negri ironically betray one of the most fundamental insights of Foucault in his famous inversion of Clausewitz: the primary model guiding the elaboration of modern sovereignless sovereignty was the regimentation of certain spatial, infrastructural, and organizational practices growing out of eighteenth-century European military reforms that co-constituted the permanent state of war exercised within and through modern European societies as a new form of power—disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977).

With respect to the Middle East, Hardt and Negri’s theory had little to offer in terms of actually accounting for the increasing concentration of US military actions and organized violence in the region. To this end, they proposed a neo-Mackinderian logic lurking behind American unilateralism, a logic seeking to create “a great half moon of imperial command that stretches from the Middle East, to East Asia,” driven in part by the shibboleth of “access to cheap oil” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: p. 318, p. 60, emphasis added). Bacevich (2016: p. 3, emphasis added), a conservative critic of US foreign policy, would similarly claim that “From the outset, America’s war for the greater Middle East [i.e., 1980–ca. 2016] was a war to preserve the American way of life, rooted in a specific understanding of freedom and requiring an abundance of cheap energy.” He goes on to state, “In that sense, just as the American Revolution was about independence and the Civil War was about slavery, oil has always defined the raison d’être of the War for the Greater Middle East.” In such accounts as this, US imperialism is effectively an expression of a domestic postwar political-economy increasingly driven by the suburbanized, motorized, and individualized demands, however manufactured, of hyper-consumptive lifestyles framed as a non-negotiable right (Campbell, 2005).

Such constellations—Said’s (1978) “imaginative geographies” or Harvey’s (2003) “territorial logics of power”—are a consistent thematic when it comes to theorizing mass organized violence in the Middle East. In a memorandum to President Carter in 1978, then National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski—prophetically setting the stage for the crises of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—wrote, “If you draw an arc on the globe, stretching from Chittagong (Bangladesh) through Islamabad to Aden, you will be pointing to the area of currently our greatest vulnerability” (U.S. Department of State, 2014 (1978)). A quarter of a century later, the inauguration of the global war on terror occasioned the imagining of a new geography, an “arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia,” according to then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2001).
That low oil prices have been the singular imperative of US actions in the region is difficult to square with instances of the opposite. The mythology of the 1973 “OPEC embargo”—it was not organized by OPEC and there was never any actual supply shortage—is firmly ensconced in the North Atlantic’s collective imperial memory, particularly its political elites. Yet the history of those events is actually one in which US policy makers undertook a chicken game with Middle Eastern producer-states knowing full well that higher prices at the pump would be the inevitable outcome (see Mitchell, 2011: chapter 7; Vitalis, 2020: chapter 3). Likewise, it has been repeatedly claimed that the Reagan administration encouraged Saudi Arabia to crash oil prices in the mid-1980s in order to undermine the Soviet economy’s newfound reliance on Siberian petroleum (e.g., in Reagan, 2014). In reality, Vice President Bush was dispatched to Riyadh in April 1986 on a mission to persuade the Saudis—who were then battling for market share vis-à-vis increasingly diversified zones of extraction—to decrease their production in order to save the US oil industry from ruin, a move that would have benefitted the USSR as well (Vitalis, 2020: pp. 98–99). More generally, conflicts around the main zones of Middle Eastern petroleum extraction have, from the 1970s until recently, almost always had the effect of raising oil prices, much to the benefit of producer states and international oil companies (and their shareholders), as well as, secondarily, North Atlantic and Soviet/Russian arms manufacturers (Nitzan and Bichler, 2002: chapter 5; Bichler and Nitzan, 2018). If US foreign policy is dictated by the singular demand for cheap oil emanating from the American consumer and particular industries, why is it that the United States has done more to impede the free flow of oil by launching wars against or otherwise imposing punishing sanctions on key producers like Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela?

Such examples underscore the fact that instability and order are not necessarily in contradiction with each other. Hardt and Negri, celebrating Empire’s twentieth anniversary, conclude that one of the most significant political outcomes of two decades of intensive violence in Southwest Asia and Northern Africa, kicked off by the US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), is the demonstrated failure of the United States to “achieve the stable hegemony required of a true imperialist power.” They add, “Now, after decades of failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, waging the ‘war on terror’, few can muster much faith in the benefits of a US-led global system or its ability to create a stable order” (Hardt and Negri, 2019: p. 71, emphasis added). Similarly, and much earlier, Giovanni Arrighi (2005 a; 2005 b) suggested that the American neoconservatives had clearly failed in their project to create a new politics of fear for a post-Cold War hegemony, a project that was already “unraveling” two years after the invasion of Iraq.
Theories of US imperialism vis-à-vis the Middle East frequently labor under two problematic assumptions: one, that low oil prices are the overriding imperative of North Atlantic states and their hydrocarbon industries; two, that geopolitical supremacy always seeks and requires geopolitical stability. Both, in fact, can be interrogated on the simple ground that there are powerful fiscal and political incentives for both instability and high oil prices, and which are very much entangled across identifiable geographies (Mitchell, 2021). For at least the past half century, the dominant characteristic of US geopolitical practice has been to reinforce—rather than erase or dampen—socio-territorial divisions across much of the world. The unparalleled (in)securitization of the Middle East from the 1970s onwards coincides with an important shift in US foreign policy once the limits of Washington’s post-war power had been fully elucidated in Korea and Vietnam, the later coinciding with the implosion of domestic and international Keynesianism (Sargent, 2017; Mundy, 2021). Whether in terms of policy (the Nixon/“Guam” Doctrine; U.S. States Department of State, 2003) or international theory (“offshore balancing”; Layne, 1997), these antiseptic framings nonetheless disclose an effort to rearticulate the preeminent global position of the United States by favoring regional “balances of power” over direct military intervention. This was primarily achieved by carefully managing localized conflicts, whether pre-existing, exacerbated, or precipitated by the United States or its allies in the North Atlantic and postcolonial worlds. Beginning with the “Vietnamization” of the Vietnam War, such policies sought to elevate the role of regional proxies or hegemons deputized to maintain security and order at the behest of US interests, most notably in Iran, following the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, up until the 1979 revolution.

This is an approach to statecraft in the region that has a deep historical pedigree (Lustic, 1997). What is often overlooked, however, is the extent to which such policies, in so far as they seek to inhibit the emergence of any rival to US supremacy, are based on the active and passive promotion of conflictual dynamics. The hyper-militarization of the region starting in the 1970s financially functioned to recuperate petrodollars back to the North Atlantic through arms sales, while also sustaining the Soviet weapons industry (Spiro, 1999; Wight, 2021). Concurrently, hyper-militarization had the effect of intensifying security dilemmas, setting in motion sub-regional arms races that raised political tensions from Morocco to Pakistan. While the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, stands as the most cynical example this dynamic where US military aid to both sides worked to keep the conflict going as long as possible (Mitchell, 2011: pp. 215–216), the US also made significant contributions to sustaining Morocco’s war in Western Sahara (to counter-balance Algeria’s growing military
strength), creating “Vietnams” for the USSR in Afghanistan and for Libya in Chad, preventing a holistic resolution to the dispossession of the Palestinians, and supporting the creation of an ethno-sectarian apartheid state in Israel. Complementing these tendencies has been a steadfast dedication to supporting regressive monarchism against the challenge of populist republicanism.

That US efforts to “secure” the Middle East since 2001 have resulted in the opposite—widespread and chronic insecurity—actually fits quite well within a broader pattern of behaviors. For half a century now, America’s international supremacy has been derived from the dynamics afforded by instability across the Middle East and North Africa. In this light, the Bush Jr. administration’s resort to sustained expeditionary military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan was more of an imperial aberration than something new. The efforts of the Obama and Trump administrations to prolong the Syrian civil war through direct and indirect forms of intervention, and for the sake of larger geopolitical aims, represented a telling reversion to the post-Vietnam norm.3

None of this is to suggest that American imperialism in the Middle East has been dominated by either a logic of political territory, economic capital, or a unique convergence of the two (pace Harvey, 2003: chapter 2). Rather, as will be argued later, the alleged separation and incommensurability of such logics in critiques of imperialism is one of the main reasons why theories of imperialism fail to explain imperialism. In other words, critiques of imperialism ontologically assume that the world is always-already cleaved into autonomous domains of the political (or territorial) and economic (or capital). Yet the appearance of these domains in modern imperialist imagination and practice are an ideational and material effect of how modern forms of power have been organized and exercised. Much of the credit for this conceptual and practical cleaving ironically goes to the consolidation petroleum-based energy systems in the early twentieth century under the direction of European empires and North Atlantic oil firms (Mitchell, 2011: chapter 5). One can thus hardly expect a critique of imperialism to succeed when its worldview has been extensively conditioned by imperialism.

3 “My job is to make it a quagmire for the Russians” were the words Ambassador James Jefferies, former US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2019–2020), during an online conference at the Hudson Institute (quoted in Brennan, 2020; see also Blumenthal, 2020).
3 Homogenizing or Heterogenizing?

Elsewhere in the literature on the new imperialism one finds assertions that the primary function of growing US entanglement in the wider Middle East post-9/11 was to influence the “global oil spigot”—if not to weaponize it, for the sake of keeping potential rivals like China in check. Most famously argued by David Harvey, there is an immediate contradiction in this theorization of US actions in the Middle East. On the one hand, there is an alleged strategic impulse to create mechanisms of control that could impede the material flows of capitalism’s primary source of energy to potential or actual geopolitical rivals through acts tantamount to politico-military sabotage (Veblenian or otherwise). Since the 1973 oil crisis and the announcement of the Carter Doctrine in 1980 (following the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; see U.S. Department of State, 2015), US policy towards the region, especially the Gulf, has ostensibly been premised upon preventing any regional or external power from doing just that, weaponizing the oil (Israel’s belligerent occupation and “overexploitation” of Egyptian oil reserves in the Sinai between 1967 and 1982 is a telling exception; Shipler, 1979). The notion that there existed a singular, centralized “oil spigot” was clearly an effect of the 1973 oil crisis, but the spigot’s increasingly regular invocation from the late 1970s onward came mainly in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which allegedly put Moscow within an imaginary striking distance of the Gulf (see, e.g., Jelinek, 1980; McDowell, 1980). Milton Friedman (1975) actually invoked the idea of the oil spigot in the pages of Newsweek nearly two years after the 1973 crisis, where he misattributed the agency of the embargo to OPEC (instead of OAPEC), helping to cement a historical—yet politically useful—error that persists to the present.

Undoubtedly, America’s self-assigned responsibility “to protect” the global oil market from being disrupted in the Middle East has effectively taken the form international racketeering. But there is no evidence that the United States...

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4 Following the invasion of Iraq, Harvey (2004: p. 81, emphasis added) claimed “if [the US] can move on, as seems likely, from Iraq to Iran and consolidate its position in Turkey and Uzbekistan as a strategic presence in relation to Caspian basin oil reserves, then the US, through firm control of the global oil spigot, might hope to keep effective control over the global economy and secure its own hegemonic position for the next fifty years.” Noam Chomsky has likewise invoked the “hand on the spigot” metaphor on a number of occasions, even citing Brzezinski as an endorser of the notion (McNeill, 2005).

5 As former US Secretary of State James Baker once said, “Look, I’ve been a member of four administrations [i.e., Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Bush Sr]. In every one of those...
used its influence and presence in the region to hobble geopolitical rivals outside of the Middle East (e.g., the case of Bush Sr.’s 1986 visit to Saudi Arabia noted above). And almost the opposite has taken place since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Asia now accounts for nearly two-thirds of Iraq’s seaborne crude oil exports, with China claiming a quarter of the total (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2021). Critics of American imperialism often highlighted the extent to which US petroleum companies benefitted from the overthrow of the Hussein regime (e.g., Klein, 2007; Juhaz, 2008), yet China’s oil companies were also quick to enhance their position in the new Iraq (Al-Shafiy, 2015) becoming the first firms to sign deals with the new government and, more recently, happily replacing departing North Atlantic operators (Zidane, 2021). If anything, US imperialism in the Middle East has facilitated the growth of China’s geopolitical power.

On the other hand, it is also claimed that the dominant logic of late capitalism, which drives the geographical strategies of US imperialism, is a relentless demand for “the battering down of all barriers to the spatial movement of capital” (Harvey, 2007: p. 57). This theorization mirrors the oft-quoted passage from the Grundrisse where Marx (1973: p. 539) claimed that capital “must [...] strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market.” In Hardt and Negri’s (2000: p. 333) terms, the “world market [...] requires a smooth space of uncoded and deterritorialized flows.” For Patnaik and Patnaik (2016: p. 4, emphasis in original), this is a distinct feature of financialized capitalism: “that the world should not be partitioned, that no barriers should exist in the way of the free movement of capital, including in the form of finance, and of commodities.” Others have likewise theorized imperialism, and its currently dominant American variant, as primarily seeking to create a world safe for the easy expansion of capitalism’s dominion (e.g., Wood, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Panitch and Gindin, 2013). The idea that imperial states and global capitalism are leveling and homogenizing administrations, we had as a written national security policy, that we would go to war to protect the energy reserves of the Persian Gulf, if necessary” (quoted in MEF, 2008: p. 18).

6 A more recent case is perhaps just as illustrative: following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States attempted to convince its allies in the Middle East to produce more petroleum so as to counter European dependency on Russian natural gas and to alleviate the global price shock triggered by the war, which was exacerbating inflation (price gouging in the context of the global corona virus pandemic) in the United States. The fact that these efforts met with mixed results, and were soundly rejected by Saudi Arabia, was not only an indication of the limits of US influence in a region but the absurdity that there ever existed an “oil for security” arrangement between Washington and its putative comprador states in the Gulf.
forces—vis-à-vis the forces of reactionary traditionalism—likewise found significant purchase in mainstream debates about globalization in the 1990s framed as “the Lexus and the olive tree,” including a sub-genre tailored to the Middle East, “Jihad vs. McWorld” (Barber, 1992).

Power and profit are just as often, if not more so, realized through the interdependent articulation of social and spatial difference. It is not just the case that conflict and violence emerge at the ever-expanding liminal zones of capitalism’s material and ideational dominion, as the arguments above would suggest. The “frontier” is not a condition; it is rather a structural effect of relations, practices, and processes of power (Ballvé, 2020). Just as the incommensurability of the capital-labor relation is essential to the dynamism of capitalism, other forms of conflictual yet entangled differentiation texture the terrains upon which power can flow. Barriers are a quintessential feature of capitalism’s intercourse.

The derivation and enhancement of modern forms of power through the elaboration and reproduction of socio-spatial difference, particularly with respect to imperialism in the Middle East, was effectively the most fundamental insight of Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*. From the mid-1800s onward, the co-emergent crises of population management in the colonies and the new urban centers in the North Atlantic generated novel scientific efforts to render those populations as intelligible in terms of a distinct realm of “the social,” including incommensurable bio-cultural differences of race (Kuper, 1988; Mamdani, 2012; Owens, 2015). We should not make the mistake, however, of equating intelligible, manageable, and docile (pace Foucault, 1977), or to dismiss racism as one of capitalism’s many “irrationalities” (Rodney, 1982: p. 10) external to its core operations. While the creation of new understandings of human difference abetted new forms of imperial warfare and domestic policing, difference obtains its dynamism—becomes effective difference—precisely through its articulation with the kinds of conflict that the institutions of war and policing help to reproduce. Luxemburg (1951: p. 370–371) was right to recognize the extent to which the use of violence was essential to the expansion of capitalism into new frontiers like Algeria, though the violence of French rule soon became predicated on almost the opposite of a socially homogenizing *mission civilisatrice*. Instead, it was supplanted by racial theories of the uncivilizability of the “non-native” Arab population vis-à-vis the “indigenous” Berbers, an ascriptive difference invented and reproduced by colonial social science and bureaucratic management (Lorcin, 2014; Davis, 2022). At the level of the global, Cold War mythologies of a world increasingly ordered since 1648 around separate-but-equal territorial nation-states helped to hide the fact that the putative irreconcilability of human difference—not state interests—had
been the actual conceptual basis of modern imperialism, as well as the endemic conflicts it produced alongside the emergence of the capitalist mode of production (Barder, 2021).

In this way, Panitch (2014: p. 25), like many others, is right to observe—but for the wrong reasons—that there’s an analog between US military interventions abroad and the kind of violent racialized policing witnessed domestically. Irrespective of their institutional mandates, bureaucratic cultures, and the autonomy of their agents, the “order” produced by the American police and military, functionally speaking, is often as much about (re)producing difference and insecurity as the opposite. In the case of the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, Alnasseri (2009: pp. 87–88) rightly highlighted the constitutive duality of security and insecurity. Just as capital requires the power of government to establish and maintain private property, the state must also produce the enemy and the deviant (e.g., the terrorist and the criminal) through its instruments of security. If capitalism and imperialism are simultaneously heterogenizing and homogenizing, then articulations like the tacit alliance between the United States, the Saudi monarchy, and puritanical religious movements cannot be understood as an indications of limits or weaknesses—as a kind of fallback option vis-à-vis unspecified abstract conditions of total control and unimpeded profitability that no classical or modern political-economy has ever obtained (contra Mitchell, 2002). Considering the historical record of US alliances, interventions, and sanctions in the Middle East and North Africa (and Venezuela and Russia more recently), no other country has done more to erect barriers to capital flows (vis-à-vis oil), to foster conflict, to promote monarchical authoritarianism, and to de-develop the region (in Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Syria) than Washington.7 These “impediments”—key contributors to the development of postcolonial underdevelopment across the region—are as much conditions of power’s exercise as consequences of it (Kadri, 2014). Labban (2008) theorizes such spaces as “negative territoriality” whereby power is afforded not through the forced incorporation of peoples and places into empire of North Atlantic capital, but rather by their violent exclusion and isolated from it.

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7 Harvey entertains the idea that, within the ever-evolving relationship between raison d’état and the requirements of capital accumulation, there might be contradictions, and that the US wars in Vietnam and Iraq are difficult to square with a postwar mission to “keep the world open as possible to capital accumulation through the expansion of trade, commerce, and opportunities for foreign investment.” While this might be the case for capitalism in general, it is certainly not the case for powerful North Atlantic arms and petroleum industries (see Harvey, 2003: p. 30; quoted in Brenner, 2006: p. 81).
Lastly, what in fact made Harvey’s new imperialism new was a new political-economy of accumulation by dispossession (or neo-primitive accumulation) that allegedly emerged in response the increasing failure of capitalism to realize and absorb surpluses through traditional forms of production and consumption in its established zones. The idea that America’s occupation of Iraq represented, at best, forced neoliberalization and, at worst, a kind of smash-and-grab capitalism, found wide currency elsewhere as well (Juhaz, 2006; Klein, 2007). But for Harvey, the major blockages confronting North Atlantic capitalism at the turn of millennium, as expressed in the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2001 recession, are unrelated to the alleged necessity to find a “spatial fix” in the Middle East, which is an alleged crisis framed in entirely neo-Malthusian terms: ostensibly increasing US import-reliance and dwindling global supplies of oil (Harvey, 2003: p. 13; citing Klare, 2001). While Malthusian accounts of petroleum’s violent geopolitics have a degree of elegance, the fundamental geological premise of peak oil has always been proven incorrect. The defining problem of oil, from the perspective of deriving wealth and power from it, has always been the opposite: its natural abundance (Mitchell, 2011; see also Huber, 2011; Gordon, 2021). This facet of “private riches” was already well understood by James Maitland (1804), the eighth Earl of Lauderdale, whose treatise recognized the creation and management of scarcity as fundamental to the political-economy emerging around him (cited in Foster and Clark, 2010). In our contemporary period, much of the ideological labor that has gone into reproducing petroleum’s fictive global scarcity has ironically been performed by leading critics of American foreign policy flogging easily-rebuked theories of peak-oil imperialism (Vitalis, 2020; Stern, 2016).

Looking back at the late 1990s, the crisis of profitability facing the North Atlantic petroleum companies was one of excess supply since the mid-1980s. The price increases of the 1970s made possible new frontiers of extraction in the North Sea, Alaska, Siberia, and elsewhere. The oil profitability crisis of the 1990s was managed through mergers and reduced levels of investment in extractive infrastructures and exploration, which gave the impression of increasing natural scarcity (Nitzan and Bichler, 2002: pp. 266–268). The 1990s was also a period of intense crisis for the armament industries, starved of their Cold War earnings and the threat of a “peace dividend.” Beyond reduced profitability, the major impediment facing international oil companies in the Middle East was US policies designed to isolate “rogue states” through material and financial sanctions (e.g., Libya, Iraq, and Iran). Yet under the UN sanctions relief program, the United States began importing Iraqi oil in significant quantities in 1998. These imports then continually began to decline after 2001, and today Iraq only accounts for one-third of US imports from the Gulf—a region that
only constituted around eight percent of US daily imports in 2021 (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2022a,b). Following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority opened all sectors of the economy to foreign investment and privatization except for petroleum (Smith, 2016), defying the recommendations of a State Department Advisory Panel of Iraqi exiles and the Cato institute (Vieth, 2003; O’Driscoll Jr and Cohen, 2003). Before and after 2003, Iraq’s oil remained under the control of the Ministry of Oil and its complicated network of nationalized oil companies, though in 2018 the Iraqi parliament voted to consolidate these operations under a revived Iraqi National Oil Company. In what sense the Iraq war, or any other in the region, was “all about oil” remains an enigma.  

4 Economic or Political?

It is difficult to couch post-9/11 rearticulations of North Atlantic hegemony and sustained US military interventions in the Middle East primarily in terms of a generalized decline in profitability (see Brenner, 2006). There should also be concerns about theoretical overstretch and elucidatory shortfalls of positing a capitalism putatively regressing to dispossession as a primary means of accumulation (Das, 2017; Roberts, 2020). Harvey (2021) himself has recently come to question whether or not declining rates of profit are a significant impediment to the expansion of late capitalism, and also for seeming to suggest that imperialism as we knew it was at an end. “The historical draining of wealth from East to West for more than two centuries has,” Harvey wrote (2016: p. 169), “been largely reversed over the last thirty years.” The suggestion that international relations and the global political-economy were no longer engineered in such a way as to guarantee the dominance of North Atlantic capitalism and the perpetual dispossession of the masses of the global south drew a firestorm of criticism.  

8 In the case of America’s longest war, the occupation of Afghanistan, the apparent failure of petroleum pipeline imperialism—Afghanistan has yet to host a conduit linking central Asian reserves to other markets (and circumventing Iran)—leads to a similar explanatory impasse: either Washington is horribly inept when it comes to serving its geopolitical interests and North Atlantic petrol-capital, or there are other logics at play. A major purveyor of this thesis was Ahmed Rashid (2001).

9 The number of interventions in the debate triggered by Harvey’s comments are too numerous to list. Interested readers should consult the websites of the African Review of Political Economy (roape.net) and the Union for Radical Political Economy (urpe.org) for key contributions.
Many of these critiques of Harvey’s comments have come from those whose theorizations of imperialism tend to emphasize its primarily or exclusively “economic” nature, not only by drawing a sharp line between the political and the economic, but often by subordinating the autonomy of the former to the putative sovereignty of the latter. At the outset of the global war on terror, Wood (2003: p. 5) framed imperialism as operating through two modes of power: economic and extra-economic. Magdoff (2003) would describe the new imperialism as one of a global (economic) market, unlike the (political) colonies of old. More recently, Carchedi and Roberts (2021: pp. 24–25, their emphasis) described contemporary imperialism as being a system in which “military and political domination, as well as cultural and ideological pre-eminence” are “determined traits” that nonetheless help make possible “the economy’s determining features.” This line of argument—the effort to transpose Marx’s *Capital* to new international contexts—stretches from Hobson, Hilferding, Luxemburg, and Lenin to Amin and Magdoff (see Mommsen, 1980; Brewer, 2002). More recent contributions to this analytical tendency, often dismissed as “economistic” (Parisot, 2019), continue to focus on the processes by which the dominance of North Atlantic capital and polities are reproduced through globally exploitative structures of production, trade, and finance (e.g., Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016; Suwandi, 2019; King, 2021). “Late imperialism,” Foster (2019: pp. 9–10) has argued, is a world-wide political-economy organized around “generalized monopoly-finance capital; the globalization of production; new forms of surplus extraction from the periphery to center; and epochal economic, military, and environmental challenges.” These theories of contemporary imperialism are quite capable of accounting for the ways in which North Atlantic capital has been able to reproduce its global dominance through the elaboration of international regimes of industrial commodity production, finance, and labor. What they fail to offer is any way of accounting for the militarization, proxy wars, sanctions, interventions, and occupations—the practices that traditionally typified imperialism—that have devastated the Middle East over the previous decades, all of which coincided, it should be recalled, with the emergence of the global neoliberal regime over the past half century.

Dualists who approach the question of contemporary imperialism as being realized at the convergence of both the economic and the political tend to devote more attention to its increasingly violent manifestations in the Middle East. In these accounts, American imperialism becomes a question of conflicting or coordinating logics, not just of the reproduction and control of capital, but also in terms of the territorial or geopolitical, in the reproduction of state power. As Callinicos (2009: p. 15) puts it, “capitalist imperialism is constituted by the intersection of two forms of competition, namely economic and
geopolitical” (see also Harvey, 2003: pp. 33–36). How and why the Middle East would become the epicenter of the most violent aspects of American imperialism is a question often deferred to Bromley’s (2005: p. 254) historical account of US efforts to assert a degree of influence over global oil markets, but not “to carve out protected spaces for the US economy and firms” (cited in Callinicos (2009) and Panitch and Gindin (2013)). For Desai (2013: p. 269), however, “the control of oil in the Middle East” became the new geopolitical rationale upon which American supremacy was grounded after the Cold War. Taking a more disaggregated approach involving inter-capitalist competition, Bieler and Morton suggest that US interventions in the Middle East are less about advancing the general interests of global capitalism or the trans-national capital class than the specific interests of particular sectors—namely arms, oil, and firms specializing in post-conflict reconstruction—that managed to enroll the Bush-Cheney administration in a sustained act of imperialistic rent-seeking disguised as military Keynesianism (Bieler and Morton, 2015). This argument builds upon the three decades of empirical research advanced by Nitzan and Bichler, which demonstrated a relationship between wars in the Middle East and the ability of North Atlantic arms and petroleum firms to outperform other sectors (Bichler and Nitzan, 2018). There are now, however, several problems with this line of argument. As has long been the case, the explanatory strength of this previously longstanding correlation is deflated by the lack of evidence—and much evidence to the contrary—that US policy makers were actively seeking to use military power abroad to precipitate conflicts in the Middle East so as to raise oil prices by politically manufacturing scarcity at the behest of North Atlantic petroleum and weapons corporations (Vitalis, 2020). An additional problem, as recent research has shown, is the extent to which complex ownership structures, mediated in large part by financialized capital, make such sectoral disaggregation untenable. The sense in which two discrete sectors of North Atlantic capitalism—arms and oil—require Middle Eastern insecurity, while other sectors have a preference for the opposite, is now entirely muddled by the crosscutting nature of financialized capital’s ownership of these industries (Hanieh, 2021; see also Labban, 2010). The final problem is the collapse of the relationship between Middle Eastern insecurity and oil prices in 2014, despite the record high rates of violent armed conflict in the region (e.g., Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan). Even more

10 Similarly, Mike Davis reportedly described the Bush-Cheney administration in 2002 as “the executive committee of the American Petroleum Institute” (quote attributed to Mike Davis from a talk at the Marxism 2002 conference by Callinicos (2009: p. 15)).
confounding is the event that has recently resuscitated the fiscal fortunes of the North Atlantic petroleum sector: not a war in the Middle East but one in Ukraine in early 2022.

5 Conclusion

Is the absence of a satisfactory account of the American empire’s violent fixation on the Middle East rooted in the impossibility of the intellectual task, the need for more retrospective analysis, or the very terms of debate that continue to structure these questions? This review has primarily sought to dispel a certain set of myths about US imperialism in Middle East by highlighting its relationship to the heterogenous production of security, identities, and territories in the region. This review then sought to question the political and economic reductionism inherent in many theories of imperialism, and to suggest that a “both/and” dualist approach merely reproduces the same explanatory impasse. To move forward, accounts of contemporary imperialism should look beyond reductionism and dualism by viewing neither the economic nor the political as encompassing the totality of human action or as the most salient rift within it. Neither of these spheres of practice are given or predetermined (as political or economic); rather, it is their embrace, contestation, and ambiguous overlap that is indicative of historical and ongoing sites of struggle variously to demarcate, reinforce or efface such ideational and institutional boundaries. It is the imperialism of abstractions (Sayer, 1987) from which theories of imperialism first need to be emancipated.

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Biographical Note

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