

Book Review

Alain Joxe

Empire of Disorder

Cambridge, Mass: MIT/Semiotext(e), 2002

Reviewed by Michael Whealen

As a writing instructor at a large Canadian university with a reputation for turning out graduates who are encouraged to think critically (its motto is *tentanda via*- "the way must be tried"), I spend a lot of time working with senior students on their public policy and administration papers. One of the delights of this work is that I am necessarily exposed to an avalanche of good scholarship in the social sciences. Since I am seldom away from a word processor and Net access, I have fallen into the habit of adding studies I want to pursue in greater depth to my "must read" file. And, customarily, at the end of each academic term, I go on a knowledge acquisition shopping spree, sourcing libraries, Amazon.com., electronic databases, sometimes even a (non-virtual) visit to an "alt" bookstore like Pages on Queen Street in Toronto (where I discovered Joxe, incidentally). Time permitting, I then read this stuff. The problem, of course, is surfeit. Certain restrictive policy initiatives taken in the last couple of years by our elected representatives in Washington and-to a lesser degree Ottawa-notwithstanding, there is still a lot of good material out there.

So, I have developed an information management strategy. I write this data onto my "wet" CPU (having previously backed it up on some kind of hard storage device, just in case). And then I wait. And I watch. For after many years of reading what social scientists have had to say, I have learned that the very best ones-much like their counterparts in the natural sciences-can sometimes exhibit predictive value. That's simply to say that history has proven, or subsequent events in the contemporary social and political world repeatedly prove, them true. Frankly, these are as rare as hens' teeth or horses' toes. But when I come across them, I want to share them, because surely these are the theoreticians that teachers and policy makers might want to know about. A few weeks back, when I read about coalition forces marching through Baghdad but being careful to declare that their presence there was "provisional," and when I watched MSNBC video clips of "liberated" Muslims kissing the new Crusaders, I thought of Joxe's comparatively short (221pp.) but predictively sweet and refreshing *Empire of Disorder*. His interpretation of emerging international political patterns put many of the ironies, anomalies and calumnies of the current scene in a more intelligible perspective.

A word about Alain Joxe, for he is only recently becoming well known off the European continent. Professor Joxe is the directeur d'études à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, founding director of the interdisciplinary Centre International de Recherches sur la Paix at the Ecole des Hautes, and head of le Groupe de Sociologie de la Défense. Such academic credentials are impressive. As well as being an expert in strategic studies, he is the son of Louis Joxe, General de Gaulle's cabinet minister, who signed the Evian Accords that ended the Algerian war, and the brother of Pierre Joxe, a former socialist minister of the interior and defence. He is knowledgeable, accomplished and very well connected.

This book is a translation—a very good one, I might add—by Ames Hodges, of the original French edition. Joxe writes with unexpected lucidity and simplicity in the disciplinarily complex area of contemporary international relations, a sphere that has seen the demise of whole generations of expert “soothsayers” who have been humbled by geopolitical developments that they either badly misread or failed to see on the horizon. Joxe’s prognosis, however, is based on a compelling diagnosis, and may well stand the test of time.

Joxe is not easy to pigeonhole. As a colonial theoretician, he holds firmly to the insight that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is one of reciprocal necessity. This is a very old, and very sensible truth about imperialism in all its forms throughout history, but it bears repeating: By definition, an hegemonic power is so only in relation to the colonies within its control. One might say, after the macroeconomist and world-systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein, that there are no cores without peripheries delineating the cores as cores. This is a thread that runs throughout *Empire*. It speaks to essential (some might say dialectical) relationship between metropolis and hinterland that inevitably affects attitudes and conditions in both.

Starting from this position and drawing on an impressive assemblage of classical and contemporary political thought, Joxe goes on to develop a twofold thesis. First, he argues that globalization, the growing and accelerating flow of commodities, services and capital across traditional national boundaries, is ultimately neither sustainable nor desirable if we are genuinely concerned about the kind of world that we want our children to inherit. The problem, of course, is the old one of the inequitable distribution of the wealth that globalization has generated. It is not just that colonies are less wealthy (culturally and socially as well as economically) than colonizers, but that the process of colonialism itself produces both the wealth and poverty. In the glory days of European mercantilism, this was accepted unapologetically as the whole point of empire. It was, of course, subsequently rejected by revolutionaries from Lenin to Fanon. And, it was seen as a problem to which modernization was the solution, by liberal analysts from W. W. Rostow on down. One way or another, however, the grandeur of the centre was understood to have been won at the cost of the impoverishment of the periphery.

Joxe then goes on to predict that the initiatives of the “overdeveloped” nations (primarily the US) to coerce or bribe or strong-arm the rest of the world and their own domestic populations into this distributive straitjacket aren’t ultimately going to work in perhaps quite the ways they think they will. As he writes, “Globalization is quickly turning the world into a chaos, leading to an increasing disparity between rich and poor, the rise of an international, rootless ‘noble class,’ and an escalating number of endless cruel little wars. Yet the United States refuses to conquer the world and assume the protective imperial role for the societies it subjugates. Instead, it operates on a case-by-case basis, regulating disorder and repressing the symptoms of despair instead of attacking its cause.” I thought of this latter observation while watching the US move from Afghanistan to Iraq and then brandish its big stick against Syria. And this was in just one sphere of influence in the course of the last decade or so.

To a degree, his brilliant little analysis, flying as fast and as low as a USAF armed drone homing in on its surgical strike site, is flawed by the fact that he doesn’t hazard any plausible alternatives to the present direction of affairs (unless one wants to extrapolate the inevitable denouement as some kind of ultimately embarrassing debacle for the US, after a host of lesser ones). Still, Joxe

is a penetrating chronicler and interpreter of current international affairs. He provides a depressingly realistic description of events and a persuasive diagnosis of the problem even if, like SARS, there is no therapy immediately available. If nothing else, he challenges Western citizens and leaders to think and act more deeply and more humbly than they have traditionally thought and acted.

If I have any serious criticism of this stimulating take on current events, it is one that pertains only to the structure of the book. Its first section is presented in the form of one of those dreadful dialogues that are in fact monologues trying to "pass" as dialogues that one encounters across the political spectrum with highly polemical studies today: preaching to the converted, I believe it's called. Here, Joxe is asked a host of heavily-freighted interrogatives by his sometimes sycophantic fellow-traveler, leftist theoretician Sylvere Lotringer. However, even in this, Joxe subverts expectations, and things brighten (lighten?) up a bit. At one point, Lotringer asks him a terribly leading question concerning a remark made by Henry Kissinger to the effect that, after 9/11, the US would be micropolicing everyone, everywhere, all the time. One sees exactly where this is going. But surprisingly, Joxe-with characteristic Gallic aplomb-just replies that perhaps Dr. Kissinger was making a joke, and that while the Americans might try to do this, it is, in reality, quite impossible. Plainly, to Joxe, the Emperor has no clothes.

This book is a treasure for anyone who wants to understand emerging geopolitical realities in a way that goes beyond both the Cassandras who envision the future as a kind of endlessly replayed loop of Blade Runner, and the breathless apologists of a global, *laissez-faire*, "happy-ever-after" consumerism. Things aren't that simple, and the world bumps along much as it always has, thank you very much.

About the Author:

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