

The following pieces draw vaguely on the Marxist idea that however ill at ease on the periphery—there is no escaping the cultural bonds of the imperium...

A world safe for baseball:

Hand on shoulder of 7-year-old MH, still in his Rockies uniform from his earlier game, I was squeezed in a cluster in front of the bleachers behind home plate. We were among the parents gathered to watch the adolescent boys in their final game of the season. Yet before the game got underway, there was a bit of pageantry to mark the end of the Dubai Little League season. The brief ceremony took place under a white awning behind the pitcher's mound. Set up inside it was a makeshift podium and a portable sound system.

As MH and I craned for our view, just to our right was a paunchy fellow in iridescent sunglasses who was wearing an American flag shirt. He was chuckling with a silver-bearded guy in a tan safari-jacket. We were close enough to overhear their chatter:

“Maybe Fidel Castro will be on the mound,” said the older one in tan jacket.

Yeah, and Saddam at first base!” snickered the paunchy guy.

I gathered that the two were joking about the controversial exhibition game which the Baltimore Orioles were to play next week in Cuba. I continued looking towards the awning, pretending not to eavesdrop.

“On shortstop will it be Colonel Gadhafi?” The paunchy guy adjusted his sunglasses.

“Yeah, I can imagine Gadhafi at short stop,” said the safari suited fellow. He crossed his arms. “Yeah, he’d scoop up all the grounders.”

“Yeah, and who’s that dude who went on the rampage in Cambodia?” The sunglasses flashed. “Imagine him on second base and Idi Amin on third.”

“Idi Amin... Now there’s a blast from the past.” The safari suited guy stroked his beard. “How about Idi Amin along with Slobodan Milosevic in the outfield?” He snickered. “Now that’d make quite a team.”

“Dream team, man!” the paunchy fellow punched his open hand.

The bearded fellow nodded. “Yup, dream team from hell...”



Just then a cheery voice boomed from the microphone.

“Testing, testing...Ok, ladies and gents— let’s get started.”

I recognized the chubby MC at the podium as a Comtech teacher at the college... He had apparently also once been a radio announcer in Ontario.

“Before the boys get started on their last game of the season,” the hefty MC motioned to the players lined up in a semi-circle behind the awning, “we’d like to show our appreciation. We’d like to give our thanks to those who made this season the best one yet for the Dubai Little League... Of course, all of us here— parents and kids—we all share in the success of our league. But we owe a special thanks to our team managers and corporate sponsors... Every time we bring our kids out for a game, we see their contributions— the uniforms, the equipment, the snacks. Like the immortal Yogi Berra once said, “*You can observe a lot just by watching!*””

A ripple of laughs issued from the bleachers.

Sensing impatience, the Canuck spoke faster. “Without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, we have the honour of Mr. K., the American Consul General in Dubai, who will hand out appreciation awards to our league sponsors and patrons.” He jerked around. “Mr. K.?”

Trotting up the first base line was the bearded man in the safari suit. Without skipping a beat— he was shifting from adolescent joshing about America’s enemies to performing diplomatic duty. He stepped onto the podium, beside the chubby MC. Hands beside his back, the Consul General grinned in the applause.



“Ford trucks, for sponsoring the Marlins.”

After the gift bags were handed out to the team managers, the MC called forth representatives of the corporate donors.

“Coca Cola— for sponsoring the Braves.”

The Counsel General shook hands with the patrons while handing out the little trophies lined up on the podium.

"Disney— for sponsoring the Giants."

Among those prancing forward was a mom in a Ford Truck tee-shirt, a square jawed company rep in tennis wear (who could have been a Mormon) and a Lebanese American in a Mickey Mouse cap...

"Chevrolet— for sponsoring the Reds."

Corporate reps, oilmen, military attaches—all shuffled into a line behind the MC and the Counsel General...

"And MacDonalds—for sponsoring the Dodgers."

By then the boys along the infield were fidgeting and parents were chatting in the bleachers. After handing out the last award, even the Counsel General carelessly glanced at his watch.

"OK," said the Canuck MC sensing the mood, "So finally, I'd just like to thank all the dads and moms who—"

"Dad!" said MH, jerking my sleeve. "When is the game starting?"

"In just a few more minutes. Thanks for being patient."

I patted his shoulder. It seemed like we had witnessed a mini-pageant of the corporate icons reassuring that the Gulf—indeed, the world—was safe for the American way... Even in this distant outpost of empire, no Castro, Gadhafi, or Milosevic could poison any ground hallowed by baseball...

By then even I was beginning to squirm like a 7-year-old in a church service...

1999, March (Dubai)



On the eve of invasion:

It is heartening to see the videos of anti-war demonstrations that took place all around the world. I feel especially gratified that MH and I briefly joined the march through downtown Vancouver yesterday afternoon...

Yet for all the poignancy of that anti-war solidarity—the effect on war planners is null. Even without the broad Afghanistan coalition (little Canada showing a rare display of balls) an invasion of Iraq is now irreversible. Any Iraqis resistance will almost certainly be crushed like a pistachio under a sledgehammer...

Yet ironically, it may be that the overwhelming force that the imperium unleashes upon Iraq—leads to its own undoing... As images of ‘shock and awe’ bombing (as in 1991) sink in around the world—the more likely it will be that Bushes’ War on Terror will be taken as a crusade against Muslims. The more rage that is stoked throughout the Islamic world, the greater numbers of young Muslims will be radicalized. In seeking a cause—as young men often do—many may heed the call of Al Qaeda to fight ‘the crusaders’...

No matter that Saddam is an old foe of Al Qaeda—Osama Bin Laden—wherever he is hiding—will have powerful new ammunition... His next recorded message is all but certain to use an invasion of Iraq as more proof of America’s war on all Islam...

As Bin Laden taunted in a recently released message: the might of the America’s arsenal can be no match for hosts of ‘martyrs’ with suicide vests... As the recent attack on tourists in Bali chillingly demonstrated—jihadists are ready to strike against any westerners—anywhere at any time...

So, it will not be Tomahawk missiles that will be decisive in this latest phase of the War on Terror—it will rather be the propaganda for hearts and minds of the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims. At the moment, many are surely in turmoil. As much as most surely despise the sliver of extremism that brings wrath and racist attacks upon all Muslims—many may still wonder what lies in heart of a president who proclaims himself a “born-again Christian” ...

So, with the Iraqi invasion, the vicious cycle turns faster and cuts ever deeper... The War on Terror radicalizes more Muslims and pushes Americans further to the right. Growing Islamophobia exacerbates paranoia and pushes more young Muslims towards the beckoning jihadists... As Auden famously put it: “*Those to whom evil is done, do evil in return...*”

2003, February



Exploiting squeamishness:

With the toll for American soldiers in Iraq now averaging two a day, public support for Operation Iraqi Freedom has begun to evaporate. Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan is in a stalemate with most of the Al Qaeda leadership, including Bin Laden, still communicating with their followers from secret locations.

In watching a piece on CNN tonight about flagging morale among the American combatants, I thought of a telling moment in my mid-20s in northern Nigeria.

I was on the pillion of the new motorcycle which my Nigerian friend was learning to drive. Rounding a bend outside the village, he swerved onto the sandy shoulder to avoid an oncoming lorry. To avoid falling off, I spontaneously clutched him around the waist.

After lurching back onto the broken asphalt, he glanced back at me, chuckling.

“You’re really scared to die, isn’t it?” Laughing, he gave me a playful poke in the side...

A little embarrassed, I realized that I had unconsciously demonstrated a trait which my friend would assume common to every *bature* [white ‘European’] — an overwrought and possibly crippling fear of death...



I also thought of a scene in the anti-war documentary, of the Vietnam War era, ‘*Hearts and Minds*’ (1974). In one segment, Commanding General William Westmorland, opines: ‘The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does a westerner...’

Coming after a wrenching scene of a Vietnamese funeral, that scene distilled the blind arrogance of America’s presumption of superiority. Few high-profile Americans would risk making such a baldly racist claim on camera today. Yet possibly a majority of Americans still subscribe to the belief that they value life more highly than do other cultures. The belief and the corresponding one that American lives are more precious than non-American lives is hardly surprising for a people who believe they are exceptional in human history...

Yet ironically in Afghanistan and Iraq, jihadists seem to be flipping American exceptionalism into an exploitable weakness... They claim to embrace that about which Americans are exceptionally squeamish. As a recently reported message from Al Qaeda taunted: ‘*We look forward to death as much as you worship life*’. However mighty America’s arsenal, this chilling avowal may be more potent than any high-tech weapon...

Ironically to his followers, a Bin Laden in hiding is far more powerful than Bin Laden in a bunker in Kabul... For his growing acolytes, he is like a prophet in some high mountain cave receiving visions which are communicated through his smuggled-out messages... He is believed to have discovered a wormhole to the mushy core of the ‘invincible’ imperium. The jihadists and rag-tag warriors believe that the steel against which they hurl themselves is already trembling.

They may even believe that with just a few more jabs all the rottenness will come bursting forth...



Meanwhile, the mandarins of empire, the Wolfowitzs and Rumsfelds, are fighting to keep America on message: that the War on Terror is a war of civilization against barbarism—that the victims of 911 are yet to be avenged... Yet the mightiest military force the world has ever known still faces the determining question: *whose resolve is greater—ours or that of the enemy?*

At the same time, the public is growing jittery. It is not that a waning desire for revenge is weakening support for the Middle East missions... It is rather that a nation obsessed with guns is particularly squeamish about casualties in its foreign engagements...

150 American lives have already been lost in Iraq (incidentally, half the number of victims of a recent and barely reported Bangladeshi ferry sinking) with ongoing casualties in Afghanistan. A people dedicated to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness have no stomach for the blood of their youth spilled for any cause.

The threshold of squeamishness may be near. Ambush by ambush, casualty by casualty—American resolve is being ground down. Will Afghanistan or Iraq be another quagmire? Already stirring is the ghost of Vietnam...

2003, July

Fluency in the master culture:

In putting down the phone after the call from my cousin in Seattle, I was stuck that after the exchange of pleasantries, we spoke about nothing more than baseball. Until he signaled that his phone battery was dying, we talked about the relative success of the Seattle Mariners this season compared with that of the Toronto Blue Jays.

Baseball has always been our safe topic of conversation. Failing that, we would have chatted about Hollywood movies. With my cousin being broadly ‘liberal’, we have on occasion, touched upon US politics. Yet, since 911, mention of the War on Terror has been somehow taboo... In any case, apart from queries about family, our conversation is always limited to American topics...

The only American with whom I speak freely about politics is old friend and former colleague, BC, still in Dubai. Yet even in our long chats, it has occurred that we rarely stray from American topics... Is that the default mode, I wondered, in most informal conversation between Canadians and Americans? Are Canadians ‘naturally’ eager to show off their fluency in the master culture?

In such regard, I recalled a few Latin Americans met on the Gringo Trail, *circa* 1976, who were keen to practice their English. They eagerly talked of Hollywood movies, baseball and American pop idols, often in exaggerated American accents. How could they not realize, I wondered— just how buffoonish was their attempt to ape American speech!

Of course, the Anglo-Canadian can speak flawlessly in the American tongue with perfect command of pop cultural allusions. Still, are we any less buffoonish? To borrow an ugly expression from the repressive 1950s— as much as the Canuck might otherwise be taken as a Minnesotan— in the American view, he is still only “passing white...”

Still, most Anglo-Canadians do suppose themselves to possess an identity distinct from that of Americans. They sometimes claim to be more ‘European’ than Americans. When pressed to elaborate, examples of ‘distinct’ institutions are often cited: Medicare, national broadcasting; gun control. They also tend to take pride that such institutions tweak the tail feathers of the imperial eagle. Apart from cartoonish (American) stereotypes, Anglo Canadian ‘culture’ is often described in negatives— the subtle ways we do *not* regard ourselves as American... But very rarely do we step outside the Yankee template...



After the call, I wondered if my cousin was a little miffed that I had begged off his friendly invitation. I felt a little guilty knowing that the kids would have enjoyed a Sunday afternoon at his cottage south of the border. As always, we could have bought some cheap groceries and filled up the gas tank. My excuse was heavy lesson planning— but it really was just an aversion to crossing the border since 911. Given the aggressive interrogation to be expected from a Homeland Security officer, I wonder if I will be able to bite my tongue...

As for the next conversation with a friendly American—I will try a little experiment: I will see how long I can steer the conversation away from exclusive reference to the metropole... Yet that might be harder to sustain any longer than holding one's breath—or biting one's tongue.

2003, August

At ease in his own skin:

Although the CBS news has long been reviled by American conservatives, the salute to the late Ronald Reagan last night on ‘60 Minutes’, played straight into his beatification by the right...

Much was made of the “new morning in America” that Reagan reputedly ushered in after the supposed malaise of the Carter era. It was emphasized that Saint Ronnie was the only president in history to be elected and re-elected in landslides. Such was he revered that by the mind-wandering end of his presidency, journalists nudged him back on track and helped him complete sentences...

The documentary showed the great communicator’s thundering speech at the Berlin Wall (“Mr. Gorbachev open this gate!”) followed by images of the great unifier shoulder to shoulder with a grinning Democrat Speaker Tip O’Neal... Then there was a reminder of the Gipper’s sense of humour: shown cracking up Walter Mondale on the debate stage by saying he would not exploit his opponent’s “youth and inexperience...”

In further embroidering the hagiography, there were images of the modest house in middle America where St. Ronnie grew up, and of handsome young “Dutch”, the lifeguard, who notched up rescues on a tree trunk...

His stint as head of the Screen Actors Guild was mentioned—with no reference to his complicity in anti-communist paranoia. (In fact, he denounced members of his own union to the HUAC committee). There were neither any clips of the narrow-eyed and hard voiced narrator of John-Birch style propaganda films (e.g.: ‘*The truth about Communism*’). Also unmentioned was his washed-up actor period of the 1950s in which he advertised a host of products from cigarettes and shirts to hair cream...

Completely glossed over was his hippie-baiting as Governor of California, his cold-war bellicosity and ease in racist dog-whistling. There was no reference to the glorification of Wall Street greed, the Saving and Loan crisis or the Iran *Contra* funding scandals during his presidency... The glimpses of his personal life omitted any hint of the father who charged interest on loans to his own children and whose son and namesake hated his guts...

Avoiding all ambiguity, the focus was on the charming eye-twinkling octogenarian. The genial Ronnie is shown cooing to his beloved Nancy whom he sometimes called “mommy”. Only a heartless cynic would be reminded of a 3-year-old boy waiting for his bum to be wiped... Still, as narrator Dan Rather put it, Reagan was a man “completely at ease in his own skin...” That rarity appears to have been his most special gift...



Well before the commercial break it occurred that the CBS was simply desperate for a feel-good story. Yet it will take rather more than nostalgia for the “new morning in America” to counter images of Iraqi prisoners on dog leashes...

2004, June



Cultural sensitivity in the War on Terror:



Intrigued by the ‘article in the *New Yorker*’ (another borrowing from the faculty lounge) on American counter-insurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In facing insurgencies of unexpected strength, the Americans are apparently employing a range of strategies. They even studying old school tactics such as those employed by British Colonel Gerald Templar in colonial Malaya. His carrot and stick tactics successfully defeated a communist insurgency similar to that which was to later succeed in Vietnam... Pentagon training sessions have also made use of ‘*The Battle of Algiers*’ (1966) — Pontecorvo’s documentary-style drama about the colonial French government’s response to a bombing campaign by the Arab-Algerian liberation movement. One might well wonder whether the Pentagon has discovered such materials about 45 years too late...

Most interesting in Packer’s report is that the Pentagon has been consulting hotshot cultural anthropologists. Among them is a young Californian with the unlikely name of Montgomery McFate. She describes herself as having taken an early interest in anthropology from her mother’s Polynesian paintings that decorated the houseboat in which she grew up.

Breaking the mold of typical research in cultural anthropology, Ms. McFate did her doctoral research on the Irish Republican Army. Further rebelling against her “beatnik” parents, she developed an interest in the military application of her field. It was after the September 11 attacks that she had her real epiphany: the US military needed far better “cultural knowledge” to succeed in its interventions in the Middle East— and she could provide it.

She reportedly does acknowledge the ethical concerns among her academic colleagues for her role inside the US military. She claims that her advice has mitigated tense situations and saved lives of both the occupier and the occupied... Her reported example is having advised the patrol in which she was embedded not to immediately fire upon a group that was firing rifles into the air. Her cultural expertise determined that the suspect group was actually a wedding party...



Packer suggests that the new counter-insurgency techniques show that the Americans are scrambling to right the ship. After the Abu Ghraib PR disaster in Iraq, the field manuals on

interrogation have apparently been rewritten with instructions to maintain Geneva Convention compliance—despite Dick Cheney's private distaste for such niceties...

There is also an attempt to buy temporary alliances with hefty bribes. Still, one wonders why hasn't some poor Afghan tribesman collected the \$25 million bounty on Osama Bin Laden's head? Cultural sensitivity and cash dispersal aside—the Americans are still hated occupiers...

Packer leaves open the question as to whether the new counter-surgency approaches offer too little too late. The hope of leaving behind a friendly government and a measure of order is fading fast. Especially in Iraq, the Americans were stunningly unprepared for chaos that would ensue in the 'toppling' of Saddam Hussein...There is little appetite for picking up the pieces let alone gluing them together...

Meanwhile back in the homeland, images of prisoners caged like animals in Guantanamo Bay make more difficult the reminder that the burning towers are yet to be avenged...

2007, February
