INTRODUCTORY ESSAY: 
Empire and Dissent

by Fred Rosen

Talk of U.S. imperialism, long marginalized in this country as the rhetorical language of the “old left,” has made a mainstream comeback over the past few years. It has been brought back into fashion by neoconservatives, and their friends in high places, who strongly believe that the United States has an imperial right and obligation to act as global guarantor not only of its own interests, but also of the interests of the entire global community. The invasion of Iraq, for example, seems to have been envisaged by its proponents as an easy first step toward bringing current imperial values—(constrained) free elections, (selective) free markets and (U.S.-dominated) international security—to the Middle East; all contingent, of course, on U.S. control of the world’s second-largest oil reserves.

This exercise of imperial power is really nothing new. In the Americas, long before the excesses of neoconservative rule, the United States had considered it a right and a duty to exercise dominance over its “sister republics,” and to intervene when necessary to protect their sovereignty in the face of intrusion by other powers, be they Spanish, French, British, Soviet or Drug Lords. Indeed, we have just marked a century since the “Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine. “Chronic wrongdoing,” President Theodore Roosevelt told the U.S. Congress in December 1904, “or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation”—namely, “however reluctantly,” the United States.

Over the past century, that is, it has been U.S. policy not simply to protect its neighbors from foreign and/or evil Empires, but to exercise sufficient control over those neighbors so as to maintain the U.S.-defined “ties of civilized society.” As explained by Alan Knight in this Report’s lead article (“Empire, Hegemony and Globalization...” p. 8), Washington has sought to accomplish the ends of Empire without constructing a formal Empire as such. The U.S. Empire, in Knight’s classification of imperial typologies, has been an “informal” one, shaping the activities of its fellow American states to its own interests by means of its superior force without constituting itself as a formal imperial power.

The use of this superior force together with economic, political and cultural dominance has long generated multifaceted resentment and opposition. This “dissent” has been evident not only in the frequent attempts of one or another of the “sister republics” to pull away from U.S. dominance, but also in the repeated manifestations of popular discontent and unrest directed against U.S. power.

This Report intends to examine precisely that dynamic: the interaction of U.S. power with the dissent and resistance it has engendered. The articles herein explore the ways in which forms of dissent and resistance have been generated by the activities of Empire, as well as the ways in which the contours of Empire have been given shape by opposition, resistance and disaffection. Empires—formal or informal, at any time or place—have usually instilled an uneasy fealty among their member states. The experience of the Americas has been no exception.

This Report stems from a weekend-long workshop held in Cuernavaca, Mexico this past March. The workshop, called “Empire..."
and Dissent: Focus on Latin America,” was sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Fifteen workshop participants discussed the concept of “Empire,” its relevance to both the current and historical relationship between the United States and the rest of the hemisphere, and the close relation between the exercise of U.S. power and the emergence in the Americas of various kinds of resistance, accommodation, avoidance and dissent.

Of the 15 participants, nine, including the author of this introduction, have written essays for this Report based on the stimulating three days of discussions. We have added a tenth article, NACLA editor Teo Ballvé’s discussion of recent popular insurrections in Bolivia, to supplement the Report’s coverage of grassroots dissent. Many of the Report’s contributors, joined by other workshop participants who, for one reason or another, were not able to contribute to this NACLA issue, will prepare longer, more scholarly papers for an edited book on the same theme to be published, in all probability, by early 2007. NACLA and its advertising pages will keep you posted.

**Today, sensing a vulnerability perhaps** caused by imperial overreach, a number of American states have expressed a strong desire for a greater degree of independence from the dictates of Washington. The resurgence of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur); the launching by Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba of a non-commercial, continent-wide television network (TeleSur); the flexing of Southern muscles in such once-uncontested preserves of U.S. power as the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank; and the several Caribbean and South American oil-based commercial treaties initiated by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez are all state-level “declarations of independence” from U.S. domination. In contrast to grassroots mobilization and unrest, we can think of this state-level opposition as “dissent from above.”

At the state level, we can identify a ready acknowledgement of Washington’s predominant power and a broad range of strategies for coping with, obliging and/or resisting it. Mexico’s conservative president, Vicente Fox, for example, has sought to play the role of honest broker between the dominant power and the rest of the Americas. Though with few apparent successes in his soon-to-expire term, he has tried to position himself as the Latin American leader who can open doors of goodwill or gain strategic concessions in Washington. Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on the other hand, despite his growing internal problems, has more successfully positioned himself as the Latin American leader who can most credibly organize, support and protect an independent community of Latin American nations. He has cautiously (sometimes very cautiously) attempted to cultivate a global countervailing force to U.S. economic and political power.

Fox and Lula have not taken mutually exclusive positions. Fox would like Mexico to be part of that countervailing force, and he has continued his talks with Hugo Chávez on proposed cooperation between Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) and the Venezuelan state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), particularly in
the development of their joint refining capacities. But he has kept Washington happy by speaking favorably of a gradual opening of PEMEX to private investment.

Lula seeks to build Southern power, but would also like a non-antagonistic relationship with Washington. He is promoting U.S.-Mercosur negotiations as an alternative to the U.S.-promoted country-by-country negotiations to form a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), but he has voiced no opposition to the eventual enactment of a hemispheric free-trade zone that would include the United States. He has the backing, particularly among the leaders of the region’s middle-income countries, to pursue the promotion of regional solidarity in the face of U.S. imperial ambitions.

Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez is the audacious outlier; the self-declared opponent of the Washington Consensus (which he, alone among South American presidents, refers to as U.S. imperialism); the rebel who enlarges political space for everyone else. He has conducted a foreign policy based on South-South solidarity, even maintaining cordial trade relations with his long-time ideological and geopolitical antagonist, President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia. And he has worked closely with Lula, Néstor Kirchner, and even market-friendly leaders like Fox and Chile’s Ricardo Lagos in the construction of a prudent political and economic solidarity in the face of U.S. domination.

Several authors consider these state-level responses of “dissent from above” with examinations of the very different cases of Lula’s Brazil (“Can Democracy Challenge Empire…” p. 32), Chávez’s Venezuela (“Venezuela: Defying Globalization…” p. 20) and Fidel Castro’s Cuba (“Cuba: New Partners…” p. 25).

Accompanying the more-or-less careful state-level dissonance over the years has been a much less cautious series of popular mobilizations, or broadly stated, “dissent from below.” These popular mobilizations have not always been directed against Empire itself, but more often than not against local elites, who generally happen to be allied with Empire. These mobilizations are also frequently directed against their own “friendly” governments to give them the backbone needed to withstand the enormous pressures on them to meet Washington’s needs before the needs of their people.

The Report explores this growing resistance of communities at the grassroots with a particular focus on the current state of Mexico’s Zapatista rebellion (“Inclusion Through Autonomy…” p. 12] and the dynamic social movements of Bolivia [“¡Bolivia de pie!” p. 40]. Key to this focus is Neil Harvey’s exploration of the prospects for the “horizontal” popular alliances sought by the Zapatistas, alliances projected as possible outcomes of the present moment by several other contributors to this Report, particularly Adolfo Gilly [“Radical Populism,” p. 37] and Itty Abraham [“A Southern Route from West to East,” p. 28].

In addition to the relatively straightforward domination of American nations by U.S. power, we have to consider the more diffuse domination of amorphous “markets.” As the essays in this report make clear, hemispheric domination in the current moment flows from both sources of power. On the one hand we have the informal U.S. Empire itself: Washington’s determination to maintain its dominant position within the hemisphere. On the other hand is the domination of “the markets,” frequently presented by pro-market ideologues as a kind of inevitable, natural phenomenon like hurricanes or drought. Critics of market domination take a different view. In some recent debates over globalization, as Neil Harvey reminds us, this domination by the markets has been referred to simply as “Empire,” a global construction with no necessary geographic or political modifier.

The domination of markets, we know, is the domination of those who have preponderant power within those markets. Market power certainly has geographic dimensions, but more importantly, it has class dimensions. Transnational capital, though frequently headquartered in the United States, exercises class rather than national power. In the Americas, the domination of a capitalist class and the domination of the United States are not always easy to separate, though they have very different dynamics.

The current dynamics of capital’s domination were set in motion by the market-based reforms that were designed in the 1980s to impart a measure of fiscal and social discipline to Latin American governments and populations in the wake of the virtual collapse of most of the region’s economies. The reforms were imposed—à la Teddy Roosevelt’s mandate to preserve the “ties of civilized society”—with the belief that such discipline would build confidence among the private investors whose self-interested financial activities were meant to drive the recovery and growth of Latin American economies. The idea was that significant sums of direct and financial investments could be coerced out of those investors only if they were reasonably certain that the funds invested in the region would be secure and profitable.
Thus, enforced both by U.S.-dominated international financial institutions and the absorption of free-market versions of neoclassical economics by local elites [see, “Empire of Knowledge,” p. 17], the protection of a secure investment climate quickly became the region’s economic and political priority, typically at the expense of social well-being. Since the early 1980s, financial security has replaced social security as a policy goal; social inequality has grown; income has been distributed upward; and the working poor, to lower the costs of doing business, have deliberately been deprived of options and social mobility.

All this has been accomplished by the opening of Latin America’s economies to foreign investment and trade by way of privatization, deregulation, export-orientation and fiscal austerity—in a word, neoliberalism. This “opening,” as Gilly notes, has stripped the subordinate classes of their old social protections (meager as they may have been) and welcomed them to a new era of social discipline.

As a result of this imposed discipline, more people are working under conditions of “labor flexibility,” without long-term contracts, and therefore without the benefits, guarantees and obligations that such contracts imply. The proliferation of free-trade zones throughout the Americas, and the rise of the maquila industry in Mexico, have brought labor flexibility to prominence, but many long-standing formal industries like construction and cleaning services make ample use of flexible labor as well.

Formal, long-term, on-the-books employment allows a worker to be covered by the minimal guarantees of a country’s labor laws and allows workers to collectively organize to press for better wages, benefits and working conditions. It is the ability to organize, more than anything else, that is undercut—North and South—by the growing regime of labor flexibility. This lack of an ability to campaign for formal labor rights and expectations has, in many settings, destabilized families’ connection to community life and undercut many of the formal rights and obligations that define citizenship. Citizenship, in many cases, has become even more ambiguous as much of the disciplined, flexible, informal workforce seeks work in other countries under conditions of uncertain legality.

Flexible employment is not just about the conditions of work, but also about a significant change in the culture of social obligations and expectations. Under a regime of flexible labor every individual is expected to be responsible for his or her own destiny, and to expect nothing from society as a whole. Ideologically, flexible labor is accompanied by the belief that this individualist state of affairs is right, natural and unavoidable. This marks an enormous cultural change. While many of the grievances confronted by social movements are ancient, it is the neoliberal reforms of the past quarter-century that have sparked so many recent rebellions and protests from below.

Movement organizers have astutely made use not only of the powerful legitimacy of the social security and solidarity that were undermined by neoliberal reforms, but also of the legitimacy of the formal democracy that has become such a key component of the discourse of U.S. Empire. One of the interesting current responses of the popular movements, emphasized by both Gilly and Abraham, is their symbolic invasion of the terrain of “democracy promotion,” long the property of the imperial power. Playing by the democratic rulebook—as in the recent South American moves toward greater independence from U.S. domination—has rendered direct repression and the isolation of dissenting regimes illegitimate (though as we have seen on all too many occasions, not out of the question). This has given democratically elected regimes, and popular movements as well, additional breathing space.

The multidimensional nature of Empires—military, economic, political, cultural—has engendered multidimensional responses from their subjects. This has generally made for a process within the confines of those Empires that is continuously unfolding, changing and delivering surprises throughout the imperial lifespan; until the Empire in question, sometimes unexpectedly, ceases to exist. We are in the midst of interesting phases of the lifespan of both the U.S. Empire and the global dominion of capital. The future of both is unwritten.