KOSOVO AND THE NEW IMPERIALISM

by ELLEN MEIKSINS WOOD

Note: We have no way of knowing what the status of the war in Yugoslavia will be when the following reaches you. Since its completion, there have been more NATO "mistakes": the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and of many Kosovar Albanian civilians in Korisa. We can only hope that such events will bring the U.S. government and its NATO allies to their senses. But whatever happens in Yugoslavia, the global dangers posed by the United States and its long-term objectives will persist so long as this country's imperial project remains intact.

For the second time in just a few months, we go to press as the United States and its allies are conducting a major military aggression, in violation of international law and without any legitimate authority.

Normally, as a monthly magazine, we can't, and don't try to, report fast-breaking news. We do our best, instead, to analyze the context—political, economic, historical—in which current events are taking place. But sometimes there are events too big to wait for in-depth analysis in the cold light of hindsight. There are some things we need to talk about as they happen, even if we take the risk of being overtaken by events. The situation will certainly change by the time this issue comes out, but whatever happens, the war in Yugoslavia cannot end well. Its immediate effects and some of its long-term consequences are already obvious, and nothing that happens from now on, even in the event that things don't get worse than they are at this moment, can reverse the horrendous damage already done.

This is happening at a time when words like "imperialism" are scarcely uttered by the left, or are spoken with a certain faint embarrassment (having gone the way of other unfashionable words like "class struggle"). But there is no other currently available "discourse" that can adequately capture what has been going on in the Balkans.

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The New Imperialism: War Just for the Hell of It?

What, then, really is going on? We may as well start by hearing it straight from the horse's mouth. Here is Bill Clinton: "If we're going to have a strong economic relationship that includes our ability to sell around the world, Europe has got to be a key That's what this Kosovo thing is all about."¹

So there it is. Given everything else we know about the overriding and explicit objective of U.S. foreign policy, to expand the scope of "democracy" and free markets (surely a redundant formula, when the latter adequately captures what is really meant by "democracy"), it is not so difficult to interpret Clinton's thumbnail sketch of his purposes in Yugoslavia.

Forget humanitarian motives. This is about U.S. global hegemony. And more immediately, it is about the role of NATO as the U.S. conduit to Europe, at a time when the European Union is developing as a major pole of global capitalism that the United States needs to control. No doubt, as many commentators have pointed out, it is also about Russia and the geopolitical containment of a country that still remains a big player, the one major power that sits athwart Europe and Asia. With these larger objectives in mind, it is probably unnecessary to invoke oil supplies and pipelines—which are regularly, and often correctly, cited to explain U.S. military adventures, including this last one. But even these large objectives have to be seen in the context of a still larger strategy, which I can sketch out only very briefly here.

What the Clinton regime has been doing, as wild and unthinking as it seems, is completely consistent with a now well-established pattern in U.S. foreign policy. So well-established and habitual has this pattern become that an irresponsible President and his lunatic Secretary of State can follow it blindfolded, without plan or forethought. U.S. wars have long been about one thing above all others: demonstrating that the United States can deploy its massive military power any time any place, with or without intelligible reasons, objectives, or strategies. This is a seemingly irrational use of military force that can appear to have no identifiable purpose, certainly nothing so unambiguous as establishing sovereignty over territory or acquiring and dominating colonies.

Maybe we need a whole new vocabulary for this kind of militarism, but so far, we know no other word for it than imperialism. To make sense of it, though, we have to trace the changes in the nature of imperialism. Capitalist imperialism, as Harry Magdoff has often pointed out, is essentially different from earlier forms of imperialism, because its objectives are specifically capitalist. They are not, for instance, the objectives of the slave-holding Roman empire but the objectives of an expanding capital, the search for markets and resources in pursuit of capitalist self-expansion, and so on. But something more needs to be said, about the ways in which capitalist imperialism itself has changed.

In the old days, capitalist imperialism was based on a division between a capitalist and a non-capitalist world. Imperialist powers typically conquered colonial territories or used direct military force to control them. And, of course, imperialist states competed over those territories, typically by military means. So, though its objectives and its basic logic were fundamentally different from pre-capitalist imperialism, capitalist imperialism in its earlier days may not have been quite so different from those older forms in its methods and instruments, the modalities of territorial conquest or control, or in the forms of inter-imperialist rivalry.

But the story today is different. Today, imperialism is not really about the relation between a capitalist and a non-capitalist world. It has more to do with the relations within a global capitalist system. Imperialism today is taking place in the context of what we have been calling the “universalization” of capitalism. It is not now primarily a matter of territorial conquest or direct military or colonial control. It is not now a matter of capitalist powers invading non-capitalist territories in order to bleed them dry directly and by brute force.

Now, it is more a matter of ensuring that the forces of the capitalist market prevail in every corner of the world (even if this means marginalizing and impoverishing parts of it), and of manipulating those market forces to the advantage of the most powerful capitalist economies and the United States in particular.

It is not just a matter of controlling particular territories. It is a matter of controlling a whole world economy and global markets, everywhere and all the time. This happens not only through the direct exploitation of cheap labor by transnationals based in advanced capitalist countries but also more indirectly through things like debt and currency manipulation. Inter-imperialist rivalries have changed too. They are still there, but in less direct, unambiguous military forms, in the contradictory processes of capitalist competition.

These changes in the nature of imperialism have, among other things, intensified the contradictions and instabilities of capitalism, and this may open up new possibilities of anticapitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. But there are also other consequences. If today’s imperialism does not typically express itself in direct military domination of colonies, this does not mean that it is any less militaristic than the old variety. The point is certainly not that the world is more peaceful because the old principles of military conquest have given way to less violent means of commerce and financial domination. On the contrary, military force is still central to the imperialist project, in some ways more than ever. But now it has to be used in different ways and with different immediate objectives.

The point can be put very simply: there is a big difference between, on the one hand, establishing sovereignty over territory—a specific, clearly identifiable territory with known boundaries—and, on the other hand, establishing sovereignty over an anarchic global econ-

omy. The minute we get that distinction clear in our minds, it starts to make sense out of all kinds of other apparently inexplicable things, such as repeated military actions by the United States that consistently fail to achieve their stated objectives, and which even worsen the conditions they are supposed to correct. We also have to keep in mind that the universalization of capitalism, which is the context of this kind of imperialism, is still going on in a world of nation-states. So the effort to establish sovereignty over global markets, no less than the sovereignty over specific colonial territories in the past, is a project pursued by state powers, and by one state power above all.

The question is how this kind of boundless hegemony, this sovereignty without territory, this imperialism without frontiers, can be achieved. A little while ago in MR's Notes from the Editors, we made a point that has long been at the heart of MR's analysis of imperialism: when all is said and done, after we take account of all kinds of specific interests, or apparent interests, it finally comes down to a naked display of force, just for the sake of it, just for the sake of asserting U.S. hegemony. Saber-rattling has, of course, always been part of imperialist strategies, but massive displays of force have a new importance in the new imperialism. The point is that, in today's conditions, we won't necessarily find any specific and concrete objective to military action. We won't find it, simply because the object of the exercise is not necessarily direct control of territory or even resources.

This is something that even some old-fashioned military men can't quite get their minds around. For instance, a few years ago, General Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, enunciated what has been called the "Powell Doctrine," laying out the basic conditions for the use of military force: there must be some clear and vital national interest, there must be a clear goal, there must be sufficient force to achieve that goal, and there must be a clear exit strategy. When Madeleine Albright was the U.S. ambassador to the UN, she challenged Powell on these principles. "What's the point of having this superb military that you've always been talking about," she is reported to have said, "if we can't use it?"² The idea seems to have been that U.S. military might should be used more flexibly, even where none of those conditions are present, where there is even no clear, or clearly attainable, objective and no clear exit. The United States, in other words, should use its military power when, and because, it can.

Whatever deliberate strategies are being pursued by Albright and Clinton, then, Albright's irresponsible attitude at least makes some kind of sense in the context of the new imperialism. In fact, it has been a basic theme in U.S. foreign policy for a long time. As Harry Magdoff said many years ago about Vietnam, you can't, in the end, explain U.S. foreign policy in some very specific material terms. You have to recognize that what it's about is making it clear to the world

at large that U.S. power can be deployed anywhere at any time. And, to cite a principle enunciated by Henry Kissinger, part of that strategy is unpredictability—some would say irrationality.

Humanitarian Imperialism?

Where, then, are the tens, even hundreds, of thousands who used to come out to protest U.S. imperialism, in Vietnam or Central America? Where, in particular, is the left? Have people stopped caring, or is it possible that people don't recognize imperialism when they see it? Given the apparent irrationality of the new imperialism, it may be understandable that so many people, even those on the left with strong anti-imperialist commitments, have trouble acknowledging it. The indiscriminate use of military force is certainly harder to understand than the outright capture of territory and the exploitation of colonies, and surely, many people will think, it can't be true that any sane person or government would use military power in this way, killing and destroying without definable objective.

But there is another reason for the remarkable weakness of the opposition to this new form of imperialism. The new imperialism, as practiced by the U.S., has adopted a very effective disguise. Last year, we published a piece called "Human Rights Imperialism" by Uwe-Jens Heuer and Gregor Schirmer. This was a prophetic piece, which could be reprinted today as a comment on the war in Yugoslavia before the fact.³ It clearly demonstrates how the U.S. interpretation of human rights violates any meaningful conception of human rights and destroys the very foundations of any such conception, replacing the common interests of humanity with the particular interests and arbitrary actions of the United States.

The notion of "human rights imperialism" nicely captures the mystification that seems to have swayed a lot of people on the left. To say this is not to discount the genuine convictions of those whose reaction to events in Yugoslavia is "But we had to do *something*." We have to engage with that reaction, and not just in the case of the war over Kosovo. Whatever happens in that war, this human rights imperialism won't go away, and unless we confront it head on, the left is in danger of losing its one most consistent commitment, the resistance to imperialism, a commitment that many people have preserved long after giving up on things like class struggle.

That is why, in this issue, we are publishing two pieces that, in different ways, challenge the humanitarian claims now being used to justify the war in Yugoslavia: Tariq Ali's piece, which exposes the contradictions in the very logic of the war, and Gilbert Achcar's article, which takes on human rights imperialism on its own self-proclaimed ethical terrain by asking whether this can be called a "just war" (as,

for instance, Susan Sontag called it in the Sunday *New York Times* magazine on May 2).

There are just a few things I want to add to what the other pieces say about this “humanitarian” war. To begin with, it is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to sort out the truth from the lies on all sides. As much evidence as there now is—certainly since the onset of the bombing—of atrocities in Kosovo, there is growing evidence that NATO went to war with surprisingly little to support its claims of atrocities in any way commensurate with the war it was about to launch.⁴ But let’s start from the premise that there was a “humanitarian” disaster which people of good will, not least many socialists, wanted to see stopped. What do we say to them?

We surely no longer need to outline all the evidence against the patently spurious claim that this war has been driven by humanitarian concerns—for instance, all the cases of atrocities perpetrated by friends of the United States, which have elicited no such response. The most dramatic instance—discussed later in this issue—is, of course, the Turkish government’s long-standing and systematic oppression of Turkey’s Kurdish population, which continues as Turkish planes fly over Belgrade. Since Clinton has, out of his own mouth, disposed of that humanitarian claim by telling us what Kosovo is really all about, we can move straight to the fairly common argument that the motives aren’t important. If your wife is being raped or your husband beaten to a pulp, the argument goes, you call the cops, even if you know they’re rotten and corrupt.

There are some painfully obvious answers. Even if you can’t stop to ask who appointed those cops and on what authority, even if you have no time to consider the long-term effects of calling on self-appointed cops, the effects on the rule of law itself, would you really call the cops if you believed that they themselves would rape or beat your partner? Motives do matter, if only because they tell us a lot about what the actor will and will not do, and what the outcome is likely to be.

If we assume that NATO is acting on imperialist motives, we are unlikely to be surprised at the failure of its action to help the victims, whose conditions became palpably worse after the bombing began. We are unlikely to be surprised at the destruction of the country’s infrastructure which will, as in Iraq, do far more harm, and for much longer, to innocent civilians than to their oppressors. We are unlikely to be surprised at the destruction perpetrated by the NATO military machine, the immediate killing and maiming of civilians by bombs, and the long-term killing and maiming, of this and future generations, by ecological catastrophe—the bombing of refineries and chemical plants, which is nothing short of biological warfare, and the use by the United States of depleted uranium, which is just this side of nuclear war.

For that matter, we are unlikely to be surprised that an action supposedly intended to stabilize the Balkan region has transparently resulted in its destabilization, or that an action supposedly intended to weaken, if not destroy, Milosevic has only strengthened him. We certainly won't be surprised by the consistent use of a military method that has long been the method of choice for the United States: high-tech bombing, which has never yet, in any war, achieved the objectives claimed for it but which is guaranteed to cause maximum and indiscriminate destruction, in the short and long term. Everything down to the most basic tactics—such as flying bombers at great heights to avoid any risk to U.S. forces, while absolutely guaranteeing civilian casualties (not least among people who are supposed to be the bombing's beneficiaries) for the simple reason that the targets are hardly discernible—becomes intelligible and predictable once we recognize the underlying motives.

We could, of course, try to make sense of it all simply by saying that the NATO action has been monumentally inept. Inept it has certainly been. There can be no doubt that it was based on gross miscalculations, and as Tariq Ali shows in this issue, the war has been disastrous for NATO. That is why, despite its worries about Russia, the United States seems to be counting on Russia to pull NATO's chestnuts out of the fire. It is not hard to predict that the interests of Kosovo Albanians, no less than those of other people in the Balkans, will be subordinated even more than they already are to imperial interests.

But in a way these blunders hardly matter, if the aim is a display of military force and of the naked power to destroy at will. At any rate, it seems reasonable and in keeping with a long and consistent record of U.S. military actions to accept what its perpetrators themselves have said about it, that it is about U.S. global hegemony. We should just acknowledge that in the light of that objective no other consequences count.

Beyond the consequences for Kosovo, for Yugoslavia, for the Balkans, and for Europe, there are the consequences for the world as a whole. Make no mistake about it. This really is a new world order. None of us has any illusions about the feeble safeguards put in place, after two world wars, to preserve some semblance of international order. But it can't be a matter of indifference to see them completely dismantled—the U.N. effectively defunct and every commitment to international law discarded. If there was ever any hope of even the most minimally effective and decent solution to a crisis like the one in Kosovo, surely it was more likely to be found by institutions intended for such purposes than by instruments of war and imperialism.

But maybe NATO's monumental blunders, and the growing unease felt by citizens of NATO countries, not to mention the rest of the world, at the horrors perpetrated by the United States and its

allies will mark the beginning of the end for NATO, and one nail in the coffin of U.S. imperialism.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Benjamin Schwartz and Christopher Lane, "The Case Against Intervention in Kosovo," *The Nation*, April 19, 1999.
2. Eric Schmitt, "The Powell Doctrine Is Looking Pretty Good Again," *New York Times*, April 4, 1999, p. 5.
3. *Monthly Review*, March 1998, vol. 49, no. 10, pp. 5-16.
4. See, for example, an article entitled "Failure of Diplomacy," by Rollic Keith, a Canadian monitor who worked with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Kosovo Verification Mission near Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, until March 20, a few days before the bombing began. The article appeared on May 9 in *The Democrat*, the newspaper of the New Democratic Party in British Columbia, and challenges in detail NATO's account of the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo on the eve of the bombing. It can also be found on the website of the British Columbia NDP: www.bc.ndp.ca/welcome-frame.htm. See also extracts from German foreign ministry documents about the situation of Kosovo Albanians before the NATO bombing, on the web at www.jungewelt.de/1999/04-24/011.shtml.

It is our great pleasure to congratulate Eduardo Galeano, who was recently awarded the Lannan Foundation's first Prize for Cultural Freedom.

Galeano, a Uruguayan journalist and human rights advocate, is the author of many books, including *Open Veins of Latin America*, *Days and Nights of Love and War*, and the *Memory of Fire* trilogy. The Foundation awarded Galeano \$250,000, plus an additional \$100,000 that he designated for three Uruguayan institutions: the Cinemateca Uruguaya, which promotes animation cinema, the Fundación Vivían Triás, which promotes readings and discussions in history and politics, and the political and cultural weekly magazine *Brecha*.

Monthly Review Press, Galeano's first English-language publisher, issued a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Open Veins of Latin America*, with a foreword by Chilean novelist Isabel Allende, in 1997.