

CHAPTER 4

Nationalism: Your Country Can Do No Wrong



THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF THE STATE

What the State has (or has not) done has been of great importance in history. (Note the capital *S* in *State*. That is done here so that *State* will not be seen as one of the fifty states of the United States of America.)

Everyone agrees that the State is important. In all societies with a recorded history—ancient, medieval, modern—there has never been one in which the State (and its power) was not crucial. It has *always* been vital, both for maintaining and for changing the ways and means of society. As only one example, in the preceding chapter on capitalism, it was shown how the English Poor Laws and their abolition were established (by the King) and *disestablished* (by Parliament); both were acts of State power.

But mention the *role* of the State and disagreement begins and becomes sharp. Indeed, the role the State has played in the economic development of nations—*all nations*—has been and remains generally ignored, denied, or misrepresented. This process of falsification and fabrication is not always practiced by economic historians, but it is almost universally engaged in by economic theorists and the ideologues of capitalism—very often the same people. (One would do well to challenge these apologists, as does Noam Chomsky: “Do *facts* matter or don’t they?”)

In what follows, it will be shown that the State was essential to capitalism’s birth and, as business realized its power over it, for the satisfactory functioning of the nation. But take note: *The State is not the same as the government*. Its players and its power include but go well beyond the various levels of local, state, and federal government.

Any adequate understanding of the State’s role requires that we take account not only of what the State has created, but also what it has prevented. For example, in the USA the State prevented meaningful unions until the late 1930s. Then the

State eased their way until the 1960s. Finally the State helped to break them, starting in the 1980s. (See *Part III*.)

Also seldom discussed is what the State has been responsible for that did not appear in specific actions—or often, that did not appear at all (such as universal health care in the USA). To understand the complications and the importance of such matters requires a closer look at *power*, and its many dimensions.

Power, Power, Who Has the Power?

Power is the ability to act effectively: to make things go your way, to keep them that way, and to prevent others from having their way. Power is what's called “a zero-sum game”; there's only so much of it to go around—if you have more, someone else has to have less. The Latin root for the noun *power* and the verb *to be able* is the same. (That is not the last time that point will be made, for it is vital.) For present purposes, power is the ability to make or to influence decisions and non-decisions. But who gets power? And how?

Most simply, power is held by those who control what is most valued in their society, what has been valued, or what is coming to be valued—or usually, some combination of those. Power can be control over something physical, such as productive assets or weapons; or it can be control over ideas and cherished beliefs, including hopes and fears.

Control over the means of material survival has placed those who have had it at the center of power in every time or place. Its roots, however, have changed added to over time. Consider, for example, the priesthood in Ancient Egypt, or the Church and warriors in medieval society.

However, as society increasingly became modern, control over productive wealth became the most important, but never the only, source of power; and that control sits at the center of what is meant by capitalism.

The State system is complicated, and always becoming more so. But within that complexity in the capitalist era, Marx and Engels found the core when (in the *Manifesto*) they wrote: “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the *common* affairs of the whole of the capitalist class.” Taken literally, that is an oversimplification. But it is both the starting and ending point for a fuller analysis. (See Milliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*.)

Recall the earlier quote from Marx, arguing that “the ruling ideas of any society are the ideas of its ruling class.” That is another way of pointing to the importance of ideology in society, past or present.

A Dollop of Conventional Wisdom

A grasp of the important confusions or the blindness of ideology can be found in the passage that follows. It was written by a much-respected economic historian of both Britain and Germany, W. O. Henderson. In 1776, Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had advocated a zero role for government in economic affairs. Henderson, in keeping with the usual view, wrote that, yes, that was how things *were* in Britain's industrial revolution, arguing that the State's role

was a *passive* one....The social evils in town and countryside that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution might have been alleviated at an earlier date if the governing classes had been *better informed* about the great changes that were taking place in the mines and factories....The government was *inactive* because it saw no good reason why it should do anything. (Henderson; emphasis added)

The *passivity* and *inactivity* of the government and *ignorance* of *the governing classes* are the key terms here. Henderson's is the general view of the role of the British State in the industrial revolution. And it is just plain wrong.

Celebrated historian that he was, Henderson could have and *should* have known that the governing classes, far from being passive and inactive, and even though not officially *in* the government, were both the prime movers and the main beneficiaries of the social evils and the great changes of that time.

As noted in Chapter 3, that dual role of actor-beneficiary applies especially to the enclosures that created the essential and powerless working class. Existing and emerging British capitalists and existing and would-be large landowners combined their self-interest with their public power to create a world to their liking—and profit.

It is repeatedly necessary in a capitalist society to remind oneself that the links between economic and political power are forged of steel. The necessity to remember that connection grows always stronger in today's world. As democracy has grown, so has the need and the ability for those in power to develop and to use direct and indirect forms of *disinformation* and *misinformation*, and to suppress accurate information regarding those links of power.

The popular word for all this underhandedness and trickery has become *spin*—with the media its stage and TV its star performer.

THE BIRTH OF NATIONALISM

So what has all that to do with nationalism? There was of course State power

before there were nations. In the medieval era State power was concentrated in the major trading cities. However, as the modern world grew from its infancy in the 16th century to its youth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as the geographic scope and activities of European societies enlarged and multiplied, it became necessary for political controls and strength to go well outside of and beyond the entrepôts.

In short, nations and *nationalism* came into existence and strengthened as the needs for their strengths arose. (Recall that the fact of Spain and Portugal leading the colonial expansion was not due merely to their location near the Atlantic Ocean accident. They were also the most established *nations*.)

Nations were needed. The towns had a need not only to have their boats get there first to the new areas, but also to have the military strength to keep the new areas away from others. That required the organizing of towns and cities into one nation, in order to keep from being absorbed by others nearby that had *already* done so.

The nationalist *spirit* was also essential, both to create and to rule those nations effectively. Always part of that spirit, from its birth to the present, was some combination of greed, racism, and pride. It lives still in the costume called nationalism—which, it is necessary and useful to add, is *not* the same as patriotism.

Patriotism has to do with fondness or love of your country; *nationalism* has to do with seeing your country not just as something to admire and love, but as one *that can do no wrong*, as one that is *better than the others*. The land of the nationalist has rights superior to those of other countries, up to and including the right or need to invade them, harm them, no matter why, no matter what. Nationalism is a blood brother of racism, of militarism, of hate and fear. Unlike patriotism, it pits peoples against each other, with ugly and destructive results.

IMPERIALISM: BRITAIN TAKES THE LEAD

Nationalism played a key role in the birth and spread of nineteenth century *imperialism*. Although it was not the only cause, religion was the main inspiration for Portugal and Spain's shift into colonialism. As nationalism spread and was joined by capitalism, others joined in that race, and in the 1800s, nationalism was transformed into imperialism.

Imperialism was spurred on by the interacting motives created by capitalism, industrialism, and nationalism. Britain took the lead in imperialism because of

what had also enabled it to take the lead in the other three of The Big Four. It was a combination of several interdependent factors, all favoring Britain:

1. It had long been a kingdom.
2. Its rich agricultural and mineral resources were the most appropriate for that time.
3. It had long been a seagoing power.
4. Its isolation (as an island) made it less vulnerable than the continental societies.

Those advantages would be diminished over time; but in the crucial and always warring seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were strong. And had to be.

Increasingly from the sixteenth century, there had emerged a set of struggles in Europe in which what ultimately became its major powers simultaneously moved toward becoming nations, always seeking to expand the territories they already controlled, both in and out of Europe.

In a precursor of the 20th century (and maybe this one, too), war was an almost constant consequence. As noted earlier, in the seventeenth century there were only 4 years without war. (Allen)

Subsequently, and especially in the nineteenth century, those struggles became more intense, more destructive, and always more concerned with controlling territories *not* in Europe. It was the *age of imperialism*. (See Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*; Magdoff, *The Age of Imperialism*.)

At this time all nations were competing with each other for the natural resources needed for industry and for military strength. Thus, the first century of industrial capitalism became one of a competition always edging toward war.

And thus, as Dobb points out, compared with colonialism, those deepening needs also meant a considerably deeper and more complicated penetration of the weaker societies; economically, geographically, politically, culturally:

Imperialism required, as the colonial system of earlier centuries did not, a large measure of political control over the internal relations and structure of the colonial economy. Thus it requires not merely 'to protect property' and to insure that the profit of the investment is not offset by political risks, but actually to create the essential conditions for the profitable investment of capital. Among those conditions is the creation of a [working class] sufficient to provide a cheap and plentiful labor supply—and where this does not exist, suitable modifications of pre-existent social forms will need to be enforced (of which the reduction of tribal land-reserves and the introduction of differential

taxation on the natives living in the tribal reserve in East and South Africa are examples).

Thus the political logic of imperialism is graduated:

1. From economic penetration to spheres of influence
2. From sphere of influence to protectorates or indirect control
3. From protectorates via military occupation to annexation

(Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism*)

And then, when the colonized and imperialized became *independent*—as well over a hundred such societies did after World War II—what then? Different kinds of hell. (See *Part III*.)

TWO WORLD WARS: FRUSTRATION LEADS TO AGGRESSION

Back to more than a century ago. That was when the demand for imperializing distant societies was rising rapidly, while the pool of those still available had begun to dwindle. That combination of economic and political aspirations and linked frustrations made war inevitable.

Already by 1897 that inevitability had become clear between the two most powerful Europeans—Germany and Great Britain—as seen in this quotation from the respected English journal, *Saturday Review*:

A million petty disputes build up the greatest cause of war the world has ever seen. If Germany were extinguished tomorrow, the day after there is not an Englishman in the world who would not be the richer. Nations have fought for years over a city or a right of secession; must they not fight for two hundred and fifty millions pounds sterling of yearly commerce? (Hoffmann)

As will be discussed at some length in *Part II*, Britain and Germany and others did fight for that and much else before and during World War I, 1914–1918. But World War I, far from resolving the problems that had caused it, worsened them (as is treated in detail in *Part II*).

After World War I all the major European countries involved—Austria, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia—underwent economic chaos, political chaos, or both, revolution or counterrevolution, and from 1939 to 1945, war again. (The USA had had much lower casualties in World War I, and its economy, like Japan's, very much *benefitted* from this war to end all wars.)

The second war was the final blow. World War II wrecked the European economies and sent their governments into chaos—and thrust the USA into the catbird seat.

Between them, the two world wars had killed more than 70 million Europeans and wounded and displaced many millions more. There were more people killed, wounded, and displaced by those two wars than all previous wars put together. That was only for Europe. (Add in the U.S., Japanese, Southeast Asian, and Chinese casualties in the Pacific war.) Europe was flattened. Only the USA was strong.

On top of the losses and the chaos, imperialism was an irreversible disaster for the *imperialized* societies. They could never get back their pre-imperialized or pre-colonial economic and social conditions.

There were big differences between the imperializers and their victims. The disasters for the Europeans, Chinese, and Japanese—except for those killed or severely wounded—not only were reversible but were reversed. As will be seen, within a generation or so, the average West European or Japanese would be living much better than before the wars.

But in those same rosy years for the rich countries, most of the people in the previously colonized and imperialized societies would have the disasters of *globalization* piled upon them.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL IMPERIALIST OF ALL

What about U.S. imperialism in the warring decades of the first half of the twentieth century? We in the USA had no need to do any of that; so we didn't, right? Wrong.

Unlike all of the other imperialist nations, the USA had nothing to fear from any others—even taking into account the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Honolulu, after all, was nearly 2,500 miles from the U.S. mainland, and Hawai'i was a U.S. *colony* until after the war. It should be noted that we did not even enter the European war until Germany declared war on *us*, after Pearl Harbor.

Although a small minority of the people in the USA (including FDR) thought we should have joined the war against Germany by 1940, it took the bombing of Pearl Harbor to obtain majority support.

We had been in World War I, of course. But it had begun in 1914, and even then, we did not become one of the Allies until 1917. In that war, as in World War II, the USA had many fewer military and *no* civilian deaths. And, importantly, both wars, far from weakening our economy, were very important for strengthening it. It was World War II that pulled us out of the depression.

By the end of World War II, as the economies of all the major industrial countries were flattened, ours reached new heights. After 1945, the gap between our economic and military strengths and all others' was greater than any other society's had ever been in modern history. Was that because or despite our not having been an imperialist power? Almost all would say it was because we were *not* imperialist, we were just lucky—or, others have said, because we were *deserving*.

A closer look at how and why we became economically strong shows that it was due first and foremost to *our empire*, the one the USA put together in North America from colonial days on. In fact, U.S. imperialism has been the most successful imperialism of all.

How's that again? Almost all U.S. historians (and most people in the USA) see us as a *nonimperialist* nation. If they consider the matter at all, they (historians especially) believe that we didn't imperialize any other society. We just kept moving west, fulfilling our *manifest destiny*. Move west we did, from our beginnings on the East Coast all the way to and into the Pacific Ocean, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border (plus to Alaska, to Hawai'i, to the Philippines).

But we weren't we moving into empty country? Not a bit. We were building our own empire by forcibly—taking almost a whole continent's land from others, in a long process that we sanctimoniously enshrined as our *manifest destiny*. Just how it was defined and seen deserves a good look, in part because we are still acting in accord with it. In *Manifest Destiny*, a popular 1839 book, John Sullivan told us what *manifest destiny* means—at least in part:

Its aim to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.

And this is just part of what it meant. By 1900 the USA controlled the greatest and most desirable combination of resources in the world—while, at the same time, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans protected us from attacks. And we haven't stopped imperializing since. (See Magdoff, *Imperialism Without Colonies*.)

We had also started earlier than 1839. While still a colony of the British, what became the USA was involved in struggles that must be seen as imperialist: control over one or another region in North America. Over time, those struggles involved the Spanish, French, Dutch, British and even Russia, which at one time held land in California. (I live on Russian Hill in San Francisco, named for its

one-time cemetery; also in Northern California there is the Russian River and Fort Ross—or “Russ.”)

As suggested above, our largest and most devastating fight was against those we—but not they themselves—called *Indians* (or even more insultingly, *redskins*). In his magnificent study, *Stolen Continents*, Ronald Wright shows us just why *insulting* is applicable. After apologizing for the use of *Indian*, *Native American*, *Amerindian*, *aboriginal*, and *indigenous*, Wright goes on to say:

These are not the only loaded words. An entire vocabulary is tainted with prejudice and condescension; whites are soldiers, ‘Indians’ are warriors; whites live in towns, ‘Indians’ in villages; whites have kings and generals, ‘Indians’ have chiefs; whites have states, ‘Indians’ have tribes...[And Wright quotes an ‘Indian’ leader as telling the Mayor of Chicago in 1927]: ‘School histories are unjust to the life of our people... They call all white victories, battles, and all “Indian” victories, “massacres”... White men who rose to protect their property are called patriots—“Indians” who do the same are called “murderers.”’

Hundreds of tribes were displaced, destroyed, or forcibly moved into reservations, many of whose occupants had lost one or more of their families, and all of whom had lost their lands, their way of life, their futures—and *their dignity*.

As colonists under the British, those who became “Americans” had learned the dirty tricks of imperialism, whether as regarding “Indians” or Europeans.

Having shed ourselves of the British after 1776, we set about systematically getting others out of the way, by hook or by crook. A quote from Zinn describes the early stages:

By the time Jefferson became President, in 1800, there were 700,000 white settlers west of the mountains. They moved into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, in the North; into Alabama and Mississippi in the South. These whites outnumbered the ‘Indians’ about eight to one. Jefferson now committed the federal government to promote future removal of the Creek and the Cherokee from Georgia... When Jefferson doubled the size of the nation by purchasing the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803—thus extending the western frontier from the Appalachian across Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains—he thought the ‘Indians’ could move there...

And then there was Andrew Jackson, conventionally seen as a military hero and by his Nobel-prize winning biographer, Arthur Schlesinger, as U.S. democracy’s hero. Some hero!

Jackson was a land speculator, merchant, slave trader, and the most aggressive

enemy of the “Indians”....He became the hero of the War of 1812, which was not....just a war against England for survival, but a war for the expansion of the new nation, into Florida, into Canada, into ‘Indian’ territory. (Zinn)

Whatever else in it needs telling, the economic history of the USA, since its colonial beginnings, cannot be understood if the roles of *slavery* and of *Indian removal* are not given the importance they had in that history. *Slavery* because of its key role in our becoming a strong agricultural exporter from the 17th century on and *Indian removal* because it gave us a free hand in making our own the most valuable territory in the world.

Take away those two factors and there would have been another and entirely different history (probably for the better). (Mander’s *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, provides a useful basis for serious study of that question.)

The westward expansion continued without interruption, except for unwinnable efforts to slow us or stop us, as in the Mexican war and a British attempt to keep us farther south of Canada (“54°40” or fight” we told them). Most of us in the USA, if we think about that at all, would see such conflicts as merely and rightly defending *our* territory. In 1823, we made that audacity *official* when President Monroe’s Doctrine told all other outsiders that they would have a fight on their hands if they tried to gain new footholds *anywhere* in the western hemisphere.

Even before the war against Mexico [1846] carried the United States to the Pacific, the Monroe Doctrine looked southward into and beyond the Caribbean. Issued in 1823 when the countries of Latin America were winning independence from Spanish control, it made plain to European nations that the United States considered Latin America its sphere of influence. Not long after, some Americans began thinking into the Pacific, of Hawaii, Japan, and the great markets of China. (Zinn)

Westward expansion, having led the USA to occupy the Philippines by 1900, also meant that ultimately we would have our own clashes over empire—most seriously against Japan, which is what took us into World War II.

By that time, the USA, though priding itself on being anticolonial, had become the most successful imperial power in the world, most especially because of the lands we had stolen from “the Indians.” We called ourselves anticolonial and we were—but only against *others’* colonizing in our backyard. (See W. A. Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life*; Magdoff, *Imperialism Without Colonies*.)

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The history of imperialism is a sordid and disgusting one, no matter which nation did its dirty tricks. But every one of those tricks was being done by a *nation*, prodded and to a critical degree dominated by its business class—that is, by its capitalists. Their interests lie at the root of the foul deeds, no matter who the perpetrator.

Imperialism is a matter of the strong crushing the weak, of might making (what is supposed to pass for) right. As it developed, the smaller nations—would-be imperialists themselves, such as Italy or the Scandinavian countries—could grab very little, unless (like the Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese) they had already gotten theirs before the industrial era. Germany finally did become strong, exceeding Britain's economic and military strength, but *too late*. That tardiness led it to take steps that ultimately meant war.

Meanwhile, as Europe was getting its hands dirty in its push for empire, the USA was seeing itself as having uniquely clean hands. And all the while remaining the imperialist par excellence and the most capitalist of all countries.

Lurking in the shadows of all that activity, causing it to happen and enabling it to become what it did, were nationalism and the State. But they were not alone. The rest of the Big Four family—capitalism, colonialism-imperialism and industrialism—were doing their part to make the modern world what it is, which is always and increasingly worse than it was before.

Now we turn to the last of The Big Four, industrialism. It could have been an entirely positive development. It wasn't, as will now be detailed.

