THE ENDGAME OF GLOBALIZATION

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LIBERALISM AND THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN GLOBALISM

... a remarkable force: this fixed, dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life.

Louis Hartz, 1955

Liberalism in the latter part of the twentieth century was broadly seen to be progressive, on the right side of history. Liberals opposed the cold war and imperialism, were against racism, reviled oppression, and saw themselves as marking progress beyond a stodgy, heartless, out-of-date conservatism; they supported social welfare for the poor, feminism and civil rights, self-rule for colonial peoples, environmental politics, even—within limits—unions. They supported individual liberties and social equality, opposed corporate capital when it over-
stepped its bounds, and generally believed in government regula-
tions against the predations of a capitalist market when it threat-
ened to run amuck. Above all else, liberalism was pitted against a
conservatism that seemed to defend the rights of established
class, race, and gender power. Liberalism opposed both a feudal-
ism that preceded it and a fascism and communism that arose at
different moments on the same watch.

This slant on liberalism took its cue from the evolution of a
specifically American politics in the twentieth century, but pow-
erful as it was, it was not the only take on liberalism. When peo-
ple in Latin America and Europe began to recognize as
“neoliberal” the global economic policies of the Thatcher, Kohl
and Reagan-Bush governments, their successors, and the World
Bank and IMF in the 1980s and 1990s, they conjured up a much
longer, deeper and broader tradition of liberalism than recent
US definitions encompass. They recognized the connections be-
tween post-1970s global economic ideologies extolling the
global marketplace and the social and intellectual revolutions of
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that ushered in a new
political economy of bourgeois property rights, market power,
and the rule of national states. This “classical liberalism,” they
perceived, was often integral with, rather than antagonistic to,
latter day conservatism, and neoliberalism deliberately harkened
back to that classical tradition.

The gestalt of a narrow, elite, national self-interest which, when
twisted slightly in the light, reveals a truculent globalism of uni-
versal rights, liberties, and justice, characterizes contemporary
neoliberalism and neconservatism alike. Both are fruit of the clas-
sical liberal tradition. Beautifully symbolized by the draping of
the Stars and Stripes over the toppling head of Saddam Hussein, this gestalt also marks the history of the American Empire since 1898 and has deep roots in the intellectual and practical origins of the United States and its subsequent expansion. Philosophically this takes us back to the Enlightenment, the origins of modern liberalism, and the ideas enshrined in what is strangely referred to as the “new nation.” In truth, of course, the United States of America is one of the oldest national states, pre-dating for example Italy and Germany by almost a century. (That the long pre-national histories of the latter have been morphed into contemporary national memory and made to stand as figures of an almost infinite national past—weren’t the Romans Italians?—only points to the extent to which the European founders of the United States largely obliterated existing histories and humanities across the New World in order to make a “new nation.”) But the Enlightenment is the central key here to understanding US globalism before globalization: in the founding of the United States it finds a more faithful practical and political expression than in any other territory of the globe, the Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution notwithstanding.

*Liberalism, Enlightenment, Americanism*

When viewed outside the twentieth century American box, liberalism is not the antithesis of contemporary conservatism but its political backbone. Such a liberalism harkens back to the revolutionary bourgeois political economy of Adam Smith, Kant’s cosmopolitanism, the willed reason of Rousseau, Hume’s practical...
empiricism, and of course John Locke’s juridical politics of property and rights. All contributed in various permutations to the “new nation,” but as many have suggested, Lockean liberalism in particular is carved into the grooves of the US Constitution. “In the beginning all the world was America,” Locke once wrote, giving biblical blessing to an entrepreneurial liberalism that more than returned the compliment to the English philosopher. The enshrinement of the juridical individual as variously property owner, man in the market, bearer of specified rights, and appropriator of nature took no purer practical form than in the documents of America’s national birth. Nor were they anywhere put to more judicious use. This gave rise to what political theorist Louis Hartz, in his classic The Liberal Tradition in America, called “natural liberalism”—an appeal to liberty, equality, and freedom that rooted its claims in a philosophy of natural rights supposedly common to all mankind.¹

The revolutionary success of this classical liberalism lay in its extension of such rights beyond the narrow, absolutist confines of feudal, monarchical, and aristocratic power—its simultaneous embrace and enablement of bourgeois democracy. It provided a progressive answer to Hobbes’s withering judgment that absolutist government was the necessary price if the precipitous anarchy of natural selfishness was to be kept in check. Where Locke was occupied by legal contract, Adam Smith stressed the extraordinary unseen work of the market, which not only capitalized on individual freedoms—literally—and organized for the provision of mass needs, but did so in such a way that the overall interests of the commonweal were supposedly safeguarded and advanced. From pins to people, the new capitalist market made the world go
round. Revolutionary bourgeois freedom in the market cogged with Locke’s freedoms in the world of law and jurisprudence. With Kant’s more enigmatic aspirations for cosmopolitan citizenship in the background, Locke and Smith together provided twin intellectual inspirations for a series of interlocked beliefs that anchored the political flowering of capitalism and the self-understanding of emerging bourgeois society and its individualism. A society of individual property owners, free and independent before the law and with equal recourse to it, who met in the competitive marketplace, and who enjoyed the right to a democratic vote and voted unashamedly in their own self-interest—such a society, the Enlightenment promised, would produce the best outcome for everyone. This vision was not uncontested: its individualism was always tempered by the republican drive for a workable state; day-to-day revolt was inspired less by Locke or Smith than by taxes, oppressive law, and aristocratic foible; and Tom Paine’s “rights of man” aside, Enlightenment liberalism was adopted as a rationale for revolution after, as much as before, the fact. Still, its promise did spark, fuel, and stoke the colonial revolt against a European power that was too slowly casting off its absolutism.

Nor was this a vision without contradiction. The class, race, and gender contours of this bourgeois political landscape are now well understood: Kant’s cosmopolitan geography and anthropology included some pretty awful racist denigrations of much of humanity, and Rousseau’s exultation of reason presumed it a distinctly European possession. Adam Smith’s civic heroes were entrepreneurs with everyone else playing bit parts. The original citizens of the US were property owners and almost
exclusively men. Slaves counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of property-owning political arithmetic (they obviously couldn’t vote), and they were generally held by men who were indistinguishable in many ways from the aristocracies across the water—aristocracies which, it has to be said, at least had the decency (under political pressure from the bourgeoisie) to abolish slavery decades in advance of the United States. Native Americans counted for nothing at all: they were beyond the pale, to invoke a political-geographical image from a British imperium that America believed it was transcending. Locke was especially decisive in this context. The taking of “common lands” found in the “state of nature” is justified, he said, insofar as its subsequent working—the mixing of labor with nature—produces profit for the common good. That previous users of the land could be excluded from the commonweal via the logic that they themselves were part of the state of nature simply reaffirmed the vision.

The interlocking of liberalism and nationalism in the forging of America is not a seamless fit. Philosopher Omar Dahbour argues forcefully that resorting to a definition of political community at the national scale attenuates a series of contradictions at the heart of liberalism but in no way resolves them. Who precisely belongs to this national community accorded liberal rights by the state? Where are its boundaries? For non-citizens, how are partial rights of citizenship determined? Does liberalism have a theory of economic inclusion, economic citizenship? These conundrums are multifold but are more dramatically on display in the origins and evolution of the United States than in any other instance. Liberalism is “a doctrine which everywhere in the West
has been a glorious symbol of individual liberty,” writes Louis Hartz, “yet in America its compulsive power has been so great that it has posed a threat to liberty itself.” How could liberalism become a threat to liberty? For Dahbour, the inherent illiberalism of the liberal tradition crystallizes in its historical, geographical and political minuet with nationalism. A liberalism that takes the juridical individual as its primary element finds it impossible, ultimately, to reconcile with the priority accorded territorial oneness, national collectivity, and communal identity presupposed by the nation-state. For Hartz, too, the answer also lies in the bowels of liberalism itself. Locke harbors “a hidden conformitarian germ to begin with, since natural law tells equal people equal things, but when this germ is fed by the explosive force of modern nationalism, it mushrooms into something pretty remarkable.”

(This liberal critique is today a centerpiece of conservatism: when the same “conformitarian germ” is enforced by the state, as in affirmative action, egalitarianism itself becomes oppressive.)

Remarkable indeed. Nothing is more insidious than the liberal fain of equality between people who are demonstrably and desperately unequal. There is little liberal victory in the fact that Bill Gates has the same right to apply for workfare as an unemployed single parent. Neither in the market nor in court is a homeless mother the equal of George Bush. Those who resurrected the notion of neoliberalism in the 1980s to describe the economic policies of corporate globalization—centered in New York, Tokyo, and London—understood precisely this “hidden conformitarian germ” masquerading as “natural law.” Adam Smith’s law of the market was re-anointed on the throne of global common sense (Hume) and the greed for profit was restored to its position as a
natural urge (Hobbes); in the meantime people’s basic needs for food, water, and shelter were relegated to the pleadings of special interest groups. Conformity was no natural germ but the goal of raw power at the global scale. Opponents of corporate globalization were written off as trying to stem the natural tide of capital or worse, as terrorists against all things American.

Writing in the poisonous political caldron of the 1950s cold war, and with a clear target in his sights, Hartz—himself a radical liberal who wanted to salvage the promise of liberalism, however contradictory—ventured that whatever its ideological power, liberalism in its original sense had never actually been put into practice. Nationalism blocked the path. Even in the United States, he concluded, there “has never been a ‘liberal movement’ or a real ‘liberal party’”: “we have only had the American way of life, a nationalist articulation of Locke which usually does not know that Locke himself is involved.” The unanimity of Americanism, widely associated today with a conservative mission, is by Hartz’s account the product of liberalism par excellence, “the bizarre fulfillment of liberalism.”

The liberal tradition itself has internalized parts of this critique, at times spurning an implausible nationalism in favor of a more politically correct internationalism yet at the same time remaining firmly attached to Americanism. This goes to the heart of the contradiction of US global power in the twenty-first century. It describes not simply the hoary old dualism of nationalism versus internationalism, itself a liberal nostrum. Rather, the best of this modern liberalism remains true to Kant insofar as it combines an ambitious universalism—Kant’s cosmopolitanism—with the unassailable imprimatur of its American lineage.
American exceptionalism—the belief that the US is different from and special compared to other nations—only represents an alternative expression of this contradiction: America would and should take its model liberalism to the world, safe in the conceit that the world needs and wants it; but exceptionalism always provides the resort back into a narrower sense of national victimization should the world spurn its advances.

Liberal American internationalism today, therefore, is red, white, and blue nationalist at the same time, thoroughly co-dependent on a narrow nationalism—liberal or otherwise. It thrives by consuming nationalism much as a python swallows a pig. The devoured pig of one nationalism sustains it for a while but it must eventually go hunting for more of the same. To the extent that liberal internationalism is not periodically fed by nationalism, it will waste away and die.

Congeries of Liberalism and Empire

So how do we account for the constellation of ideas that pass for popular American liberalism in the twentieth century—liberalism as a synonym for a left social politics irrevocably opposed to conservatism? The historical geography of liberalism provides the first clues to the answer. Outside the United States the liberal tradition per se either disintegrated in the cauldron of twentieth-century wars and ideological struggles or else, where kept alive (as in Canada, Britain, or Australia), remained—however much transformed from the eighteenth century—a conservative tradition. In the United States, by contrast, twentieth-century liberal-
ism moved dramatically to the left, so much so that it indeed became a synonym for a left-leaning politics. This happened for very specific reasons that have everything to do with disparate worldwide responses to the socialist challenge of the late nineteenth century and first third of the twentieth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, an ascendant liberalism provided the banner for the bourgeois classes but found itself challenged between the remnants of a fading monarchical power on one side and the gathering strength of working class movements and organizations on the other. Occasionally these struggles bubbled over: in 1848 throughout Europe, in 1870–1871 on the Rhine and in Paris, or around the world between 1917 and 1919. Revolutionary communist organizations pupated out of these movements, and they in turn threw up a social democratic response—most typically a labor or socialist parliamentary party—which while solidly rooted in working class politics and even Marxist ideas, sought non-revolutionary means to express many working class people’s political aspirations. Liberals found themselves squeezed between the new politics and the old, and their response to this challenge was neither uniform nor consistent. That said, it did have a pattern. A certain liberal reformism in the late nineteenth century simultaneously reasserted its eighteenth century roots and gravitated toward the petit bourgeoisie—rural or urban—as an alternative to the old aristocracy on one side and the social democrats on the other. Liberalism remade itself between the twin poles of Toryism and social democracy.

It was different in the United States, however. There, despite the power of unions and working class organizations and despite
Eugene Debs’ polling a million socialist votes in 1912, the social democratic tradition never gained enough support to institutionalize itself in national politics. Social democracy was sufficiently suppressed that it was unable to achieve what it did elsewhere, namely the co-option of working class revolt into the grooves of parliamentary bureaucracy. It fell to liberalism, emerging from a thoroughly patrician progressivism, to perform this task, to transform itself into the antidote to socialism. Originally the fresh ideology of a blossoming global capitalism, the liberal tradition was now put to work in a more defensive role which in turn transformed it. Woodrow Wilson, a devout liberal yet arch-conservative at the same time, was the practical and symbolic fulcrum of this transformation. A scourge of the monopoly trusts in the early days of the twentieth century yet also a single-minded warrior against socialism, Wilson more than anyone pioneered the transformation of liberalism into a left-leaning immune-system against socialism in America.

American liberalism, in other words, remade itself to fulfil the task that social democracy fulfilled elsewhere. It became a progressive force, absorbing yet dampening the leftward impulse of socialism; it was willing to burn the toes of capital in order to keep feeding the larger body. It largely lived out the agenda Wilson established, a liberalism quite at home with racism and class exploitation, yet one which responded when necessary to political pressure (as in the granting of female suffrage). Liberalism expanded into a bipolar role of co-opting any progressive urge among the multiracial working class while also viciously repressing that same force when it organized too much of a challenge to the power of capital or the liberal state. This incarnation
of liberalism presented its truest colors during and after World War I when Wilson, while fighting Senate conservatives to establish a League of Nations, was also fighting socialists in the street, organizing repressive detentions against workers, organizers, and immigrants, and deporting American “reds” to Russia. (His administration had already handed down a ten-year sentence on Eugene Debs for delivering an anti-war speech.) Such a liberalism had a resurgence in World War II when Wilson’s spiritual successor, Franklin Roosevelt, mulling over plans for a supposedly progressive United Nations, despised by American conservatives, also suppressed wartime strikes with an iron fist and imprisoned 120,000 Japanese Americans in concentration camps.

One could think of this as an exceptional American history—only in America did liberalism take such an ideological and contradictory leftward turn—but that would be a mistake. The story of American liberalism’s twentieth-century tilt to the left makes sense only in the context of a United States vociferously located at the heart of global affairs. The most surprising aspect of this may be that the cultural-political power of the United States was sufficient to export the US experience into a widespread synonymity of liberalism with the left. If twentieth century American liberalism did not immediately co-opt the left around the world, it did make inroads, and over the long term ground down the opposition. It took the end of the cold war to make this happen. When in the 1980s the old elite liberal party in Britain, with its decaying power based in the rural petit bourgeoisie, entered a coalition with social democratic defectors from the Labour Party, they participated in a practical redefinition of liberalism that in many ways aped the US experience decades earlier. The new Liberal
Democratic Party explicitly positioned itself between the heartless toryism of Margaret Thatcher and the last gasps of working class parliamentary socialism represented by union power and the Labour Party. That the subsequent Labour leader Tony Blair effectively joined this tide and became among the most neo of liberals in the 1990s only reaffirms the point.

Opponents of neoliberalism were therefore astute in branding the rightward shift of the 1980s with this name, even if the range of adherents it attracted was wide and versatile. Tony Blair may have been bosom buddies with Bill Clinton, but he went to war as lap dog for George W. Bush. At home, he also finished off the anti-welfare state work of Thatcher in a way that she could never have accomplished, much as Clinton’s welfare reforms of 1996 completed the work of 1980s Republicanism—Reaganism on steroids. Whatever the fights over Iraq in 2003, Blair’s “New Labour” and Gerhard Schröder’s “Die neue Mitte” connected not just to Clintonian ideology but to George Bush’s flintier conservatism aimed at recentering the capitalist market as arbiter of social survival and success. Neoliberalism filled the political vacuum in the wake not so much of liberalism per se (the US and perhaps Canada excepted) but of its social democratic variant, which had largely lost its class base. However abrasive and conservative some of its recent US proponents may be, the new neoliberalism does not represent an alternative to a heady but short-lived neoconservatism but rather the cocoon within which the latter was nurtured, however briefly.

In this context, the blossoming of neoliberalism around the world in the 1990s is nothing short of remarkable. It grabbed Russia and eastern Europe by the throat as an accompaniment to
capitalist reconstruction; reconquered German social democracy from its timid postwar survival; impressed itself on Asian and Latin American elites both through the blandishments of the World Bank and IMF and the self-interested proclivities of local elites with an economics training in Chicago, London, Cambridge (Massachusetts), or Tokyo. That neoliberalism is thoroughly conservative—again pinning its banner to the sanctity of property, the market, and state-mandated individualism (and the wealthier the individual the more sacrosanct the individualism)—is not a paradox but precisely the point. Subsequent to its eighteenth century assemblage, enshrined in the US Constitution, liberalism became a conservative artifact throughout most of the world, so much so that even in the United States, turn-of-the-twentieth-century aristocrats, perhaps best represented by Henry Adams and his brother Brooks, railed against the Constitution precisely for its “fixed, dogmatic liberalism,” as Louis Hartz put it. The reinvention of an anomalous left-wing liberalism in the US in the twentieth century has, quite ironically, paved the way for a global rediscovery of some of the basic tenets of liberalism as the conservatism of capitalism par excellence.

For the social liberalism that arose in the United States in the twentieth century, empire and imperialism were anathema. Yet by the late 1990s it was not just neconservatives but—and more to the point—neoliberals who came to embrace the notion of an American empire. Recognizing that the new twenty-first century American empire relied on overwhelming military as well as economic, political, and cultural power rather than immediate territorial control (colonialism), political scientist and journalist Michael Ignatieff openly embraced empire and enthusiastically
endorsed the Iraq war. This was widely seen as a shocking admission—liberals outing themselves as pro-war, worse, pro-empire!—but it simply represented an historical reconnection to liberal roots. In retrospect, twentieth-century American liberalism was a convenient and highly functional aberration from the main course, one that justified the global ambition of US capital. It may have been rhetorically opposed to empire via the self-serving confusion of imperialism and colonialism, which seemed to let US global ambition off the hook, but this liberalism was itself the architect of empire.

Liberals have traditionally endorsed empire. They have occupied the forefront of imperial ambition, and the current Washington neoliberals—spanning both parties—resemble no one more than their nineteenth-century British predecessors. Political scientist Uday Mehta goes back to the origins of British liberalism and finds that “it is liberal and progressive thinkers” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century who “endorse the empire as a legitimate form of political and commercial governance.” Nineteenth-century European liberalism exhibited “a growing confidence in its universality and cosmopolitanism,” much as we see today America’s confidence in its own global reach. Reflecting on the translation of liberalism from Europe to the US, Mehta makes the point that “the radical edge to Locke’s thought got severely eviscerated” and in fact “became the voice of a matter-of-fact conservatism.” However that may be, this conservatism didn’t simply meld liberal philosophy to imperial assertion but found the urge to empire inherent in liberalism from the start. To affirm this critique of historical liberalism, one does not have to embrace the conservatism of Edmund Burke, as Mehta seems to do.
It is sufficient to highlight, as Mehta does superbly, the connection between liberalism and empire.

In philosophical terms, then, the slippage between narrow national self-interest and claims to represent global good and right emanate not simply from the Enlightenment but from the ways in which Enlightenment universalist ambition was put to work in the context of a specific national experiment. The founding documents and ideologies of the United States did not simply create a new model of national citizenship, the authority of which ended at the boundaries of the nation. They clearly did this but did a lot more besides. They also mobilized the “natural rights of man,” loudly proclaimed as universal, into the particularity of an Americanism which placed itself not simply as geographical but global historical alternative to inherited forms of social oppression, exploitation, and inequality. America was the future. As Louis Hartz’s sympathetic critique suggests, the core contradiction between national particularity and global pretension was inoculated by a self-medicating liberalism that took itself as “natural” and by definition, therefore, above reproach.

As the vestigial political lies that kindled the Iraq war became increasingly public, multiplying daily on TV screens and newspaper headlines, and as the personal, political, and economic costs of the Iraq war soared with little prospect of an end—more than 1,000 US troops and up to 100,000 Iraqis dead and counting, with hundreds tortured, raped and killed in US jails—erstwhile liberals such as Michael Ignatieff came to the defense of war in particularly eighteenth-century, almost Hobbesian, terms: “To defeat evil, we may have to traffic in evils.” Rarely since 1898 has the vice of liberal American imperialism been so honestly on
display. We should at least ask, given its complicity with imperialism, whether liberalism may itself be a greater evil compared to the alternatives.

**Geographies of Practical Liberalism**

Striding through the New World, liberal thought generalized and at the same time flattered itself as universal. It represented itself as an abstraction above the geographical and historical specificities of European imperial expansion. This is a point made sharply by Mehta, who recognizes that the liberal justification of empire was vitally enabled by the abstraction from territorial realities in particular. Put differently, the success—and the failure—of American liberalism rests in part on a “lost geography.” This lost geography came to fruition in various guises, most recently in twentieth and early twenty-first century ideologies of globalization. As well, liberal universalism fueled a powerful depoliticization of global ambition in the popular imagination. But the abstraction from space and time is in no way automatic, and Mehta’s mistake concerning the apparent disregard of territorial questions in the nineteenth century may be to read the lost geographical sensibility of the twentieth back into the philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or at least to assume that the fine philosophical proclamations of the Enlightenment lost little of their idealist abstraction as they were put to work in the westward expansion of the United States. But philosophy is all about such abstraction, and in practice, the abstraction from geographical (and historical) specificity is at best uneven and rarely
consonant with the gritty daily geographies of American expansionism. The geography of liberalism in practice reveals a tremendous amount about the politics of globalization, past and present.

For the bright new liberalism of the nineteenth century, America was a geographical project *par excellence*—geography, not history, was destiny. History, a seemingly eternal litany of oppressions and intrigues sedimented one on top of the other, was thankfully left behind on another continent’s Atlantic shore, while the landscape of North America provided a shining alternative, a challenge certainly, but more importantly a bounteous opportunity. The raw natural vistas of the New World came already imbued as a trinity of god, nature, and (Lockean) man, a brilliant opening rather than a closure. This is Jefferson, not only writing on Virginia, but organizing the Louisiana Purchase and sending Lewis and Clark up the Missouri and over to Oregon; it is Emerson’s metaphysical sublime; it is painter Frederic Edwin Church’s hallowed landscapes revealing a new continent bathed in heavenly light. Here lay a whole new “state of nature” available for use and possession by Adam Smith’s entrepreneurs, guided by the divine principles of Lockean justice, their eyes on the prize of Kant’s cosmopolitan promise—again, we are the world.

Geographical escape provided the foundation of liberal possibility in practice. But geography also offered something much more constructive. “During most of American history,” writes Walter Russell Mead, “geography and demography united to proclaim that, all things being equal, the mere passage of time would make the United States increasingly richer, more powerful, and better respected in the world community.” Here history is
rendered abstract—the mere passage of time—while geography has an active voice, makes claims, reworks and gives substance to hopes and desires. And indeed geographical reason and rationality were forged and harnessed in support of this enterprise— geography was recast as a social and physical technology of empire. Although the claim would certainly raise eyebrows today, it should not be surprising in retrospect that during “the first six or seven decades of the nineteenth century,” the search for geographical knowledge, broadly conceived, “dominated the sciences in America.” The practical geography of the new continent, as well as the geographical reasoning it both inspired and required, was not just integral but pivotal to the earliest ambitions for a globalization of European ambition in the new image of America.

Geography, of course, became destiny in a far darker sense. The liberal conquest of the North American continent was not bathed in quite such a heavenly light as Frederic Church’s majestic paintings portrayed. Nor was the mixing of labor with nature devoid of horrors. Even as Church was painting, the waters of the expanding United States ran red with native blood, were being depleted of fish, canalized, and turned into open sewers for the effluent of capitalist industrialism. Farm lands were sucked of nutrient while forest lands were felled before the axe in anticipation of the same fate. The earth was gouged for coal and steel and other raw materials. The bounty of buffalo was plundered almost to extinction, numerous bird species extirpated. The end of the nineteenth century brought the final geographical solution to the centuries-long American social cleansing of its original inhabitants. The remnant minority who were not killed by war, disease, starvation, privation, or legalized army and settler violence were herded into
rural ghettos called reservations, generally located on the most barren land, where jobs and services barely existed. Having been vilified as savages still in a “state of nature”—mere appurtenances of the land—they were vilified anew as hapless authors of their own geographical destiny. The enslavement of Africans as a labor force for this universalizing European liberalism rooted in the New World gave rise to a different if equally reprehensible geographical rupture in the name of civilized progress.

Nothing in these experiences contradicted Enlightenment liberalism; rather they built it out. The purported savagery of the native American population, noble or otherwise, and the inferiority of Africans only reaffirmed the freedom and equality of all the others considered “Man”—their inalienable rights and so forth. Excluded from citizenship and status as juridical individuals, yet “domestic in a foreign sense,” as the Supreme Court would later put it, the social and territorial detention of Indians and African Americans in “free” America was the crude precursor for colonizations in Puerto Rico and Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

1898 was therefore neither a beginning nor an end of empire, as is variously argued. It neither initiated a period of empire that didn’t previously exist, nor did it end an experience of empire that somehow ceased to exist in the new century. It did not separate the US from the European experience of colonialism but was rather continuous with it. America as continental expansion may have been the most successful colonialism of all time, and 1898 represented simultaneously its continental fulfillment and its serious commitment to trans-continental continuity. Yet the post-1898 world was simultaneously a denial of that specific form of
colonialism. Neither an end nor a beginning, it was a transitional break. It provoked the political dilemma that bent twentieth century American liberalism in its own peculiar direction.

Prior to the economic depression of late 1893, it was evident to all that the US economy was producing profit and accumulating capital at a record rate. It had already surpassed a declining Britain, and Germany was the only competitor. Despite massive industrialization at home, only pockets of uncapitalized frontier land now remained in the US, and outlets for profitable investments of surplus capital were rapidly shrinking. Continued economic expansion beyond the confines of the continent was not only logical and necessary but quite consistent with the political claims registered from the origins of the Republic. From interventions in the Haitian revolution, the invasion of Canada, the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, and subsequent interventions in the Caribbean and Central America, not to mention the dismemberment of Mexico, the geography of US expansionism was never confined, ideologically or practically—neatly or otherwise—to what became circumscribed as the forty-eight states. The spurt of manly colonialism culminating in 1898 surely expressed a certain cultural impulse, a “surplus energy” inherent in the twinned projects of nation building and empire building as Amy Kaplan suggests, but it just as surely provided the prospect of outlets for an overflowing economy that began powering itself out of crisis.

It was a short-lived colonialism, however, not because of some liberal American antipathy to empire—quite the opposite—nor because it solved the questions of economic and cultural expansionism. It was short-lived precisely because it didn’t solve these
problems. A *successful* colonialism would have been pursued. But by 1898, where else was there to go? Mexico, Canada, Japan, Russia, Venezuela, or Brazil? That these were recognized states, many of them republics (or in the case of Canada, a British dominion) with some degree of juridical sovereignty, did not at all prevent US intervention. But chasing Pancho Villa south of the border was one thing, colonizing the place quite another. The geographical reality was that, with few minor interstitial exceptions, the entire surface of the earth was already carved out by republics, states, and colonizing powers. Most of the colonies of 1898 had to be wrested away from a declining Spanish power, and few (if any) significant opportunities of this sort remained. Would the US really stand up to Britain militarily? Invade Brazil? Take on China? For all the pundits who pointed in this direction, others were more sober.

To the American ruling class, a territorially based imperialism seemed too difficult militarily, too costly economically, and potentially too damaging to the self-professed rhetoric of liberal democracy and the self-determination of peoples around the world. The likelihood of defeat at the hands of local opposition, an independent republic, a European power, or a combination of all three did not prevent some saber-rattling vis-à-vis East Asia and Latin America, and it by no means prevented further intervention—especially in the latter. But it did forestall subsequent colonialism (the Virgin Islands were *purchased* in 1916 from Denmark). A new means would have to be found. The answer was already at hand. US corporations and magnates were already investing in raw material extraction and even manufacturing in foreign lands, especially Monroe Doctrine countries where United
Fruit and W.R. Grace, rubber merchants and gun manufacturers, railroad companies and oil prospectors, not to mention the bankers who serviced them, could all depend on US gunboats to back up their investments. Certainly, investment in the colonies of European powers was harder due to tariffs and preferences, but there was also China. Just as Teddy Roosevelt’s macho expression of “surplus energy” took him on hunting trips to British-controlled Africa, capitalists’ drive to expend surplus capital in profitable ventures also took them to parts of the globe where they had little, if any, control over the territory.

Revisionist historians, most eminently William Appleman Williams, have made a parallel argument, namely that the shift from European-centered power in the nineteenth century to an “American Century” brought a world in which political and military control of territories was no longer the *sine qua non* of empire. While there is a lot of truth to this argument, it eventually falls on the wrong side of geography. 1898 was not quite such a sharp break: European empires had their own experiments with free market imperialism—most notably Britain in the 1850s—that distanced themselves from direct territorial possession. And they also joined the experiment of global economic domination without colonies, especially after World War II. By corollary, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq suggest, not to mention Vietnam, geopolitical power up to and including military and political occupation remains a plausible option for modern imperialism. While the recognition of revisionists that the critical role of territory has changed since the end of the twentieth century is astute, their eschewal of territorial questions entirely expresses more than it contests the “lost geography,” and it misses the new
twentieth century articulation of geography and economics which reverses the priority of geo-economics and geopolitics in the calculation of imperial interest.

More recently and from a different direction, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have argued that the new empire of twenty-first century capitalism is “deterritorialized,” post-imperial, and certainly not identifiable with the United States in any meaningful sense. Without knowing it, they have recapitulated the 1904 notion of Sir Halford Mackinder that “an Empire of the World” was just around the corner. Geographer, liberal, member of parliament, and staunch defender of the British Empire, Mackinder presumed that empire would have a British rather than American accent, but Hardt and Negri ought to have had no such blind spot. They capture astutely the deterritorializing impulse of globalization, but are entirely blind to the converse reterritorialization that globalization also brings. Even before 9/11 and the Afghan and Iraq wars, before the hardening of US national borders, it should have been obvious that whatever the power of the global, imperialism—however much it now operates through geo-economic more than geopolitical calculation—never relinquishes territorial definition. Power is never deterritorialized; it is always specific to particular places. Reterritorialization counters deterritorialization at every turn.

American globalism from Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson to Bill Clinton and George W. Bush is the consummate expression of the liberalism that founded the United States. Territorially specific, it aspires endlessly but never successfully not to be. Globalization is the capitalist expression of eighteenth century liberal universalism—“Liberty,” says George Bush, “is universal.” It was a contested liberalism to be sure, never as pure
as the scholarly doctrines that came to be claimed for it, nor fixed in stone since the eighteenth century. Rather it took many forms, including the McCarthyism—and responses to it—that drove Louis Hartz to question the dogmatism of this most undogmatic political tradition. It was sufficiently victorious that by the twentieth century, the central antagonism in American politics—that between conservatives and liberals—actually represented an internal squabble within a triumphant liberalism. Twenty-first century American globalism, whether by neoliberal or neconservative means, is its most ambitious fruit.