

Liberation by Illusion: Image and reality in the construction of security



By: Ronald Roberts

America as we understand it is of course a work of fiction, a land of milk and honey, vast corporations, empty spaces, and guns; the former 'land of the slave' and the present 'home of the free,' which has burrowed itself deep within the global psyche. It may thus be painful to remind oneself that, fictitious as it is, the hopes engendered by the idea of America cannot be realised

*The author is Senior Lecturer
in Psychology at Kingston
University, London*

In the perennial quest for liberty two strands of twentieth century history have determined the place of the US at the forefront of international consciousness. These are respectively, the pivotal role of American forces in both liberating Europe from Nazism and stemming the tide of Soviet expansionism and the phantasmagorical projection of US power through the dream factories of Hollywood. In tandem with the industrial presence of the American military on the scarred European landscapes of the 1940s, the emancipatory visions of what their presence might offer had already been set by the celluloid giants of the cinema's golden age. The likes of Bogart, Bergman, and Bacall conveyed the seductive attractions of unending prosperity, liberty, romance, and danger, and through them the capitalist heart of America found itself indelibly stamped into the minds of enchanted theatre goers the world over. The imprimatur of hope, dreams of escape, and re-creation of the self in the image of celebrity have for the past half century been carried as subliminal messages to stir the longings of oppressed people the world over. As we ponder the security dilemmas and aspirations of the Bosnian people in the second decade of the twenty-first century it is salutary to examine the extent to which the residue of these broken Western dreams has been dispersed across the European continent.

In his classic travelogue through the hyper-real landscapes of America, Baudrillard famously wrote that "in America, Europe simply disappears,"¹ but as the McDonaldization and Disneyfication of global culture proceeds full steam ahead it is perhaps now also true that Europe has disappeared from its own doorstep, squeezed out of existence by the juggernaut of all things American. For a truly regional view of security to triumph in South Eastern Europe it will be necessary to cultivate an aesthetic of distinction capable of resisting the onslaught of commercial reason which seeks to commoditise the entirety of human existence. Alongside this, the notion of security, to be of lasting value, must be seen to embrace not only the financial, political, and military dimensions of stability favoured by the European Union (not forgetting those of energy and food) as essential criteria for integration with (or subordination to) Brussels but also the ecological and

the temporal. Thus the fine threads of identity and possibility historically rooted in the region must be savoured and erected as bulwarks against the calamities customarily wrought by the transforming power of international capital – a power, which like all things American, recognises no frontiers.

America as we understand it is of course a work of fiction, a land of milk and honey, vast corporations, empty spaces, and guns; the former 'land of the slave' and the present 'home of the free,' which has burrowed itself deep within the global psyche. It may thus be painful to remind oneself that, fictitious as it is, the hopes engendered by the idea of America cannot be realised. That the hopes of the global American dream are fading is not simply a matter of the US being in decline, its swagger absent even from its Latin American backyard,² a powerless superpower witness to the new realities of multi-polar geopolitics. The cultural life of America, like elsewhere, has also been consumed by the excesses of the neo-liberal monster it co-created with its transatlantic brethren. The intellectual and technological flowering of the twentieth century – epitomised by the moon landings – has withered; US creativity has itself been suffocated by the dominance of its own military-industrial complex and the political metastases of the surveillance society. The flag of their fathers, now residing under military-corporate sponsorship, has devoured the citizen. Even Hollywood, bereft of new ideas, endlessly recycles the successes of yesteryear, its sci-fi visions too locked into a decaying nostalgia for the future – exemplified tragically in the digital reanimation of a 1980s Jeff Bridges alongside his present day self in the 3D extravaganza *Tron: Legacy*, released in 2010. A signal that, with the living close to artistic exhaustion, the organic must make way for the computational and the dead may no longer rest in peace.

The hopelessness of salvation by US power, however, has been evident for two generations – even as the civil rights movement at home flexed its muscle and affirmed the great vision of freedom at the core of the US constitution, the destructive capability of the US government was evident. This was apparent not only in its brutal prosecution of the Vietnam War but also in attempts to quash the protests of its own citizens against the same war, unconvinced as they were that military might and raw destruction constituted acts of liberty or defence. In the new century it has duly claimed its invasion of Iraq, aided and abetted by its junior partner the UK, and prompted not by any perverse hunger for oil – a notion described as "absurd" by Tony Blair – but by a virtuous desire to rid the country of

tyranny and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As most suspected and indeed now know, there was (and is) plenty of oil in Iraq³ but there are no WMDs.

The dream of the US as harbinger of liberty, democracy, and freedom is at its most fundamental a lie. Returning to Baudrillard, it is no accident that he saw in the United States the art of simulation advanced to the sublime, having evolved to commit the perfect crime – the murder of reality.⁴ The scene of this crime now permeates the entire sphere of American influence: witness the metamorphosis of all values into monetary ethics. The revered institutions to which one might turn for hope of salvation have also been supplanted by fakes. 'Resistance' it is decreed 'is futile'. In the Anglo-American world, higher education has not only become populated by intellectual drones parroting the virtues of free market economics at every turn, but entire disciplines – biology, psychology, psychiatry, economics, and history to name but a few – have become subservient apologia for the doctrines of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman. Disaster capitalism has assumed permanent residence in the global village.⁵ No wonder some have returned to religion in search of a more harmonious appreciation of cosmic interconnectedness, something completely absent from the overlapping curves of supply and demand.

The horror of the twin towers can perhaps be read as a symbolic moment which marks America's declining power – an indication that its opponents were no longer primarily moved by fear. The response to that awful attack, however, has been to seriously curtail free speech in the Western world, to such a degree that the demise of the ivory towers as places of free thinking and intellectual liberty now puts our way of life at risk. There is increasing evidence with the privatisation of thought that the university as a Western institution is now dead, replaced by a government/corporate simulacrum.⁶ The bearers of the enlightenment have been given a makeover. Universities, as they now self-construct (or is that destruct?) themselves in their own brand image, are in the 'business' of selling themselves to the corporate world for their own survival – in a not too dissimilar fashion to some of the students who populate the landscapes of higher education. Such market activity constitutes a greater peril to esteemed Western pedagogical values and way of life than anything *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* dispatched in her weekly battles with the campus supernatural. It is the corporate undead who now stalk the corridors of power in the academy. And as so-called quality newspapers fall prey to the celebrity gazing that nowadays passes for social commentary, neither can one rely upon a free press to

alert a discerning citizenry to the calamity overtaking them. Though Chomsky⁷ rang the alarm bells about thought control in democratic societies some years back, Rupert Murdoch and friends have now most certainly brought the final curtain down on a free press, in a manner somewhat analogous to the sustained assault orchestrated by McDonalds on a healthy and balanced diet.

The dilemma for Bosnians then, and indeed for all those who seek a protective place under the strategic American umbrella, is to balance their just desire for security with their desires for justice, autonomy, independence, and self sufficiency. This delicate balancing act must be set against the backdrop of a likely and not-too-distant future implosion and collapse of global civilization, built as it is upon diminishing supplies of hydrocarbon energy.⁸ The contemporary global capitalist order is premised on a conceptual disconnect from the natural world, bearing with religious conviction an obsession with unlimited and perpetual growth. In the global capitalist psyche, nature has been repressed and now we are witness to its return. The interconnected realities of climate change, fossil fuel depletion, and loss of productive agricultural land, coupled with population growth, global food shortages, and an erstwhile economic instability rooted in escalating hierarchies of virtual finance have already started to bite. Widespread collapse in the political legitimacy of governing elites, threats to the viability of nation states, a plethora of inter- and intra-state conflicts unleashed over dwindling natural resources are predicted consequences of these conditions. Indeed, the waves of dissatisfaction spreading across the Middle East are one sign of this, yet the current global response remains an "ineffectual mess."⁹ Unless unprecedented and concerted global action is taken now, we are heading with certainty toward an ecological crunch that will impact human life on a scale several orders of magnitude beyond anything we have encountered as a species to date. Human survival in numerous parts of the world will undoubtedly be compromised and social organisation will regress.

Stefes,¹⁰ writing in this journal, commented that the chances of a "resolute climate change adaptation strategy" being forthcoming from the EU, let alone any coordinated international effort to address the above threats are "not very promising." Neither should one hold out much prospect that the contemporary structures of global governance led by the United States and exercised through its control of the UN, IMF, World Bank, and NATO are going to steer a rational and practical course away from disaster. Lacking a viable and concerted global response, the emerging

centres of economic power – Russia, China and India – similarly offer no alternative means for heading off the coming crisis. Nor do they offer a more compelling or attractive psychological vision than the traditional architects of the silver screen to lure people to their politico-cultural nests. India's Bollywood is limited in its scope and offers little more than a musical simulation of Hollywood while the festival of images emanating from The People's Republic of China, fantasy kung fu aside, convey little beyond the repressive horrors of Chairman Mao and Tiananmen Square. As for Russia, there are the degradations of the spirit engendered by decades of Stalinism, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall and re-emerged memories of long buried freedoms. Larry Hagman, who played the anti-hero J.R. Ewing in the *Dallas* TV series of the 1980s, credited the show's export of glamour to the former Soviet Union as a factor behind the end of the Cold War. Truth it seems is often stranger (and less desirable) than fiction.¹¹ Stalin, Putin, and contemporary oligarchs, whatever characteristics they possess, simply do not stir the longings of the human heart west of the Urals. If America is empty spaces, glamour, and the Wild West, Russia to the East is art and history, not to mention its characters, including its contemporary Mafiosi friends – all of whom lack the prerequisite charms to win a psychological beauty contest with the West. Russia, it has been said, has suffered from a "failure to discover a national idea."¹² Accordingly, it offers few escapist attractions to mark it as a coherent psychological rival to its old Cold war foe. Regionally it has hardly been helped by collective memories of totalitarian rule or its recent support for the 'Serbian brotherhood' during the Yugoslav wars of succession. Putin's denunciation of "unnecessary liberalism"¹³ neatly sums up why the country will never be a security magnet for the majority of Bosnia's citizens.

The above said, the questions of security facing South Eastern Europe are pressing in the immediate and medium to long terms. In the short term, regional security is enmeshed in the broader sphere of US-Russian relations.¹⁴ However the apparent paradox facing Bosnians who look to the West is that security in the immediate future – integration into both the EU and NATO – will do little or nothing to address looming global security issues and will probably entail opening the doors to the banking elite responsible for the global financial meltdown. Beyond this, the impermanence of US power both globally and regionally will become more readily apparent.

The future then must be faced without illusions. But is it too much to hope that a reengagement with some of

the more enduring socialist ideas of the past could find a home within the post-carbon ideology of the ecologists? A change in hue of the emancipatory collective from red to green might provide a sufficiently solid political platform from which the appeal of nationalist discourse could be resisted whilst simultaneously laying the foundations for an alternate people-centred view of security. Given the stark nature of the impending crisis it is imperative that we think the unthinkable, and easy though it may be to dismiss such thinking as utopian, the region's unique history between East and West might have bequeathed it an intellectual space where the ideals of collective liberation can be reengaged with in both imaginative and productive ways. It is perhaps no accident that one of those at the forefront of this attempt to reinvent the communist ideal, philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek,¹⁵ hails from Slovenia. With the modernist project on its knees and eschewing any nostalgia for twentieth century socialism, Žižek rails that it is only those who are prepared to "begin from the beginning" and reassert this great dream of humanity "who have really awakened from the utopian dream which holds most of us under its sway."¹⁶ The idea of America remains for many this utopian dream. In the understandable desire to grasp immediate security wherever it is offered, the longer view must prevail – for is it not true, as the great English novelist Virginia Woolf wrote, that "(t)he very stone one kicks with one's boots will outlast Shakespeare?"¹⁷ To be or not to be – that is indeed the question. ■

NOTES:

- ¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *America* (Verso, London, [1986] 2010) str. XII.
- ² Chomsky, Noam. *Hopes and prospects* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 2010)
- ³ vidjeti Bignall, P. „Secret memos expose link between oil firms and invasion of Iraq“, *The Independent*, 19. April 2011, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/secret-memos-expose-link-between-oil-firms-and-invasion-of-iraq-2269610.html> pristupljeno 19. aprila). Bignall govori o dokumentima koji dokazuju planiranje eksploatacije iračkih naftnih rezervi, o čemu razgovaraju najveće svjetske naftne kompanije s ministrima britanske vlade prije invazije. Dvadesetogodišnji ugovori koji su potpisani poslije bili su najveći u historiji naftne industrije.
- ⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. *The perfect crime* (Verso, London, 1996)
- ⁵ Klein, Naomi. *The shock doctrine* (Penguin, London, 2007)
- ⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1994)
- ⁷ Chomsky, Noam. *Necessary illusions: thought control in democratic societies* (South End Press, Boston, 1989)
- ⁸ Ahmed, N. Mosaddeq. *A user's guide to the crisis of civilisation* (Pluto Press, London, 2010)
- ⁹ The Economist (2011) Review of David Victor: Global warming gridlock: creating more effective strategies for protecting the planet. Cambridge University Press. 16. april, 89-90.

- ¹⁰ Stefes, Christoph. „Climate change and the European security strategy“, *Democracy and Security in Southeastern Europe*, Vol. I No. 4/5, 2010, str. 73-77.
- ¹¹ vidjeti Gillespie, N. and Welch, M. „How Dallas won the cold war“, *The Washington Post*, 27. aprila 2008 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/25/AR2008042503103.html>, pristupljeno 20. aprila 2011).
- ¹² Harding, L. „Leo Tolstoy: the forgotten genius?“, *The Guardian*, 6. Januara 2010 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jan/06/leo-tolstoy-the-last-station>, pristupljeno 20. aprila 2011).
- ¹³ Walker, S. „Putin drops strongest hint yet of bid for presidency“, *The Independent*, 21. April 2011 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-drops-strongest-hint-yet-of-bid-for-presidency-2270693.html>, pristupljeno 21. aprila 2011).
- ¹⁴ Sherr, James. „Russia: managing contradictions“, *Democracy and Security in Southeastern Europe*, Vol. I No. 4/5, 2010, str. 35-49.
- ¹⁵ Žižek, Slavoj. *First as tragedy, then as farce*. (Verso, London, 2009)
- ¹⁶ Žižek, Slavoj. *First as...* str. 156.
- ¹⁷ Woolf, Virginia. *To the lighthouse* (Wordsworth, Ware, [1927] 1994)