Americans Again, or the New Age of Imperial Reason?
Global Elite Formation, its Identity and Ideological Discourses

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Bourdieu and Wacquant’s ‘On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason’ does an important service by blatantly raising the issue of the social bases of the accepted intellectual representations of the contemporary world. It might be argued that this has not occurred previously because the new hegemonic representations are produced by the university academics and cultural elites themselves and are thus immediately perceived as critical and progressive according to the self-definition of these elites. Wacquant and Bourdieu argue that this doxa must be overturned. The key words under attack are globalization, flexibility, underclass, race, and the issue is whether these now globalized concepts that appear self-evident for many are simply globalized words – like commodities that are imbued with meaning by their particular consumers.

The initial and bold argument is in my opinion very well put but not developed in either theoretical or empirical terms in the rest of the article. The argument concerns the formation of a globalized or globally hegemonic discourse or set of representations. The difference between these two terms is important. Representations refer to the categories involved and discourses refer to the way in which the categories are integrated with one another in propositions about the world or the state of the world. Two acts are crucial here. The first is referred to as rupture – the decontextualization of categories, their abstraction from their original contexts. The second is universalization itself, or the circulation of the categories in the global
context making them, in practice, free of particular locales. These processes are said, together, to neutralize the specificity of categories and therefore to transform them into universalistic representations. That which is specific to the US situation is thus transformed into a general description of the world. This sounds neat, but it does not work out in reality as far as I can see. One needs to be more specific about the actual social processes involved. How does this imperialist diffusion occur in practice? The answer to the first question is partly the financial organization of world media and publishing, but this is not sufficient. The fact that the media are concentrated among certain American firms, or firms that are themselves Americanized in terms of outlook, does not suffice to generate the transformation described. One has to explain their resonance, the conditions under which these ideas can be consumed and appropriated by the rest of the world if this is indeed the case. Why is it happening now and what are the contents of the categories and discursive logics that spread in this way? No answer is forthcoming in Bourdieu and Wacquant’s article. More important, and this is strange for Bourdieu, whose research has focussed on the relation between social position, *habitus* and cultural production, there is little mention of the locus of the generation of such representations. Here the scheme begins to crack. The reason that everyone is using the word ‘flexibility’ in contexts from capital accumulation to employment cannot simply be accounted for in terms of the generalization of an American representation. Something may indeed have happened in the real world as well! There is the real downsizing of both firms and states in Europe (but less so in the US in percentage terms). There is increasing insecurity and an emergent long-term unemployed population in all of the West. There is increasing class polarization and absolute marginalization, not least in the apparent growth machine that is the US. But theorizing the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism was, so far as I know, a development in French economics and not in the USA. But then again, these ideas are not without referents and they are not necessarily specific to the USA. We are, after all, talking about the reconfiguration of the world system, and not the mere diffusion of American ideas. In some discourses, flexibility is seen as a positive thing and may well be part of neo-liberal ideology, but this is not specific to the USA nor does it preclude other interpretations of the nature and effects of flexibility. The USA is not the sole locus of celebratory liberalism although a great deal of it comes from there. Some of the strongest critiques of neo-liberalism are also from the USA. While European social democracy has incorporated neo-liberalist policies under the doubletalk of the ‘third way’, some of the strongest critiques of neo-liberalism are also from the USA, which has hardly ever known social democracy of the European type.

Much the same might be said about the concept of globalization. It is clear that many of those who invoke the term are quite ideological about it, and I would certainly agree and have also argued that the term used in an evolutionary sense is strongly normative, ‘before we were local but now,
finally, we are global and this is much better because we can become transnational individuals, multicultural in ourselves, happy-hybrid’, etc. This is clearly resonant with other discourses and representations in the media, at UNESCO and other domains expressive of elite positions. There are other understandings of globalization that are not only more complex but also much more critical. To name the most recent, Bauman’s vision of the process is quite contrary to that of sociologists like Robertson (1992) and anthropologists and cultural studies people like Appadurai (1996) and Bhabha (1994). If the latter are entirely culturalist in their understanding and normatively transnational as well, seeing globalization as social or, even better, cultural progress, Bauman (1998) attempts to grasp the real social grounding of this discourse (see also Friedman, 1994, 1999a, 1999b). I have also suggested (1997, 1999b), as Bauman does, that we must situate the very discourse of cosmopolitanization in a particular class or elite position rather than discussing it as merely another theoretical take on reality. Other scholars, like Braudel (1984) and more recently Arrighi (1997), developing Braudel, have pointed out that globalization is not an evolutionary process at all but a recurring phase in world capitalist ‘development’ (Friedman, 1999a, 1999b). This is not just in relation to capital as such but to technological and class transformations as well as the representations involved in this process.

It is of course true that many discourses that circulate around the world today are expressions of ideas that are quite dominant in the US context and which have circulated and gained dominance throughout parts of the world because of the structures of funding, of publication and of clientelistic academic relations as well. But there is more to this than Bourdieu and Wacquant suggest. While the authors do state that many of the currently popular ideas are watered down versions of originally European exports to the USA, this should give us all the more reason to remember that in the 1960s, and especially the 1970s, the USA was a major importer of French representations and discourses, from structuralism to poststructuralism and postmodernism. In fact many careers were made by a kind of self-clientization of certain scholars to an imaginary Parisian Parnassus. The simplification and even distortion of those ideas at the hands of American intellectuals might well be discussed and criticized, but the fact that they have been re-imported in different form should also awaken us to the more important changes in intellectual life that affect all of us. If we use the phrase ‘social mediocrification’ instead, referring to a process of simplification and superficialization of intellectual activity in public intellectual spheres, then we have something more serious.¹ It is not merely the representations themselves, but the way in which they are produced that is changing, and this process may indeed have begun in the USA. It is a process which values an intellectual (sic!) mode in which analysis and insight are replaced by associating a given text, experience, empirical phenomena with a slew of acceptable metaphors and ‘dropped’ names (Bourdieu included) so that the net effect is that the author identifies
himself and hopefully is accepted by the particular group to which he associates himself. This paradoxical individualist – yet total – dependence on the gaze of the other, i.e. narcissism, is the basis of a new tribalism, a tribalism of free choice driven only by individual desire that forms intellectual ‘communities of choice’.

It may be true that the discourse of American cultural studies has incorrectly been applied to race relations in Brazil. But this discourse is not and was not the discourse of a dominant imperial power at its height. It is the discourse of a particular African American elite in American universities and one that is contested by other elites. The Wagley to whom they so approvingly refer worked in Brazil following the Second World War, a period of very strong influence by the USA precisely on Latin America. The fact that Wagley himself, as an anthropologist, researched a very different structure of race relations was perfectly compatible with his American funding agencies, just as the perspective he authored was well diffused in Latin America. While, as the authors state, there may indeed be less ethno-racial segregation in Brazilian cities (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 45), there are other separations that must be noted. Marvin Harris, a former student of Wagley, argued years ago that the difference between the USA and Brazil was that, in the latter, ethnic fluidity masked an astounding equation of black identity with a lower-class position, while the USA, with its one-drop rule, produced a situation in which class and race were clearly separate (Harris, 1970). But these are all representations produced in the belly of the beast! It is a gross oversimplification to conflate the USA with some notion of dominant ideology. A.G. Frank, after all, was a student of the Chicago School who started his research in a country that he was later to include in his model of imperialism. Is dependency theory a product of American imperialism as well?

But there is something more interesting here which only emerges in several vague statements by the authors, when they refer to symbolic inversion at one point and when they refer to the so-called marginalized cultural studies and postcolonial studies as the modern vehicles of cultural dominance. This argument could do with some unpacking. It can be made stronger by looking at the terms of the inversion itself, which they do not discuss. Nationalism was once considered progressive, but today it is attacked as reactionary. Instead we have globalism or cosmopolitanism, the globalism of elites, perhaps, of those who can afford to be globetrotters and live in ‘intercontinental’ hotels where they watch CNN, both institutions that represent themselves in progressive, multicultural and even, it might be interpreted, hybrid terms, ‘we are the world’, ‘we are diverse yet all one family’, united by our hotel services or our media reach (Intercontinental Hotels advertise in just such terms, of course, on CNN). All of this is cast in the language of advertising originating in the USA, but by no means a mere reflection of the USA. Socialism is also considered reactionary today, or else it is recast as the Third Way, a true hybrid of Thatcherism and a self-representation of the good welfare society. In this way self-identified
radicals are not the same as those of yesteryear. The latter, like Todd Gitlin, are labelled today’s reactionaries, while Stanley Fish is the embodiment of the radical progressive candidate. All this is based on a third inversion. The notion of a common project, associated once with nationalism, and neither progressive nor reactionary in itself although certainly collectivist and therefore anti-liberal (the latter associated with a clearly anti-left position) has all but disappeared and smells of fascism for many. This transformation generates the notion that assimilation is a kind of racism and that the one truly progressive ideology is multiculturalism. The latter, the support and encouragement of cultural diversity, has replaced older notions of social justice based on social equality and common social goals. This resonates clearly with liberalism and with neo-liberalism. But it has a collective rather than purely individualist form. This logic contains a clear ambiguity. The extreme liberal individualist is necessarily against or at least uninterested in cultural particularism, and tends in fact to be modernist and universalist as well. But in the compromise with actual ethnification liberalism has come, or some liberals have come to accept, even in militant fashion, the notion of collective cultural rights. This prospect is frightening to many privileged members of the cultural elite and may have driven the more recent investment in the notion of hybridity as a means of transcending particularism via particularism itself (Friedman, 1997, 1999b). Even if it is logically absurd (Friedman, 1997, 1999b) it is clearly crucial in the self-definition of a new elite.

What is important, even critical, about Bourdieu and Wacquant’s article is that it raises the issues of contemporary ideological hegemony, but it does not provide a broader perspective necessary for understanding what is actually happening. I would agree that there is indeed a globalization of discourses occurring and that these are related very much to the emergence of a hegemonic neo-liberalism and an array of associated discourses of globalization, multiculturalism, border-crossing hybridity and transnationalism, but I think that this is not simply a US export. It is the product of the emergence of new transnational elites in the world system, elites who describe the world from their bird’s-eye perspective, who dislike the local, the national, the indigenous and are often quite enthralled by a new kind of cosmopolitan internationalism very much based on the metaphors of consumption and appropriation, and often combined with a desire for connoisseurship concerning the vast array of world objects that are accessible to them. This is neither American nor European but very much dependent upon the categories of such societies that already exist. Dirlik (1992) has argued that this is the ideology of today’s advanced capitalism and is represented primarily by the globalized postcolonial elites, many of whom are also part of a globalizing upper class. Here is the source, as well, of some of the categories that the authors seek to criticize and attack, that march around the world redefining the ethnic situations of Brazil and offering good advice to their movements.

So this may not be a case of US cultural imperialism but of a
more general transformation of the world system, one in which there is enough resonance for a whole array of such categories to take root among intellectuals and other cultural elites for whom they clearly make sense, but which do not function as scientific renditions of social reality.

By employing the kind of understanding of the world suggested in many of Bourdieu’s works we might instead try to locate the real source of the globalized notions that are here relegated to think-tanks of American imperialism. The ideological inversion referred to above is a structural phenomenon related to changing conditions of world hegemony. I would argue that this is a question of declining Western hegemony, not least of the USA. In spite of its increased military power, the world system has become increasingly decentralized in terms of capital accumulation and there are three clear regional poles in the system, the EU, NAFTA and APEC. This process has included vast fragmentations of formerly unified territorial units, but it has also and simultaneously entailed the formation of new globalized elites. It is true that very much of the discourse of globalization has been American and European, but it might be argued that the new global classes are very much westernized in superficial cultural terms, i.e. with regard to consumption, which does not mean that they are simply dominated clients of the USA. Rather, the new classes and their associated intellectual elites represent a new cosmopolitan multicultural identity in the making. Given the nature of this position it ought not to be shocking to see parallels with the Freemasonry of the past. The notions of world government, of transnationalism and globalization as a future for the world ordered by multiculturalism and liberalism are all continuous with the masonic past. Even in economic terms, as Braudel insisted, periods of globalization of capital can be understood as periods of hegemonic decline in which old centres finance the development of new centres.

The cosmopolitan bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century came to adopt a perspective on its own society as if it were a foreign one, a target for ‘colonial’ exploitation. (van der Pijl, 1998: 99)

There is a core of positionally produced categorizations of the world that is worth noting here. The link between multiculturalism/hybridity, globalism, neo-liberalism, flexibility-as-solution, is basic to a coherent understanding of the cosmopolitan-capitalist experience of the world. The formation of an experience space, a *habitus*, perhaps, might be sought for in the conditions of global elite existence. This is not reducible to US imperialism. It is far more pernicious in its combination of liberatory prose and hierarchical assumptions.

Notes
1. Certainly, Bourdieu’s own work on television (1996) makes use of the epithet ‘fastthink’ to refer to the media reduction of complex thought to simplified
signalling. But this tendency is not merely limited to the media. It is a more general shrinkage in the intellectual public sphere as a whole.

2. How could it be otherwise in a ‘colour’ continuum like that in Brazil?

3. The work of Wieviorka (1997), gratuitously attacked by Bourdieu and Wacquant, and Touraine (1992) on the transformation of modernity provides an important discussion of the internal forms of this inversion.

References


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