

The Global Role of US Philosophy

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As a philosopher with a special interest in social and political philosophy and with a variety of personal and professional ties to other countries around the world besides my own, I have closely followed and reflected on the phenomenon that almost everyone now calls, without always being very certain as to just what it *means*, 'globalization'. I have considered some of the more threatening aspects of an evolving, increasingly hegemonic, consumerist 'culture', if that is the appropriate word, that is transmitted, to a great extent, by transnational corporations (one of which, Coca-Cola, has the fortune or misfortune of having given its name to this development) and that is based above all, though not exclusively, in my own country. I have tried to offer some reasons *why* it should be regarded as threatening, since not everyone considers it to be so. And I have paid special attention, for obvious reasons, to the 'globalization' of philosophy itself – to some of the better and some of the worse ways in which such a process may occur and is, indeed, occurring.¹

In the present essay, intended as it is to contribute to a kaleidoscopic picture, in this issue of *Diogenes*, of what some American intellectuals are thinking these days, I have chosen a single theme around which I wish to focus a few thoughts about the global role of US philosophy. My theme is this: the danger of, in a word, *complicity*. I shall begin by explaining what I mean by complicity in light of a situation somewhat analogous to ours today that dates from a half-century ago. I shall then offer a couple of illustrative examples of complicitous US *political* philosophy from the past decade, followed by some more general reflections on ways in which US philosophy in *other* areas can also be complicitous. Finally, I shall have a few remarks to make on what might be meant by US, or 'American', philosophy.

One philosopher whose work has always attracted me greatly is Jean-Paul Sartre. Recently, especially in light of renewed interest in Frantz Fanon's philosophical thought, there has been a refocusing of attention on the Preface that Sartre wrote to Fanon's book, *Les Damnés de la terre*. As is well known, Fanon, a truly global philosopher during his lamentably short life, was a native of Martinique who studied

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104043660

philosophy and psychoanalysis in Lyon and then went to live in Algeria, where the violent, bloody struggle to overthrow French rule was under way. Fanon supported the overthrow of European colonialism everywhere, but Algeria, his adopted home, was of course his particular concern. There, colonialist practice was especially egregious, since a legal fiction endorsed by successive French governments pretended that Algeria was a part of Metropolitan France itself, and not just another colony. Eventually, of course, Algeria won its independence from France, but by that time Fanon had died – ironically, in the US, while undergoing cancer treatment.

Without wishing to spend too much time on this situation from what is now long ago, I would nevertheless like to underline a few of the salient facts by way of preparing to draw my analogy to the present situation. Algeria had been one of the first major targets of France's '*mission civilisatrice*' of the 19th century; of course, the other European powers, especially Great Britain, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Germany, also engaged in similar activities. By the time of the Algerian uprising of Fanon's and Sartre's time – mine as well, because I first lived in France for a year while the war in Algeria was at its height and there observed firsthand the fear that so many ordinary citizens felt about publicly expressing their opposition, which was in fact quite widespread, to the government's policies – a century and a quarter of French rule, through several different constitutions and many changes of government in the Métropole, had undeviatingly pursued a policy of, successively, conquering and slaughtering native Algerians and Berbers, encouraging settlements by French citizens, turning against their neighbors the large Jewish population that had lived in peace in Algeria for centuries, by awarding the Jews French citizenship, and in short brutalizing, humiliating, and dispossessing the natives with the excuse that they were fundamentally inferior, though in some cases educable. This is what colonialism amounted to. What, if anything, did it have to do with philosophy?

Well, I am sure that there were French philosophers who had qualms about this situation from the standpoint of norms of justice. But on the whole, Sartre and some others of his generation excepted, few spoke out publicly in serious protest against it. Albert Camus, who had grown up in Algeria but had left his home and his mother there to pursue his career in France itself, once notoriously commented on the Algerian independence movement by saying that, if he had to choose between his mother and justice, he would choose his mother. For other French philosophers, especially in the early stages of their professional careers – careers that were only feasible, with few exceptions, within the framework of academic service as university or lycée teachers – the existence of colonized Algeria meant an additional source of job opportunities. And of course in more recent years, by one of those ironies of which history is so full, the old Algerian Jewish community, eventually displaced by the successful revolution, has furnished some of the best-known French philosophers, such as Derrida and Cixous.

Nevertheless, as we can now see very clearly – can we not? – the entire colonial situation was deeply unjust and irrational – one might even say 'evil'. I shall return to this concept later. But that is not at all the way, to repeat, in which it was generally regarded by the '*bien pensant*' segment of the French people, those who dominated French public space – at least not until near the time of its demise. So when Fanon made the case against it in *Les Damnés de la terre, A Dying Colonialism*,

and other writings, his defense of its violent overthrow was shocking to many such people. And Sartre, lending his famous name to the revolutionary cause and urging Europeans to read what Fanon had to say, realized the extreme difficulty even for someone like himself, with his quintessentially bourgeois and French background, to avoid being complicitous, however sympathetic he felt to the Algerians' claims. Here are a few excerpts from his Preface:

We must first confront this unexpected spectacle: the strip-tease of our humanism. There it is, completely naked, not pretty: it was nothing but a lying ideology, the exquisite justification of robbery; its softness and preciousness were bail deposits for our aggressions. They look good, the advocates of non-violence: neither victims nor executioners! Come on! If you are not victims, when the government that you have voted in and the army in which your younger brothers have served have engaged, unhesitatingly and without remorse, in a 'genocide', you are unquestionably executioners . . .

You know very well that we are exploiters. You know very well that we have taken gold and metals and later oil from the 'new continents' and brought them back to the old metropolises. Not without excellent results: palaces, cathedrals, industrial centers . . . Europe, bloated with wealth, conferred humanity *de jure* on all its inhabitants: to be a man, here at home, means to be an accomplice, because we have *all* profited from colonial exploitation . . .

Proclaimed by some, rejected by others, violence makes its rounds: one day it explodes in Metz, the day after in Bordeaux; it has passed by here, it will pass by there, it's like the movements of a ferret. We in turn, step by step, follow the road that leads to our becoming natives. But to become natives completely, it would be necessary for our soil to be occupied by the former colonial peoples and for us to die of hunger. That will not happen: no, we are possessed by the defeated colonialism, it will soon mount upon us, idiotic and arrogant; there it is, our *zar*, our *loa*.²

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We can turn away from this brief sketch of a now-distant past – a past that seems even more filled with irony in light of the intervening decades of a corrupt native Algerian government, a possibility which Fanon clearly foresaw, and of attacks on it by outlawed Islamic fundamentalist groups often employing terrorist tactics, which might have surprised him a little – to the current year 2004 of the so-called 'Common Era'. The situation, I contend, is quite analogous: not identical, to be sure, for analogies are not identities, but analogous nonetheless. For some years now the government of the United States, together with its subordinate European and Japanese allies and in collaboration with the most powerful transnational corporations, has dominated much of the rest of the world politically and militarily, and it has increasingly used its surrogates, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to dictate economic policies and structures worldwide. Now, since the events of September 2001, it has entered a new phase of vastly expanded military spending and nuclear threatening; of asserting more straightforwardly than ever before its right to decide who will and who will not be considered a fit subject for the rule of law, for the recognition of human rights, and, in Sartre's terms, for the honor of being considered a part of humanity itself; and, finally, to decide which regimes are and

which are not to be considered potential objects of attack under the terms of a global and open-ended declaration of war – in short, not to put too fine a point on it, who shall live and who shall die on a global scale. And once again, just as in the glory days of French colonialism, we hear the word ‘civilized’ being self-applied by the master government and ‘evil’ being applied by it to other governments and, by extension, to entire peoples.

That, I submit, is the basic situation, even though one could spend hours and days explaining how we came to it, how various aspects of it can be excused and even justified, how some official policy pronouncements are in practice not as terrible as they sound, etc. The United States government lords it over the rest of the world with an arbitrary power which, if not every intellectual may be willing to call it unjust or irrational, is surely at least *on the verge* of deep injustice and irrationality.

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So, then, what about the situation of US philosophy? In some respects, it has never been better; as Marcus Singer (Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin), with his strong historical sense, once pointed out to me, there are no doubt more people teaching and studying philosophy now than at any time in past history, and the largest group of us who do this is to be found in the United States. US philosophy in large measure sets the standards, this tendency being reinforced by the global hegemony of English as the intellectual, political, business, etc., language of preference. This might suggest that the UK and certain Commonwealth countries have a share in this hegemony, and to a certain extent that is still true; but the era when a large segment of professional American philosophers looked to Oxbridge, snobbishly and introvertedly pursuing the minute analysis of its own ordinary/extraordinary language as the presumed height of philosophical endeavor, ended at roughly the same time as the French left Algeria. A philosopher who writes in a language other than English (or, to a lesser but ever-decreasing extent, French or German) has very little chance of achieving global recognition unless by some miracle he or she has the opportunity of being translated, whereas the most prominent US philosophers become *eo ipso* prominent world philosophers.

Now, it is almost certainly true that US philosophers are on the average more critical or at least more skeptical concerning US government policies than are typical US citizens of the same socio-economic class who are *not* philosophers. (There are, to be sure, plenty of counter-examples, such as, at least with respect to economic ideology, the late Robert Nozick.) But this is of course a minimal claim and a minimal expectation, given the fact that philosophers are supposedly trained to be critical. In my own area of social and political philosophy, it seems to me, the overall effect of what passes for cutting-edge thought tends on the whole to be complicitous. Let me briefly consider two specific examples before going on to paint a wider though less detailed canvas.

My first example is, almost inevitably, John Rawls. I am quite familiar with the basic objections that can be made to the generalization that I am about to make, having examined, for example, the influence exercised over Rawls’s thinking, at least at one point in *A Theory of Justice*, by the British Labourite economist J. E. Meade

(from the time when Labourites were not, as most are today, simple apologists for American-style capitalism).³ Nevertheless, it is true as a generalization that Rawls's book reinforces an overall impression that the American system, political and economic alike, is not completely just but, in Rawls's expression 'nearly just' and, in short, that 'we' (I put this pronoun in scare quotes, as I so often need to do these days) are a good people. (I would like to refer to the highly provocative and important work by Ted Honderich, *After the Terror*, 2001, in support of this view of Rawls's work.⁴) Worse, in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls deliberately says nothing about the role of the single society that he is imagining within the context of a world order; and when he turns his attention to the latter, in *The Law of Peoples*, the results, as I have argued elsewhere, are catastrophically complicitous. In the latter work, in fact, Rawls lays the groundwork – drawing on the 'just war' ideas of his even more complicitous (in my view) former Harvard colleague, Michael Walzer – for a justification for the waging of allegedly liberal democratic wars against 'rogue states' (Rawls even employs this US Department of State terminology) that has now been made official government policy.

Equally egregious, from a very different part of the spectrum of US philosophy, is some of Richard Rorty's work. Although for some years he insisted that he wanted nothing to do with political philosophy, which he believed he had deconstructed into oblivion, Rorty has in fact repeatedly made pronouncements of a political philosophical nature, effectively congratulating himself and us, his American and other western readers, for participating in what is obviously a superior system of social organization, our own, even though postmodern, neopragmatist constraints and sensibilities may have prevented him from rationally demonstrating that this was the case. Then, in his little collection of Harvard lectures, *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty re-entered the fray as an advocate of a strongly Americentric, albeit moderate Left, political stance; the 'our', as I patiently explained to readers of a Canadian journal in which I alluded to this book in a review essay, refers to the country immediately to their south.⁵

There is an unstudied, taken-for-granted arrogance and assumption of superiority implicit in these works that may be a bit difficult to convey to someone who fails to see it immediately; this observation, while it applies first and foremost to some American readers, no doubt applies as well to many non-Americans who find Rorty and/or Rawls, especially the early Rawls of *A Theory of Justice*, intellectually stimulating (as that work certainly is!) or even inspiring. In countries of Eastern Europe in the immediate post-Communist years, for example, Rawls's work constituted a very welcome contrast to the dreary Marxist-Leninist ideology that had passed for political philosophy until that time. But by now it should be possible for that work to be seen as itself having a strongly ideological component – a *component, nota bene*, meaning that there is much more to it than *simply* that! – that vindicated the emerging, US-dominated New World Order.

I could offer additional examples of recent books by US political philosophers that similarly manifest complicity, of others that exhibit their authors' awareness of this danger but that still, in my view, fail entirely to escape it (some of Martha Nussbaum's work on Third World problems, valuable as it is in many ways, seems to me to fit into this category), and of a few that really do escape it. For example, it

would be interesting, if I had the space, to consider theorists of democracy who continue to treat US governmental structures as eminently democratic, when in so many ways they clearly are not, or legal philosophers who continue to praise the US Constitution as an ironclad guarantor of human rights for all, when recently initiated government policies have shown sizable portions of those guarantees to have been nothing but a house of cards, capable of being swept aside with the greatest of ease. But what of other areas of philosophy? And, moreover, what is so bad about what I have been calling complicity, anyway? I shall try to answer these two disparate questions *together* by singling out one familiar problem on the border between the philosophy of religion, ethics, and ontology, namely, the problem of evil.

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In general, let it be granted, some evils that befall human beings come from natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, and some are the results of decisions taken by human beings. Decisions of the latter sort run the gamut from those in which no evil at all was *intended*, to those where evil *was* intended by the decision-makers, on to those that may appear to some – there are some philosophers who would accept this possibility and many others who would not – to have been inspired or propelled by some preternaturally evil source. (I do not, of course, have the space here to parse what my chosen word, ‘preternatural’, might mean.) Now, if a philosopher is concerned with the problem of evil – most typically these days, of course, it would be a philosopher of religion concerned with the paradox of an all-good and omniscient God’s allowing evils to happen, and sometimes also with whether this situation may put the very existence of such a God into question – he or she has the option of remaining at a high level of logical abstraction and citing only ideal-typical examples, such as a torturer of infants. But the drawback of leaving it at this nowadays is that the language of evil has re-entered the popular vocabulary in a very major way. There would seem to be some pressure, if philosophy is to pretend to relevance for the world at large, for those philosophers who deal with the problem of evil to consider the evil wrought by the September 2001 attackers, and whether and if so in what sense they, who apparently considered themselves to be highly religious persons doing God’s work, should be seen as evil incarnate – as many a commentator and US government official has suggested. To ask such questions is by itself not evidence of complicity, of course: it all depends on the answer that one gives.

But I contend that it *would* be complicitous for a US philosopher concerned with the problem of evil to explore the allegedly evil nature of the September attackers, as well as of the so-called ‘axis of evil’ that has in some vague sense been linked to them by the President of the United States, as well as the notion of an ‘Evil Empire’ that was deployed by a previous President, without at the same time considering the enormous evils that are at least tacitly sanctioned, and often actively promoted, by the US-dominated global socioeconomic system in the name of which all these anathemata have been pronounced. There should be no need to rehearse what the most salient of those evils are: millions starving in a world of comparative material abundance, nuclear weapons arsenals – not to mention huge arsenals of other

weapons – stored with a view to potentially exterminating millions of others (as well as, perhaps, some of the *starving* millions themselves) at a time deemed appropriate by the Hyperpower, and so on. Critics in other countries, if they do not simply poke fun at Mr. Bush for speaking about the axis of evil and other evils, recognize that there may well be such a thing, but that if there is it runs through the IMF and other such agencies with long global reaches. (A front-page essay in the March 2002 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique* made this very point.) In fact, I think it would be worthwhile for religious philosophers and ethicists concerned with evil to re-examine the question whether any system that is based on the principle of unlimited self-aggrandizement – maximizing the bottom line – which as every first-year business administration student knows is the fundamental principle of capitalism, may not in fact be evil to its core. Not to engage in such re-examining at all, when one professes to be a philosopher concerned with the problem of evil, is in fact to be complicitous.

Such considerations, then, seem to me to be mandated for US philosophers in their global roles. They are mandated even when non-US counterparts fail to raise them. Of course, US philosophers cannot ever *fully* understand the situations of their Third World counterparts, just as Sartre could not put himself in the place of a colonial subject. This does not mean that US philosophers should refrain from doing what they have been doing up to now, but it does suggest replacing attitudes of complicity, tacit and unreflected as they often are, with attitudes of humility or, better, of confrontation with those in power who mouth slogans about America's global goodness and expect all *their* subjects, philosophers included, simply to fall in line with them.

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Finally, what are we to understand by 'US philosophy' anyway? Clearly, it is not just the Pragmatist movement that is intended by this expression. Nor, as I have already indicated, can it mean merely the inheritance from mid-20th-century Britain, now broadened and amplified to a point at which the inheritance itself is only barely acknowledged if at all, known as 'analytic philosophy'. The term 'US philosophy' is probably best understood here in its widest meaning, namely, whatever is done – taught, studied – by members of the American Philosophical Association in their professional capacities; and this now includes, as a glance at a typical APA meeting program will show, many philosophical methods and approaches that have originated in other parts of the globe. But *if* we wish to restrict our meaning of 'US philosophy' or 'American philosophy'⁶ to movements of a provenance native to that particular country, the United States of America, then we would do well to take a lesson from a recently-published anthology co-edited by my colleague, Leonard Harris, and my former student, Anne Waters.⁷ They show, through the selections that they have assembled there, that American philosophy in its fullest, non-sectarian meaning includes not just the work of, say, William James – whose opposition to US aggression against Spain and the Philippines is a shining example of a philosopher's refusing to be complicitous when to have been so would have been extremely easy – or of the ultimate *ne'er-do-well*, Charles Peirce, or of the broadly tolerant advocate of real democracy, John Dewey, but also African-American

thought, Native American thought . . . and other extremely *non*-complicitous strains in US philosophy's checkered, but by no means entirely watchdog-dominated,⁸ history.

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Notes

1. See, in particular, chapters 12 ('Coca-Cola Culture and Other Cultures: Against Hegemony'), 13 ('Consumerist Cultural Hegemony within a Cosmopolitan Order – Why Not?'), and 16 ('The Globalization of Philosophy') of my book, *From Yugoslav Praxis to Global Pathos: Anti-Hegemonic Post-post-Marxist Essays*, 2001.
2. J.-P. Sartre, *Situations, V*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, pp. 186, 187, 191 (my translation).
3. The occasion for this was the opportunity I had to respond to a paper by Wonsup Jung, the winner of a prize offered by the American Philosophical Association to the best treatment by a foreign scholar of a theme in American philosophy at the 1998 World Congress of Philosophy in Boston. (Professor Rawls was already too ill at the time to accept our invitation to give his own response.) See William L. McBride, 'Reply to Wonsup Jung', 1998, pp. 233–40.
4. Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
5. Review of C. Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, in *Canadian Philosophical Reviews*, XVIII (6) December, 1998: 443.
6. One special terminological difficulty involved in employing the common expression, 'American philosophy', is that one can never be certain whether it is intended to exclude or to include Canadian philosophers, whose own contributions have been considerable despite their comparatively small numbers. Then, too, one may legitimately ask why *Latin* American philosophy should be considered any less American than North American philosophy is. Conversely, American philosophers themselves routinely refer to 'Continental philosophy' without specifying that the continent in question is Europe, rather than one of the other continents.
7. Leonard Harris, Scott L. Pratt and Anne Waters (eds), *American Philosophies: An Anthology*, 2001.
8. My reference is, of course, to Paul Nizan's study of philosophers as 'watchdogs of the established order', *Les Chiens de garde*, 1960.

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