

Erik Paul

Neoliberal Australia and US Imperialism in Asia

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Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

Erik Paul writes about the structural violence engendered by modern states in a somewhat similar manner to Noam Chomsky excoriating the US Administration for its concentration and abuse of political economic and military power. The approach is detailed, wide-ranging and relentless in its sustained critique. In Paul's case, the focus is particularly on Australia – the 'deputy sheriff' for the US in the Pacific region – but it broadens out into a more general analysis of 'the American Imperial Project', the 'construction of east Asia' and the awesome prospects for superpower rivalry and war in the region.

An earlier version of one of the chapters – on the violence that is embedded in many aspects of Australian society, including victimisation, poor mental and physical health, crime and incarceration, racism and the politics of fear, appeared as an article in this journal (*JAPE*, No. 63, 2009). This is the most 'micro' level of analysis. The more 'macro' level in the book looks at relationships between states and at how capitalist interests shape state activities and international relations. The author seeks to demonstrate the diverse ways in which 'violence is built into the structure of the world system' (p. 77).

A system of 'unequal economic and political power relations dominated by powerful and rich countries' breeds recurrent tensions. While there is some dispersion of power between major blocs – the US, Europe and East Asia – few would question the overriding significance of US military power. This power underpins the interventionist role of the US as self-appointed global policeman, providing the muscle that is necessary to back US claims to be the enforcer of the 'free world. The 'freedom', however, is that of corporate capitalist interests, including the direct interests in the military-industrial complex itself. Many previous writings about the political economy of the global order and US imperialism have emphasised these features, of course, but the strengths of this new book are in drawing material together from such diverse sources, including newspapers, reports and websites as well as academic

works, and in bringing the story right up to date (although the omission of reference to the Gillard government's agreement to have US troops in the Northern Territory is somewhat surprising in this context). The emphasis on the multiple 'micro' and 'macro' manifestations of imperial relations, particularly in the East Asia-Pacific region, is also distinctive.

As Paul argues, 'the American imperial project has not bought peace but has inflamed the forces of nationalism and religion and has intensified geopolitical rivalries' (p. 13). Moreover, 'what happens in Australia is likely to be largely defined by the dynamics of the US-China hegemonic conflict' (p. 14). These are awesome prospects and necessarily raise key questions about why Australian political leaders in both major parties have been so irrevocably wedded to the US alliance. They also necessarily raise the question of what is to be done.

A brief concluding chapter entitled 'Reclaiming the State' looks at the possibilities of organising for peace, promoting equality democracy and reconciliation, and building more peaceful international relations in the region. Indeed, this is only a little 'optimism of the will' to set against the almost overwhelming 'pessimism of the intellect'. Some of the memorable phrases used as sub-headings throughout the book indicate its more general tenor: 'deterring democracy', 'the predatory state', 'zones of belligerency', 'frontiers of antagonism', 'imperial overstretch' and 'hegemonic crisis'.

Like Chomsky's work, Erik Paul's book is both impressive in its strength of evidence and uncomfortable to read because of its seemingly overwhelming implications. Indeed, one could be forgiven for seeking personal refuge by seeing what's on TV or going to the pub: but only to then find yourself confronted with discussion of the very same issues, albeit probably from a rather less relentlessly analytical and critical perspective. It is hard to escape the conclusion that some engagement with the issues considered in this book is a necessary part of being an informed citizen in a nation and region permeated by complex relationships of power and domination.