

The Future of World Society: American empire?

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The bulk of my lecture starts from where I left off last time, which is that in the new global age, which I reckon is only about 30 or so years old, for the reasons I said last time, there is a kind of prevalent crisis of identity upon us and that crisis of identity I think does affect us all as individuals, all of us are now living in a world with this kind of mixture on an individual level, of emancipation, the possibility of living a better life, the possibility of living a freer life on an individual level and a certain crisis of identity, "What should I do? Who should I be? How should I act? What kind of life should I forge for myself?" and this crisis of identity on an individual level is very much related to the expansion of the global forces that I talked about last time, it's very much related to the kind of disappearance or disillusion of tradition, custom and habit in our lives because this frees us up to live a different life but it doesn't tell us how to live it. It doesn't tell us what identity to assume and it's in that gap that you get the sort of emergence of a fierce reassertion of tradition which wants to tell us how to live, which wants to tell us who to be, which wants to say we can have taken for granted traditional truths in this open world and the battlefield between cosmopolitanism and a more fundamentalist view of the world as I suggested last time is part of a kind of a fracturing lines of the global age. But the identity crisis which we have also affects nations. I think it's true you can't find a single nation in the world which isn't experiencing some kind of identity crisis for the very same reasons.

Now, you should remember that the term crisis as it was originally formulated in the classical world was not a purely negative thing. A crisis was a critical phase of one's life, a crisis is therefore, in classical terms anyway, always thought to be an opportunity as well as a problem, as well as a burden and this is the sense in which I use it here.

There is a crisis of national identity in most countries. It's a mixture again of the possibility of forging something new, of forging a new role in the world. It's the possibility of breaking away from the past but it comes along with the sort of burdens of how we should relate to one another, what are the emotional bonds which tie a nation together today? You can see it easily in the United Kingdom. What is the identity of the British? Now we have devolution to Wales, now we have devolution to Scotland, we have devolution to Northern Ireland. The British and the English at least to people living in England as opposed to the other nations always seem to be unproblematic. People used to use the term British and English as though they were same and many people still do but they're not the same, the Scots never use them to my knowledge as though they were the same. You see a kind of re-emergence of English identity with for those of you who were in the UK during the last football cup, European Cup, you know, these English flags, which is a sort of red cross on a white background, suddenly appeared everywhere, but English identity seems to have been claimed by the kind of groups who react against the wider world, there doesn't seem to me anyway to be a kind of cosmopolitan identity which either England or Britain has properly shaped in a contemporary world. Or look at Sweden, in northern Europe, a few months ago the Swedes had a referendum on whether they should join the Euro and they decided not to join the Euro. But as with all referendums it was not a referendum just on the Euro, it became a referendum on Swedish identity. What does it mean to be Swedish? How should we relate to these wider forces? Will our identity be swamped, be lost if we become too closely involved with the

European Union? What kind of nation should we be? It was on the face of it a economic referendum about whether it's better to have a single currency or not but became an intensely emotional thing which split families and of course at least one person, [Anna Lint] lost her life, as a result of an assassination while just before the actual referendum was taken.

And the crisis of identity also is found in the biggest nation – the United States – the dominant nation in the world and has been the subject of a great deal of academic discussion especially over the past three or four years.

Anyway, a famous political scientist called Samuel Huntington just written a book called "Who Are We?" about American identity, this is the same Samuel Huntington who coined the phrase "the clash of civilisations" and in his book, "Who Are We?" Huntington raises the question, "what is the identity of the United States today as a nation?" Not many people will like his answer because he holds that this identity is under strain because of massive immigration on the part of Hispanics in the southern part of the US and he envisages the possibility of a segmentation of the United States, a bit like Belgium between two different linguistic communities, many critics certainly do not accept that, but he poses these interesting questions, what is the United States? Is it, as some people have said, the universal nation? Some people have said the United States is a universal nation because the United States stands for generalisable ideals, which one could certainly make a case for saying, but if they were propagated around the world the world would benefit. The United States could be said to a universal nation in the sense in which it incorporates so many ethnicities. United States is no longer in any sense an insular nation, it's made up largely of, almost completely, well I suppose you go back far enough, completely of migrants, you have an enormous diversity in the United States so is it a kind of reflection of world society rather than simple nation Huntington asks. He thinks no. Second, is the United States, the identity of the United States essentially formed by the principles of the founding fathers, the Constitution, the ideas that underlay the Constitution? If you're going to have an integrated nation in the United States today should it still encompass those values? Huntington's answer is basically yes to that question. But you can have a third possibility. As he says, is the United States, the identity of the United States, does it always depend on an other? Can you have national identity which is not formulated in opposition to other identities in the world. Many sociologists actually would say "No, you can't".

For anyone who knows Linda Colley's book on Britain, Linda was teaching until recently in the LSE. She wrote a famous book called *Britains*, which was about the origins of British identity and she says Britain as identity was forged out of conflict essentially with the French. It was formed diametrically oppositionally, and obviously the identity of a large component in the United States until 1989 was formed out of opposition with Soviet Union and the perceived threat of Soviet Communism across the world. Maybe one could say it's now forged in conflict with radical Islam, maybe one could say it's now forged in a differentiation from Europe because many people are claiming, and I'll be discussing this in the course of this lecture, that the United States is now sharply diverging from Europe, from the core of the nations that compose the European Union and it's in this kind of opposition that you might seek to find its identity.

The idea of a radical sort of split between the United States and Europe has been much discussed in recent years and especially, I'm sure some people here will be familiar with this justly famous set of writings of a guy called Robert Kagan who wrote a famous article called *The Power and the Weakness* which he later wrote up as a book, Robert Kagan.

Kagan tried to generalise the difference between the United States and Europe. Europe he says is militarily weak, the European Union is militarily weak. When a society or in this case a group of societies is weak, whenever anyone is weak they tend to have recourse to persuasion as a means of defining what they do in the world. Since Europe is weak, Europe therefore favours multilateralism, Kagan says. Because if you're weak you can't coerce other people into following you, you have to persuade them to follow you, you have to negotiate with them, you have to favour what the EU does favour the emergence of international law, international institutions, transactions between countries and generally an approach which depends upon negotiation and compromise in order to succeed.

The United States by contrast is militarily strong. According to Kagan it's got a conviction of its place in the world, a really significant chunk of Americans, the American leadership have a conviction of America's place in the world. America therefore doesn't need to negotiate, it doesn't need to support a multilateral regime in the same sense as the EU does because the strong don't need to do that.

Kagan has these now, you know, I'm sure that most people will know is celebrated observations on this that you remember, I'm sure you're all into personal relationships, remember John Grey's book about women being from Venus and men from Mars, well Kagan says that the Americans are from Mars and the Europeans are from Venus because Europe is a kind of feminine influence in world society whereas the United States stands for a masculine one and he has this equally famous observation that the Americans do the cooking and the Europeans do the washing up – that is to say the Americans intervene militarily in places and the Europeans come along and help and try to make peace and that's a kind of division of labour in world society, but it's the basis of I think a pretty strong critique of Europe and it's not one to be taken lightly because Kagan says that in Europe we're kind of realising, Emanuel's Kant's view of eternal peace. You remember Emanuel Kant, the famous German philosopher thought we could have a world of eternal peace, that we could overcome war; and Kagan says well, in a certain sense the EU has achieved this within its own domain, you can't imagine, I mean you could have conflicts in the Balkans but you can't imagine nations within the European Union any longer invading one another or confronting each other militarily. So there is a kind of perpetual peace in Europe. But this perpetual peace in Europe and the mechanisms that's been achieved, Kagan says, they won't work or will only work very powerfully in the rest of the world because the rest of the world is still largely Hobsonian, the rest of the world is not an Kantian idealised perpetual peace it's a world of power struggle, it's a world of brutality, it's a world of nations that don't want to obey the will of the international community and we use force in order to secure their goals, so the United States, he says can't be just an self-enclosed corner of the world it has to operate in a world of power and in a world of power military strength is crucial to the goals that a nation seeks to achieve.

And there is some substance for the Kagan view if you look at things like the World Value survey which is very interesting, I don't know how many people here know it, but it's a big, big survey of a large number of nations through the world in terms of the values that people in those nations accept and their kind of view of the world and it covers all the industrialised countries as well as other as well and it does show fairly systematic differences between the United States and the European nations and indeed United States and most other industrial countries. For example, the United States is much more religious than the European countries and also the most industrial societies. In the United States something like 70% of the population claim to go to church regularly. In the United Kingdom, for example, in Britain or

more generically, it's only about 10% of the population who claim to go to church regularly and this proportion is dropping. In the EU as a whole it's only something like 18% of the population claim to go to church regularly. So I'll come back to this issue later but the World Value survey does seem to show that United States is a much more religious nation than almost any other industrial country and a much more religious nation actually than most other countries in the world.

Second, if you look at sort of more close to Kagan's thesis what Americans think of the war on terror, there are again quite big differences, high proportion of Americans support the idea of a war on terror, believe that there is a war on terror and believe that you have to fight it militarily. Much, much lower proportion of Europeans believe this, much lower proportion believe either that there is something called a war on terror or that one can fight this war in a way analogous to traditional war in some sense by prosecuting it mainly through the use of military force.

Thirdly, just take another element relevant to this, there are fairly big differences these days between Americans and most Europeans on the issue of the United Nations and it's role in the world. A large proportion of Americans do support the UN even on the threshold of the Iraq war, the majority of Americans wanted UN sanction for that war to take place. But the proportion of Americans who think that the United Nations is an effective force in the world is much lower than it is in the European countries. So you do find these significant differences and you have to ask what is it up to, well I'll be talking about Europe next time be coming back to all this from the European point of view but today I'm going to concentrate obviously more on the American one.

Now, the fact that now since 1989 you had this uni-polar moment, the United States was easily the dominant world power has led to really, really interesting discussion on what this power represents. Not only what is the United States internally, what kind of values does it hold, what kind of identity does it have but what is it's position in relation to the wider world? Is it a nation or not or is it specifically a new kind of empire and over the past, well it's only about five years there's been a proliferation of books on American empire and this proliferation is a bit different from the past because the Left always that United States was an imperialist nation. But now you have, I would say, a much more sophisticated set of arguments about American empire from people who are pro as well as people who are against. Some people have written books declaring that the United States is an empire in the post-1989 world and that this is a good thing for the reason that the United States, as mentioned earlier, is a kind of universal nation and you might know the book by Neil Ferguson on the issue of American empire. Neil Ferguson also did a television series on the British empire and wrote a book on the British empire, so was in a good position as it were to decide whether the United States has become a new kind of global empire, his answer is yes, but his answer is that this is basically a progressive thing for the world precisely because of the values that the United States represents of democracy, secularism and so forth.

Then you have people say, yes United States is at the head of a new global empire but it's a terrible thing and among these you have Italian leftist, a famous one from the sixties and seventies, called Antonio Negri who together with another author produced a book simply called *Empire*, that says yes, there is a new American empire and it is a form of control of the rest of the world, the exploitation of the rest of the world, not by any means a beneficent regime for the world.

Then finally you have people who say well, it's all a sham anyway, that although the United States seems to be in this amazingly powerful position in the world that actually it's a nation in decline and it would surprise you to know these authors are French mostly, who say this, but you know, they do it in a sophisticated way and the most well known one is a book by the French author called Emmanuel Todd who says essentially that although the United States seems to be a dominate power in the world it's in decline because other parts of the world are advancing and the United States is stagnant. So he says the future lies with China, the future lies with India, the future lies with Latin America because these areas of the world, they're going to be the dynamic areas of the future. America is already over stretched, can't really sustain it's position. As we'll see in a minute there is also a certain element of truth in this I think.

So is the United States an empire? Well, there are three basic considerations which I'd like you to think about in relation to this and which I'll comment on briefly, because an empire demands three things I think, certainly a global empire, if the United States is a global empire, demands military dominance over the rest of the world in some sense, second economic dominance, economic control, most of the rest of the world in some sense or another; and third cultural dominance. Is it true that the United States is something close to an empire in each of these three dimensions?

Well, let's look at military power first because this is obviously very poignant at the moment and very, very, important topic in its own right. The United States you can say without any doubt is the pre-eminent military power in the world. The United States is the only country in the world, the only area in the world which is capable of rapidly deploying forces to distant areas. Look at the European Union, the European Union is not able to do this. The European Union does not have transportation for troops to be moved quickly across the world or only tiny, tiny minority of troops and the European Union does not have the communication systems which allow this to be done. Electronic communications are essentially controlled by the American military machine and the European Union does not have correlate to this. This does give the United States enormous pre-eminence in military power in the world and were the Europeans as I think they should do develop a more effective security presence in the world, at the moment they cannot not do it without the help of the Americans because they don't have the technology to do so. But if you get a bit further into it you can see there are reasons to be cautious about what this military pre-eminence means and what sense it does give the United States coercive power in wider world society.

In the first place the United States has about 1.45 million people under arms which actually only constitutes about 5% of the total military personnel in the world. China has over 2 million soldiers currently under arms, the European Union actually has somewhere up to 2 million in its armed forces on a semi-permanent basis. So certainly in terms of soldiery the United States is in no sense anywhere close to being dominant militarily and it's become fairly apparent I think since Iraq and the continuing conflict in Iraq that the United States is not able to prosecute a significant number of wars simultaneously. It's now become I think conventional wisdom in the Pentagon so I understand it anyway and certainly among quite a few military experts that given even with all its military might the United States can only fight hot war and one holding war simultaneously which it is now doing, on hot war in Iraq and one holding operation in Afghanistan and even if it wanted to would not be able to mount military operations significantly elsewhere.

Military power also does not make an empire. Military power you can say does not an empire make because, Michael Mann for example in his book *Incoherent Empire*, shows that the big difference between, which Ferguson also accepts however, a big difference between the position of the United States today and the British Empire in the past.

The British never had enough military to actually rule through military power in their domains. They had very few military for example in India at any one point. How did they run an empire, well they ran an empire through co-opting local elites. They ran an empire because they had local elites who would run the empire for them and who could be persuaded to do so by the power they got but I think as Mann points out you cannot do this today, you cannot run an empire through the connivance of local elites. All you can do is try to influence them but in a world of much more open knowledge and a world of much more open dissemination of information and a world where the idea of sovereignty has almost gone everywhere you simply can't run an empire in this way. So when the Americans wanted to use Saudi Arabian airfields to launch the war in Iraq the Saudis refused to let them do so, so there are plainly are limits to the degree to which you can run an empire in the way in which empires were traditionally run. So although America is a dominant military power one must question how far this military power allows the US to run in a coercive way, it doesn't and I'll come back to that a bit later.

As an adjunct to this, I think one should look again at Kagan's thesis about the Power and the Weakness and ask who is powerful and who is weak. I mean I have had two or three public debates with Kagan when his book was coming out and my view was and is that all power is dialectical so there's no such thing as absolute power. Anyone who is weak can turn that weakness back against the strong. This happens in relationships and it happens in international relations too.

So what's going on in Iraq today? Does Iraq show the strength of an American power or does it show its weakness. Well, I think it shows both, it shows dialect, it shows that the weapons of the weak can involve suicide bombers, can involve kidnapping, can involve various kinds of mechanisms which are extremely hard to defend against if you are trying essentially to run a country from the outside. The weak will always have weapons to turn back against the strong and I'll ask you to remember what I said last time, the attack on the World Trade Centres and the World Trade Towers only involved the use of aeroplanes, a sort of classic case if you like of in a sense the weak turning against the strong, hitting at the heartlands of the strong and one should remember that if those planes had actually knocked down the World Towers immediately as they might have done, they hit a somewhat different place, 50,000 people would have died rather than between 3 to 4,000 so there will always be means of turning power back on the strong. Strength is never an absolute commodity, there's always a dialectic of power I think involved in world society and this is also crucial to the limits of high tech military power in a contemporary world.

Moving on to economic power, does the United States run the world economically? I think you have to say no. The United States is the single most dominant power in the world economically. We all depend on the American economy to drive the overall world economy as I mentioned in the opening lecture but the United States does not run the world economy because nobody does. Nobody runs global markets. There are institutions which supervise global markets, those institutions tend to be linked to American interests, no doubt about it but the United States is not in a position to run the world economy, it's only in a position to influence the world economy because nobody runs a global market economy.

Moreover when you go back to the Emanuel Todd thesis, there are reasons to suppose that American economic power is more fraught than one might think at first sight, again for reasons I briefly mentioned in the first lecture. There is an interesting book on its issue if anyone is concerned with it, which is by Gerald Swanson and this book is called *America the Broke* and it discusses the role of debt in the American economy and Swanson points out that no previous American president has fought a war while reducing taxes, it has never happened before and this American administration has fought two wars while having two tax reductions and Swanson says the result is absolute gigantic debt within the American economy which he says is much greater than is calculated in the ordinary statistics. He says the current level of debt in the American economy is 7.3 trillion dollars which is equivalent to about 25,000 dollars for every person in the United States and he says, this is an interesting point I think, that if interest rates rose again, as they might do because no one knows what will happen economic change, if interest rates rose to 18% American would be totally broke. It would not have a single cent to spend of defence, on social security programmes, or on anything and he calls this fiscal Armageddon, the United States flirting with fiscal Armageddon. Whether that's true or not, it certainly does indicate that there are limits to the degree to which America is a kind of economic super power. It does have structural problems quite deeply at its core although I don't think it will lead to the kind of Armageddon that he talks about.

What about American cultural power, briefly, with Starbucks on every corner, all that kind of stuff, American movies all across the world? Is the United States a dominant cultural force? Well it certainly is in the entertainment industries. A high proportion of movies produced in the world are American. You see Macdonalds all over the world but again I think it's a mistake to see this as simple cultural dominance because all over the world you see reactions to these symbols and to what they mean.

In Europe as you know we famously have a slow food movement, slow food movement is contesting American fast food. In India they produce as many movies as Hollywood does. All over the world you see a kind of revival of local identity, a revival of local culture, a revival of local ideas and local languages. There is no simple American cultural dominance. It's a veneer of cultural dominance I think rather than a genuine one.

So where does this leave us with American empire? Well, I think it leaves us with this conclusion. The United States has an ambiguous identity just like the European Union does but for different reasons as I mention next time. It is no longer simply a nation because it has global spread but it is not a traditional empire either. It is not an analogue to the British Empire. I think one of the best ways of describing it really is as a quasi empire and Michael Mann calls it an incoherent empire. I think perhaps that's the best way to describe it. It has global spread but its purchase on world society is much less, it's much more fragmented, it's much less powerful than one might imagine at first sight.

What about American cultural identity? What about what's happening in America? What about the differences between the United States and Europe? Here again you have a really interesting discussion in the recent literature. Some people argue that United States is shifting radically towards the Right. A journalist from the Financial Times called John Micklethwaite together with a guy called Adrian Wooldridge has just produced a book called *The Right Nation* and the Right Nation the authors argue, that the United States is diverging quite sharply from Europe just as Kagan says, becoming a different nation from the past, becoming

dominated by the Right. The Right is setting the agenda and this is pushing the United States into a new global role too.

They say if you go back to the 1960s it seemed at that point as though there was a convergence between the United States and Europe. In the 1960s you had great society programme. You had the war on poverty. You had an expanding welfare state in America. You had a kind of commitment to further expansion of anti-poverty programmes. You had abolition of the death penalty. All these things they say have now changed. The United States is in the grip of the Right, the political Right and this reflects a kind of structural change in the society at large and they've got quite interesting statistics on this. They point out that if you look for a single predictor of whether a white American will vote Republican in the United States, the single most important predictor is whether that person goes to church regularly and since a high proportion do go to church regularly this is the kind of expression of the capture of America by the political Right.

It says in the United States there are 200 Christian TV channels, 1500 Christian radio stations and of course a highly organised Christian Right and of course one should also say that at the moment anyway. It might change. The Republicans dominated both Houses in the Congress in the United States and he says this as a sort of structural shift. The United States will veer away from Europe and maybe to some extent from the rest of the world community.

Is this view correct? No, personally I don't think so. I don't think it is, time will of course tell but I think it's much more correct to make the following set of observations which are basically that the United States and Europe share much more in common than the divergences they have. The United States is much closer to being 50/50 nation than it is to a nation dominated simply by a particular position or particular political spectrum.

If you look at the differences in religion first of all. These differences certainly exist between the United States and Europe but you have to remember that religion has a different function in American society. There is an important thing in America which is called by sociologists 'in church secularisation'. People do believe in God, yes, but they go to church because of social reasons quite often not just because of direct and passionate religious commitment. The difference in church going is not as great as it looks at first sight between...big as it is and it is significant between the United States and Europe.

Second, I think it's true to say there is not a single model of capitalism in Europe so those who say you have aggressive American capitalism linked to the dominance of the Right, this is not correct. There are a lot of differences within the United States in terms of the different States of the US. Some States have a position much closer to some European countries in terms of having high welfare provision and so forth. California was one of those at least until relatively recently. In some respects quite a range of States have had a different orientation towards social provision from the Federal Government when it has been captured by the Republican Right.

In Europe you have big differences in styles of capitalism. Some countries are much closer to what is usually thought of as US capitalism and others. For example Ireland which is the fastest growing country in Europe looks quite a lot like the United States in terms of its economic system. There is not a simple comparison of this kind between the two.

Finally and when you go back to the Kagan thesis, it's been true at least in the past before 9/11 that some European states were more willing to fight militarily overseas than the United States was and these countries include Britain and France. Britain and France in the past have had a more aggressive overseas posture than the United States used to have in the post-war period because for a long period there was this fear of body bags in America and fear of loss of American life in war and during that period some of the European countries were more from Mars and the United States was more from Venus. There are not these simple comparisons and if I were to characterise the United States, I wouldn't say really 50/50 society, I'd say 30/30 for society. 30% cosmopolitan looking outwards, 30% Rightist dominated by religious Right, the rest relatively uncommitted and willing to be altered by circumstances certainly in terms of their votes in the election that we'll see in a few days time.

So how should one conclude from all this? Well, I would like rather than stopping for discussion, would like very briefly if you don't mind, to say what my conclusions are, what America's role should be, what ideally anyway should be.

First of all I am very much in sympathy with the view that the United States has prospered most when it's been a multilateral nation. The United States helped to build the international institutions which are now so important on the global scene. The United States helped to build virtually all of the institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, the United Nations itself in the post-war period and in that, when its engaged multilateralist world, it's also tends to help American interest too. There's not necessarily a conflict of interest there.

Second, one has to say, however, that there will be times when pre-emptive action is necessary in the world where the United Nations will not agree and some of the main difficulties for us concern the circumstances under which that pre-emptive action has taken. Most people now agree it should have been taken in Rwanda even though the United Nations could not agree. It was taken in Kosovo without the support of the United Nations Security Council. There will be circumstances in which this is necessary and will always be difficult to say both what the role of the United States in the wider world community world should be but my view is that they should always have a large coalition of democratic nations if you are going to undertake such action.

Thirdly, this intervention will sometimes have to be pre-empted before the event. It's not only a matter for the Bush administration. It's a matter for world society but why can't the Bush administration see that pre-emptive action has to be of many different kinds. Why no pre-emptive action against environmental change? Why no pre-emptive action against money laundering across the world. Why no pre-emptive action against a range of problems which we face in the world. Pre-emptive action will often be necessary. It won't always have United Nations sanction but it can't simply be defined purely in military terms.

Finally, one has to conclude that there are two types of free riding in the world when you compare the United States and Europe both of which we have to seek to overcome which I'll discuss in the next lecture. First of all there is the free riding of Europe on the United States. The Europeans, I think the Kagan is partly right, the Europeans created a kind of world of perpetual peace for themselves but they depend upon the United States to police much of the rest of the world. The Europeans will not at the moment give much money, tax payers won't give much money to creating a much larger rapid reaction force which Europe surely needs if

its going to assert itself on the world stage. Europe to some extent is free riding off American power and hypocritical to some degree in relation to that power.

On the other hand the United States is free riding because the United States is free riding on all the global agreements on which a recently stable world depends for which the United States at the moment refuses to sign up to. Not just the Kyoto treaty but a whole range of obligations without which you couldn't have American prosperity, without which you couldn't have a consistent world society. We have to overcome both of these I think if we are going to produce a world which is better run, which is more secure and which will help the disadvantaged.

Apologies for not finishing in time but maybe next time if you come we'll try and have a discussion at some point in the lecture so thanks again for coming today.

[APPLAUSE]