

The Search for What Should Be, Within What Is, For Critical Educators

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Abstract

Books Reviewed:

- *Cornwell, John, (2003) Hitler's Scientists, London, Viking Penguin, 535p, \$29.95, ISBN 0-670-03075-9*
- *Harvey, David (2003) The New Imperialism, New York, Oxford University Press, 253p, \$19.95, ISBN 0-19-926431-7*
- *Johnson, Chalmers (2004) The Sorrows of Empire, Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic, New York, New York, Metropolitan Books, 389p, \$25.00, ISBN 0-8050-7004-4*
- *Klare, Michael (2004) Blood and Oil, New York, Metropolitan Books, 265p, \$25.00, ISBN 0-8050-7313-2*
- *Kleveman, Lutz (2003) The New Great Game, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, \$24, ISBN 0-87113-906-5*

In November 2004 the assembled members of the College and University Faculty Association of the National Council for the Social Studies passed the following motion, overwhelmingly, “The war on Iraq is wrong. We demand that the US get out of Iraq now.”

Five current books, drawing on political economy, history, historiography, and journalism, give credence to that activist stance. Each goes directly to the question that faces many critical educators today: How can I keep my ideals and still teach? Where does the empire stop, and my ethics begin?

The Sorrows of Empire by Chalmers Johnson, *Blood and Oil* by Michael Klare, *The New Great Game*, by Lutz Kleveman, *New Imperialism* by David Harvey, and *Hitler's Scientists* by John Cornwell, all address the background of our current social context (which sets up pedagogical practice). All offer glimpses of what might be done by educators, and others, in the gap of time between recognizing a wrong war and the declaration of lasting peace.

Chalmers Johnson builds on his remarkably prescient, *Blowback* (2000) in which he warned of U.S. imperial hubris and reliance on military might undermining the attractions of economic success, in describing what he sees as the four key weak links, sorrows, in the US empire: the overreach of the military invading the world, the loss of civil liberties, subsequent reliance on complete disinformation, and bankruptcy.

Johnson, once an intelligence analyst and “spear-carrier for the empire” (*Blowback* xii), documents the cultural and economic impact of the overstep of the military in its 725 bases with 1,389,000 active duty troops (and untold secret operations and mercenaries) around the world, creating a crisis of dependency and resentment that sets up views of the US as a “consumerist Sparta” (23). This, in turn, allows US leaders to see themselves outside and above international law, powerful enough to define right and wrong in their own interests.

US youth quickly get snared in this totalizing system. Recruiters in schools, in both the US and Mexico, target the poor and kids of color to join what Johnson sees as a war of the haves on the have-nots, world-wide. The No Child Left Behind Act, requiring military recruiter access to youth, simply tightens the noose and is part of Johnson's view that civil liberties, key to democratic exchanges of information, are vanishing in the US, under the banner of the security state.

The military, though, has not escaped the privatization that has typified the post-Cold War era. Indeed, if Johnson is correct, it appears that political elites and military leaders have ceded their powers to corporations and profiteering, trailing corporate moguls around the globe, conducting secret wars. What Johnson calls the “sepy strategy,” using privatized mercenaries as central to military operations, inverts the tradition of civilian control of the military, and also can lead to sepy revolts—and the barbarization of society through the eradication of habeas corpus, secret

imprisonments without charge (Guantanamo), and the approval of torture (Abu Ghraib).

Johnson misses no possibilities to weave in a fascinating sidelight, like the role Soviet spy Kim Philby's father, Sir H.A. R. Philby, played in shifting Saudi oil control to US interests. This foreshadowing of betrayal is indicative of Johnson's wide view.

But Johnson's sense of irony is dominated by a sense of crisis, urgency. Now the US faces rising competitors, particularly China whose industrializing economy is booming, whose citizenry appear to be prepared to sacrifice heavily for national economic development (despite millions of people arriving homeless and hopeless in the cities, having been driven off the land by the "Red Army"). China needs the resources of the world, labor, material, and markets every bit as much as the US does. Iran, too, stands in the way of US pipeline dreams.

Holding the largest debt in the history of the world, much of it to China, the US is no longer an industrial nation, no longer a moral beacon, but an empire relying on sheer might alone. This is expensive. The trade deficit, massive military expenditures, secrecy, all lead to the final sorrow of the empire, financial ruin. The four sorrows create a perfect storm, one presaged in history back to Rome following the fall of its sole rival, Carthage, and the subsequent internal decay, over-extension of the legions, restrictions on speech and press, and the arrival of Visigoths.

Johnson sees militarization and the economy running on parallel, but distinct, lines, distinguishing himself from Marxists who would insist on their interaction. Still, Johnson is willing to agree that top government offices, and related think-tanks, are dominated by corporate, and particularly oil, interests. Condoleezza Rice, now Secretary of State, is the only person who has held such office who once had an oil tanker named after her.

Asked to locate hope, Johnson has suggested, in public speeches, moves to Canada, Vancouver especially, in order to escape the development of new forms of fascism. He offers, in *Sorrows of Empire*, that a revolution would be necessary to reverse the militarization of the nation, knowing that is a most unlikely prospect. Hubris, in Greek mythology, is conquered by Nemesis, the goddess of retribution and vengeance—and

ruin—who Johnson says is maneuvering now. Johnson knows his Rome, and its fall. This, then, is indeed a gloomy report, a solid fascinating analysis leading to a horror that Johnson has yet to describe. Given his accuracy in *Blowback*, it is a doubly disturbing text.

Michael Klare, in *Blood and Oil* (2004), follows Johnson in that he too is building upon, and in this case correcting, a previous book, *Resource Wars* (2001). In the latter, Klare argued that the wars of the coming epoch would be about oil, water, and land. Now Klare says it is really all about oil, and it is not possible to divide the ties of blood and this vital natural resource which propels nearly everything 21st century citizens touch, from pens to pistols.

Klare tracks US foreign policy as related to oil through the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which treated every possible oil region as a US protectorate, to the invasion of Iraq, potentially the second richest oil field in the world. With a finite and dwindling world oil supply, US elites in the Bush administration, led by Vice-President Cheney, formerly of Haliburton, formulated policies that recognized the key to US power, the military, runs on oil.

Klare carefully documents the present state of oil riches, and the potential areas where oil may be found, following the US need to extend and diversify its control of the supply. With charts and an easy narrative, Klare demonstrates that the main areas to find oil, today and for the foreseeable future, are areas that are unstable, rife with internal and external conflict, like the Middle East, the Caspian Sea region, Latin America (where Venezuela's Hugo Chavez now threatens to cut oil exports to the US) and Africa.

The US has clearly demonstrated the willingness of its leaders to shed blood for oil, as in the invasion of Iraq, but going well back to the 1950's US sponsored overthrow of the elected government of Iran. This policy, however, crashes into increasing anti-Americanism, rising competition for limited oil resources from old yet powerful competitors like Russia, and new competitors just as thirsty: India and China.

Klare recognizes that oil is absolutely pivotal to US economic life. Yet he concludes that it may be possible to split the blood and oil equation by a heavy public oil usage

tax on the one hand, and significant shifts away from oil dependency on the other. How this will happen is left unclear.

Making Klare more concrete, Lutz Kleveman, in *The New Great Game*, maintains that Central Asia, especially the Caspian Sea region, is the nodal point of the coming struggles for oil and natural gas, the old Great Game with both old and new players. Today, the US replaces the British Empire, Russia in a new form stands for old Russia, while new entrants include local nationalists, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Krygyks, and China, now a major oil importer. China is militarily encircled by US troops who, for the first time, are also staged in former Soviet regions, with a heavy presence in war-torn Georgia, Stalin's birthplace, for example.

Kleveman is a journalist. He traveled throughout the region, with side trips to western China and Iran. This though, is no travelogue. The old Great Game inspired the clear voice of 19th century British imperialism, Rudyard Kipling, to write this of the initially easy British invasion of Kabul in 1839—which was then followed by an 1840 Afghan uprising that caused a massive retreat from the city:

When you're wounded and left on Afghan's plains,
And the women come to cut out the remains,
jest roll on your rifle and blow out your brains,
And go to your Gawd like a soldier (227).

The new great game is more complex, more dangerous. India and Russia are both nuclear powers, as is Pakistan, whose top scientist sold his nation's nuclear secrets. Russia, the experienced hand in the great game, deals from the top and the bottom, praising the US invasions while attacking nationalist movements in the USSR, eradicating civil rights and the old social safety net, and inching closer to the oil fields.

While Kleveman traces many of the same social tendencies that Johnson and Klare examined—the motive forces of oil and natural gas, the political/military geography of vital pipelines, the intensifying war of haves on have-nots, collapsing civil rights and the barbarization of entire nations under varying forms of irrationalist governments—what is most troubling about his investigation is the possibility of a deadly move in

the game by a wild-card player; the boss of Turkmenistan, who the author charges with creating “Stalin’s Disneyland,” or Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, which nurtured the Taliban, probably secrets Osama bin Laden today, and is the shadow government under the enormously unpopular president, Musharraf, who backed the US invasion of Afghanistan. One dramatic intervention, by even a small player like bin Laden, can set in motion a series of events, like a cue ball hitting a rack, that flies out of control. While Kleveman never says, “World War Three,” it is impossible not to consider it.

In addition, the journalist tells a good story, rife with irony. One interviewee, for example, tells Kleveman that Iran is far more democratic than the oil sheikdoms that enjoy so much US support in the Middle East. Another, a former fighter who watched the mujahideen defeat the superpower USSR in Afghanistan, says, “If American troops go into Afghanistan, sooner or later they will find themselves in hell on earth.”

Another informs him, and perhaps challenges some understandings in the US, that the Taliban had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Kleveman notes that the opium trade, set back by the fundamentalist Taliban, is flourishing in Afghanistan, again, and he neatly traces the routes of the traffic. And Hamed Karzai, the US-installed elected leader of Afghanistan, cannot move in his country without a US escort of special operatives. Chalmers Johnson points out that Karzai was a Unocal employee (Johnson 178).

And what comes of this for Kleveman? It is, again, not a hopeful scenario. He closes with a vivid paragraph of consumerist America watching cruise missiles fall on civilians, in between television commercials.

In steps David Harvey, renowned Marxist geographer, author of the seminal, *Limits to Capital* (1982), with *The New Imperialism*, a less magisterial, but no less challenging, analysis of what is, what might be coming, and what we might do.

To cut to the chase, Harvey says the real battleground is in the US.

Harvey offers a precise analysis of the growing social, political, and economic crisis in the US, coming well before 2001, ranging from the post-Vietnam debt crises in

New York City, the Chrysler bailout, de-industrialization, attacks on the social safety net (mental health institutions, welfare, unemployment, etc.) and the over extension of the empire—what Harvey quotes Hannah Arendt as saying is the Achilles' heel of any empire, the necessary constant accumulation of power, hence overreach.

Indeed, there really is nothing much new about new imperialism, other than redefining it as different from V.I Lenin's early work of 1914, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, when Lenin reversed his previous belief that powerful empires could counter-balance one another over time (Tucker, 294).

Imperialism, per both Harvey and Hannah Arendt, is embedded in the earliest stages of capitalism, creating the fountain of wealth that made the accumulation of capital possible. This early economic necessity set up the lifelong equation of imperial ideology: Imperialism-capitalism-nationalism-racism (45).

The US economic crisis played out as a war of the rich on the poor, inside the country and in what was once the Third World as well, the International Monetary Fund, serving as a cat's paw. In this period, the US consumer market controlled world productivity, the dollar ruled economies, and the US military intervened as the stick when the carrot would no longer do.

This process subverted itself. The growing massive deficit required immense foreign props for the US debt, mainly from China. China, meanwhile, became more dependent on foreign oil than the US.

And capital turned on those who produce it: workers and peasants. In the US, de-industrialization set the stage for an intense assault on wages and benefits, and throughout the world peasants were driven off the land, dispossessed, with considerable violence. This, in turn, fomented resistance, as people had to fight back to live—against brutal regimes. In Indonesia, in 1965, the regime change from Sukarno to Suharto led to nearly one million dead, long forgotten in television portrayals of aid to tsunami victims in 2005.

Harvey is sharply critical for the left in this instance, accusing Marxist movements of ignoring the plight of the dispossessed, focusing only on workers' struggles, ignoring

one-half of the equation of the movement of capital in its relentless search for cheaper labor, raw material, and markets. This meant the left was unable to mount any kind of serious challenge to the twin methods of capitalist accumulation, exploiting labor and driving people from the land, nearly simultaneously.

Why, then, did so many people agree to defend “their” nation’s interests, when the financiers of their nation were not reluctant at all to witness, and even finance, the ruin of, for example, US industry, leaving the country dominant only in technology, war, and perhaps agribusiness? Why was the collapse of the “fictitious capital,” of the NASDAQ so quickly forgotten, unseen as a crisis?

Irrationalism plays a key role, submits Harvey. In a statement that could be seen as remarkable foresight in light of the 2004 elections, “the influence of the Christian right cannot be underestimated.” (191). Harvey sets out an equation: neo-conservatives impose order via a big leader who offers a clear and secure hierarchy of power and morality, dissent and media opposition is crushed, racism intensifies, all offering comfort to those afflicted by processes they do not understand. Meanwhile, the conservative promise of less government vanishes in a sea of corporate bailouts (the airlines after September 11) and the centralization of political power into fewer and fewer, and ever more secretive, hands.

Harvey returns to the crisis of the economy. One-third of US debt is held by foreign financiers, the war costs could easily exceed \$200 billion, confidence in the US government itself drops as the dollar falls quickly against, say, the Euro. General Motors, in debt at a tune of nearly \$300 billion, faces a reduction of its bond status to junk bond equivalent (*Financial Times* 1-16-05). Permanent war, “could mean economic suicide” (207). And China is coming, as are the Europeans, and the possibility of a Eurasian block looms.

Whoever controls the oil pipelines controls the world. But control of pipelines is a geo-political problem. Hence, social control and oil mix, one spilling into the other. But the empire is fragile, so fragile that Harvey is tempted to predict its end. Still, the IMF and the World Trade Organization continue to ratchet open new markets, allowing the continuing expansion of capital. One presumes, then, that what ends is the dominance of one nation over capital’s processes, not the end of capital itself. The

Hegemon's crown passes on. But Harvey also warns that the current Hegemon has eyes on Iran.

What to do? Harvey suggests we recreate the New Deal, which he says was initially conceived by the early Marxist, Karl Kautsky, himself later denounced as the god-father of revisionism by Lenin, in his 1918 pamphlet, *The Counter-Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*. This new New Deal would be a creation of the US and Europe, really a guide for hope in the coming era for those who want something beyond the war, crises, segregation, and inequality that sets the tone for most of the above. The new New Deal would mean a reinvestment in the social safety net, a turn from war, toward international cooperation, a balance of imperial powers, rather like the Cold War, absent most of the war. This, of course, will mean a struggle. The key to this struggle for better days is, again, within the US where resistance is centripetally positioned to influence change everywhere.

The state, government, would have a part to play in this. Harvey acknowledges that the neo-liberal state has been ruthless toward worker and social movements for reforms, yet he holds that the state could also be influenced by progressive movements to adopt, at the least, less harsh measures.

Analytically, I have only modest quarrels with the authors above. Each book is illuminating, eminently readable, challenging on nearly each page, each offers a clear paradigm to cast new light on one's own thinking, and each is vital to understanding our present situation, on which we must base any hope we have for the future. I do wish that Johnson, Kleveman, and Klare had noticed the working class, the fact that people will fight back because they must, as in the recent California grocery strike, the longest working class battle of the last decade, led by people who are not commonly seen as militants, people who fought from necessity, and who lost because they did not understand the fight (Gibson 2004).

At issue is not so much whether people will fight, but what they need to know, and how they need to come to know it, when they do fight—as the grinding down of the economy will necessarily cause resistance. Where can educators expect reason to intervene in struggle, to produce those better days, consciously? In this potential connection of reason and resistance, I can see some hope.

I wish Harvey had a clearer view of his own thinking on the potential to influence government, when his proofs suggest that government in many, if not all areas, is truly Marx's "executive committee of the rich."

That said, Harvey alone, through his own investigation calling for a benevolent capitalist regime, offers us much, or any, hope at all: A New Deal, which is a most unlikely deal. Harvey himself notes that the class power of those who now rule is formidable, that they not only control a pernicious social system, but they accurately personify it in this historical moment, and there is no sign that they plan even the slightest retreat, and no hint from the loyal opposition that it is any kind of an opposition. Harvey's suggestion that the New Deal look a lot like the old New Deal in the US, the reconstruction of the social safety net, based apparently on the recognition of the rich that they too cannot survive without it. At issue though: It may be that in these harsh times when largesse is simply not available to rulers, those with guns will rule those who do not have guns. But this too must pass.

However, what each author misses is a deep look at the extraordinary centrifugal "pull" of capitalist culture, the extent of the opportunism that each notices, but does not fully investigate. It may be that the dollar, rock and roll, exploitative sexuality, daytime television, are more powerful than men with guns. In mostly secular Iraq, for example, or in secularizing Iran, the draw of mullahs and nationalism could be defeated by the seduction of cable tv and Microsoft, should a troop withdrawal take place. As in Vietnam, it may be capital's culture, not bombs, that wins the day. Haliburton might be able to do in Iraq, or even Iran, what the 101st Air Division could not. In brief, an thoughtful inspection of the carrot, as well as the stick, would have been helpful.

It does appear to be a dark era ahead. Still, things change. We do not know how, exactly, or when, exactly, but we know they do, as this is what history shows us. Continuity, the patterns of everyday life, is ruptured by patterns often unnoticed, deeper than everyday life, but that are often created, wittingly or not, by the actions of everyday life. Reflective reason can play a role in fashioning conscious change.

History, then, may help us choose how to live with hope every day in a dark era. So I turn to a historian, John Cornwell, and his 2003, *Hitler's Scientists*. This, like Johnson

and Klare, is a follow-up work for Cornwell, trailing his *Hitler's Pope* (2000) a revealing work not only in the sense that it patiently raises the question, "What if official Catholicism had resisted?" but in the sense that it is a fine example of how passionate history can be written with great restraint and care.

In *Hitler's Scientists*, Cornwell meticulously documents the behavior of Nazi research scientists, their non-party fellow travelers who agreed but did not join, those who just went along, and the few who resisted---and the impact of their work on the Nazi war effort. He tracks the predictable eugenicist crowd, the Wernher Von Braun rocketeers, the poison gas experts, the A-bomb scientists, and many, many more--like the codemakers, and breakers, the radar scientists, etc.

He also, in a balanced sidelight, mentions that the US and Soviets alike were more than willing to include these apparent war criminals in their own post war science projects, and he briefly documents some of the US, Soviet, and Japanese crimes that were similar (human experiments, etc). Most of the scientists claimed innocence ("we didn't know") or defiance (my hard work was actually a form of sabotage) after the war, though many held firm to their fascist beliefs.

There is no good humor here. The main message of the Holocaust remains: Loss.

However, Cornwell notes that a very few scientists who remained in Germany, and some elsewhere, did resist the drive for war and extermination of "life unworthy of life." But the overwhelming majority were either Nazis, or sympathetic to the cause via their own nationalism, anti-semitism, etc.

More, Hitler's scientists' unconsidered determination to split science and society, to believe that one could do science outside its social context, made their actions acceptable, to themselves and colleagues. Doing research for Nazis did not make one a Nazi, to them. Their subservience to fascism, their dogmatism which twisted Darwin's demonstration of evolution to sterilizing and later murdering those determined unfit, threats to the gene bank, all laid the backdrop for Hitler's invasions, death camps, slave labor; a nightmare decade.

What moved some to just go along, eagerly or not, was opportunism, greed, and fear; the same system of carrots and sticks detailed by today's writers, above. Opportunism was especially significant. When Jewish intellectuals were removed from social institutions, many were eager to get their jobs. Von Braun, later father of the US rocket programs, made himself infamous by saying, "I didn't care if I worked for Uncle Joe or Uncle Sam, as long as he was a rich uncle."

Cornwell writes that some scientists believed that since they were working within a democracy, or any social system worth support, it followed that their own activities would be mainly in service to democracy, hence the many western human experiments of, say, the fifties and sixties (radiation tests, chemical and biological weapons tests, etc), were ok (449).

But then Cornwell documents that there were those in Germany, the US, and the USSR, who had ethics, who refused, and some who suffered because of that, and some who got away with it. Some died because of it.

In his conclusion, Cornwell outlines the current world situation. He says that unlike in Germany then, there is nowhere for an ethical scientist to retreat today. There is nowhere to run. The socio-economic world is a closed circle, a tightening noose, similar to the feelings many educator have about the daily impact of the No Child Left Behind Act.

He suggests that today scientists need to form small and large discussion communities where resistance can be discussed, honest research conducted, where scientists are human beings first, and scientists second, communities which could serve as the basis of pluralistic kinds of resistance to alert the public about threats to people and nature itself (466). These discussion communities could also offer surcease to those tormented by the demands of daily life, and those resisters who come under attack.

This seems to be a corresponding challenge to educators who work within a nation that promises the world perpetual war. Critical educators, particularly, are routinely faced with the contradiction of official history taught directly, and citizen-education, taught through inquiry, critique, and interrogation, entertaining the issue that things do indeed change; empires end.

Critical pedagogy, radical education for education and enlightenment connected to power, is about life. But much of schooling today is not about enlightenment, not about constructing reason, but about killing people, either as participants or as witless, uncaring witnesses.

It may be that we now can learn best through the disasters of others. And, it may be that the answer to the question of how to best fill the gap of time between what is, today, and what should be, in the future, between the NCSS-CUFA charge that the, “US war on Iraq is wrong,” and, “the US should get out now,” is answered most clearly by Cornwell, the historian, who can look back to the past, interrogate the present, and see things change—and how we may keep our ideals and still teach.

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