

# Understanding A Globalized World

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“There is talk of a new American empire, of a world that presents the global superpower with a unique opportunity to exploit a victory in Afghanistan - to help the world unify against a new array of threats, to force decisions in every capital to draw a line against terrorism, and to rethink the principles around which nations cooperate. *But there is a struggle underway over what kind of empire America will become.*”

- Patrick E. Tyler, “In Washington, a Struggle to Define the Next Fight,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2002 (italics added).

**“America has proved to itself and to others that it is in truth (and not just in name) the only global superpower, indeed a power that enjoys a level of superiority over its actual or potential rivals unmatched by any other nation in modern times ... as long as America works to maintain its technology lead, *there is no reason why any challenge to American dominance should succeed.*”**

- Margaret Thatcher, “Advice to A Superpower,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2002 (italics added).

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 have raised profound intellectual and political challenges for all of us. They shattered many of the major paradigms that had been used to interpret world events. 9/11 created both the opportunity, and the necessity, to re-examine the forces that underlie global history and the current global economy, especially the new forces of globalization. We are witnessing a new era of global politics and a new phase of intellectual discourse. 9/11 changed the way we think and the way we teach.

Where do we begin in terms of our own comprehension and teaching about these events? I suggest that we need to begin with a willingness to re-examine world history, and the role of the U.S., and with a process of self-examination. Chalmers Johnson, author of *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, argues for intensive self-examination by the United States before further action. He is concerned that in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Americans have freed “ourselves of . . . any genuine consciousness of how we might look to others on the globe” (7).

There is also a need to re-examine how we look at history. We need to replace traditional cause and effect, teleological, and binary (“good vs. evil”) models, all of which simplify and reduce the complex forces of history to mechanical models, with a more dialectical analysis. An examples of what I mean by dialectical thinking is the proposition that the practices of European colonialism generated their own opposition, and ultimately their own demise, as a result of the perceived aggression and exploitation of the colonized. Jean-Paul Sartre explained this idea in the introduction to Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1968). Sartre wrote: “Our victims know us by their scars and by their chains, and it is this that makes their evidence irrefutable. It is enough that they show us what we have made of them for us to realize what we have made of ourselves” (17).

As part of an attempt to re-structure my own post 9/11 thinking, and in response to a request for clarity from my students, like all good intellectuals and teachers, I retreated to the library. As part of my own struggle to understand these events, I studied some of the dominant interpretations. A brief, schematic summary of these approaches follows. It is more of a reading guide than an exhaustive effort to provide a thorough account of alternative paradigms. It is a tentative beginning. I welcome additions and suggestions, and hope to eventually make a more complete survey available. Hopefully the book reviews that follow this introduction and the lesson materials will make it possible for teachers and students to become more actively involved in exploring this topic.

## *Some Alternative Paradigms Used to Explain the Current Crisis*

1. **Good vs. Evil.** Evildoers have attacked the good, the innocent, and the “free.” They must be hunted down (“smoked out of their caves” as George Bush so revealingly put it) and destroyed to preserve the world for the righteous and the good. This approach clearly reveals the limitations of binary thinking: which allows for only one right answer (e.g. “you are either with us or against us.” In the period after 9/11 virtually all of the

mainstream media invoked this paradigm. The War on Terror became the theme of news reporting, commentary, and news analysis. There was virtually no effort made to look more deeply or engage in self-examination. Binary thinking is the basis of fundamentalism, which is the enemy of critical thinking. Binary thinking is also reversible. Both George Bush and Bin Laden are fundamentalists, each believing in their own innate goodness, and that the other is the Satan that needs to be destroyed.

2. **Geographic Determinism.** Injustice and inequality are the result of the geographic advantages of regions of the globe multiplied by centuries of development. They are not caused by the actions of individuals, corporations, social movements or nations. Draws on Jared Diamond's book *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997).
3. **Economic determinism.** Current global conflict is seen as a struggle between rich and poor countries and poverty is the breeding ground for anti-American terrorism. Arguments are similar to those used in the 1960's by Robert McNamara (as head of the World Bank). In this view, the way to cure revolution was to cure poverty through international development efforts. However, forty years later the gap between rich and poor countries has widened. Of the 6 billion people in world today, more than 3 billion live on less than \$2 per day.
4. **Economic imperialism.** The idea that Western capitalism is inherently expansive and that its foreign policies are driven by the need to expand markets and find new places to invest. The idea goes back to the theories of imperialism outlined by Lenin, Hobson, and Luxemburg at the turn of the 20th century. They find expression in the work of Noam Chomsky, Michael Klare, Tariq Ali and others, who look at the powerful role of multinational corporations and oil in global politics. Their articles can be read at [www.Znet.org](http://www.Znet.org).
5. **Arms trade driven wars.** Imperialism is vastly more complex in its operations than as it was conceived by early writers. The "Military-industrial complex" has been replaced since 1945 by a "Military-industrial-university-state department-foundation-CIA complex" which drives U.S. policies.
6. **Clash of Civilizations.** Other cultures, particularly religious fundamentalists in the Middle East, resent and want to destroy American values, especially the idea of freedom. This model has been championed by Samuel Huntington.
7. **Islamic implosion.** An alternative view situates the 9/11 attack as part of a larger struggle within the Muslim world between moderates and radical elements: those who accept Western models of development and partial secularization, and radicals who seek to topple what they see as corrupt (anti-Muslim) regimes (e.g. Saudi Arabia), and replace these with Islamic states.
8. **American Empire and its Consequences.** This paradigm sees the current crisis as the consequence of the nature, and operation, of what is understood as an American Empire. The antecedents for this approach are the revisionist American historians of the 1960s, such as William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber who both argued for the concept of an American Empire. There are several variations in more recent literature. Related theories include the work of Paul Kennedy and Giovanni Arrighi. Chalmers Johnson sees the crisis of the 1990's as the consequence of a "blowback" against the over-extension of American imperialism. A difficult, but powerful and innovative book, which re-thinks the notion of Empire is Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000).
9. **Anti-modernization.** Sometimes referred to as "the refusal of development," this approach sees the current crisis as a struggle against globalization, materialism and capitalism, and its threat to local cultures and religions (including Islam). Such a struggle was epitomized by the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, which involved a rejection of what one Iranian called at the time "Westoxication." This approach, which has some parallels with the Clash of Civilizations paradigm, is developed in William Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995/2000).

**Capitalist Patriarchy.** Capitalist patriarchy, a particular form of patriarchy, is a set of institutional arrangements that operate with capitalism to ensure male domination. This approach provides a new dimension on the crisis. 9/11 is seen as an attack on the centers of patriarchal rule (Wall Street, the Pentagon, and the Congress). In the view of some feminist theorist, 9/11 has strengthened certain aspects of patriarchy through the (re-)emergence of the male hero/warrior (firefighter, soldier etc.) and surviving widow provider. In this view, when the Taliban rule was ended, capitalist patriarchy overthrew feudal patriarchy. Neither forms of patriarchy, however, ensures the full emancipation of women

