

American Grand Strategy from Obama to Trump

Zeno Leoni

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Imperialism After Bush and China's Hegemonic
Challenge

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*To my parents, Filippo 'Pippo' Leoni and Raffaella Borgognoni for their
unquestioning support.*

*To my sister, Adele Leoni, because I would have liked to tell her more about
the joy and hardship of writing a book, which are no different from those of
everyday life.*

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This book is the product of different factors and events. Firstly, from an academic viewpoint, this book stems from my engagement with three scholars. The choice of dealing with space, empire, imperialism, and American grand strategy matured when I was attending Alex Colás master module on ‘Space and Power in International Politics.’ It was very refreshing to discover that one could look at International Relations through a more inter-disciplinary and lively angle. I really hope I can teach a similar module in the future. The early structure of this book and the title owe much to my relationship with Gonzalo Pozo-Martin, my first Ph.D. supervisor at King’s College London. Gonzalo has been a very good friend and shoulder during these challenging years, even if geographically distant. He is an extremely talented intellectual and I wish him to continue to be successful with future academic endeavors. The theoretical argument in this book was informed by my academic and personal engagement with Alex Callinicos, my last Ph.D. supervisor. While reading his work I realized that behind Lenin’s theories there was a powerful (geo-)political message that was very much overlooked. I really appreciate this, particularly given that we live in a society where economics and economists dominate media and TV debates, but also debate within Marxist circles. I appreciated his method of observation which in his political analysis never leaves anything to chance, from structural trends to subtle moods of governmental actors.

Secondly, from a financial point of view, this book would simply not exist without the support received from my parents. Although my Ph.D. was mostly self-funded, they did not doubt for a second when I decided to move to London to study a master. Furthermore, I have always had the guarantee that they would have come to rescue me, if necessary. Above all, they never questioned that I was studying a subject—international politics—that is considered quite unproductive in comparison with other disciplines. Money apart, they transmitted me the great value of happiness through small things, the best inheritance one might ask to his or her family in this time of crisis. Still on the private life side, my girlfriend Lourdes Fernandez Menayo—a flamenco dancer—has always supported the idea of beginning a Ph.D. since the very early days. In particular, she has always reacted in a cooperative manner to my need of reading and writing on weekends or evenings. Given the relatively short career span of dancers, I hope in the near future to be able to help her with starting her own Ph.D.

Thirdly, this book would not exist if over these years I had not developed a quasi-military self-discipline. While the initial stage of my Ph.D. was a challenging brainstorming, life in London was definitely harder despite this global city with its rampant capitalism remains a privileged point of observation for understanding society. The cost of living and studying in the city brought me to explore all sorts of jobs. I started as a ‘sandwich chef’ in an industrial kitchen in Park Royal’s industrial estate—West London—making meals which were delivered to weekends tube workers, for £7 an hour without a contract. While my foreman was an Italian citizen later arrested for some drug issues in Colombia, the owner of the business was a middle-aged Englishman who apparently had won the contract to provide food for tube workers by bribing a North London councilor—eventually the owner also won the management of the work site canteen where the new council building was built. The instability of that job threw me into the bitter reality of London’s unskilled labor market as I ended up working for big chain for £6.19 an hour. There, I not only learned how little money one could earn, but I also saw mass production first hand as in each sandwich the amount of ham, cheese, tuna, salad, peppers and rocket was measured to the gram according to the company’s guidelines. More sadly, this made me discover something I previously had little familiarity with—given my rural origins—such as the existence of poor workers or ‘new slaves.’ As I went to work at 5.30 in the morning in order to open the bar, it was impossible to forget the

Latin American cleaners of offices who I met on the bus and who worked at difficult hours for a miserable pay.

After a period of transition thanks to my father's support and the not too generous Jobseeker Allowance, I started the Ph.D. and a four years long work with a young BBC and Sky News journalist affected by cerebral palsy and Asperger syndrome. This was an incredibly challenging time with a very difficult individual who saw his life complicated by the unhappy circumstances of his family: His father was a bipolar individual and former businessman who had lost his company in the United States; his mother died of cancer just after her new partner kicked her son out of the United States—before the funeral. During this time I was made aware of how class-driven is British society—particularly inside Sky News. In addition to achieving a more comfortable London living wage—£8.15 an hour when I started, 9.15 when I left, plus roughly one pound every hour for holiday pay—it is during this experience that I developed a substantial part of my thesis. Radio 4 and Sky News offices, along with the train going from central London to Ealing Broadway, Osterley and Feltham were my working spaces. Certainly, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one-fifth of this book was done on a train. This was not ideal but it was effective in the attempt to get the reading and writing done while paying expenses. As the breakfast TV program Sunrise started at 6am, my shifts began at 4am. Certainly the image of me trying to go through Poulantzas' books at that time of the morning after only a few hours of sleep is emblematic of the hardship of students-workers in London and Ph.D. students in general. During this period I moved house ten times in seven years, and the last two were a consequence of Brixton's gentrification. But the housing issue opens a more important section for this dissertation. As I relocated from the countryside to a big city, and from a Southern European to a Anglo-Saxon country, the culture-shock was difficult. What's more important though is that it brought me to think about 'affection for territory.' Italy remains a country without a solid nationalist tradition. However, its tradition of small states and local diversity is alive and present in people's perception of the value of natural environment, agricultural products, and historical customs. Personally, I find irreplaceable that ensemble of social relations, local kinships, characteristic landscapes, and natural places for exploration. Surely, all these national qualities are seldom undermined by people's bigotry, but—to echo Marx on 'Hindustan'—such a conservatism is for me a reassuring symbol of a society that remains protected from the contradictions of

turbo-capitalism. Nonetheless, I cannot forget about my military students at the Defence Academy of the UK. I have learned a lot from interacting with them, whether in class or at the pub. In many ways I am really far from that world, yet it reminded me how important discipline and strategy are in our everyday life. There is a lot that our society could learn from them.

Fourthly, it is hard to admit that without the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the spare time that it has opened thanks to smart working I would have never been able to submit this manuscript in time. As a Teaching Fellow my workload over the last two years has been extremely heavy if summed to the research activity for this book. Yet, working at the Defence Studies Department of King's College London has been a great experience, I have learned a lot compared to when I was a Teacher Assistant in Central London and I made professional contacts in and outside academia beyond any expectation. Ultimately, I have learned about all the limits of academia. This sector, as others, is in a state of crisis that started before COVID-19. I hope some of my colleagues and I will manage to succeed in this ever more challenging job. This leads me to the association that I founded with Dr. Michele Groppi, friend and colleague at King's College. The International Team from the Study of Security—Verona (ITSS-Verona) is only one year old and yet we have already launched several policy forums—one international—podcasts series with world-leading scholars, and online lectures. When doing my Ph.D. I just could not see myself as an entrepreneur. Yet, current Ph.D. students should bear in mind that surviving in academia does also require a large degree of that skill.

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