Week 7
Imperial Philosophies, Discourses, and Apologia

- The Naturalization of Imperialism: Strauss’ Misappropriation of Thucydides
- On “Human Nature”
- Imperialist Ironies
- Imperial Narcissism
- Disappeared: The Vanishing of the Colonized Other
- Historical Revisionism and Torture-Denial

The Naturalization of Imperialism: Strauss’ Misappropriation of Thucydides

→ CONCLUSION: writers in the Straussian tradition contend that empire is a natural outgrowth of the “logic” of international life as conditioned by our “natures.”….the inevitability of empire….an essential human nature….we should not judge war and empire too harshly, for this amounts to turning our backs on our basic natures, a denial of the all-too-human truths that condition the character of international life (p. 159)

→ An expedient, selective, and deeply flawed appropriation of Thucydides’ work: a spin on the world based on a superficial survey and a selectivity that indulges the pleasures of power (p. 160)

→ Why does it matter?
Political and academic influence of the writings of Leo Strauss

But does it matter?

Straussian thought: the ideological subtext of empire, the formation of a disarming consensus (p. 138)

Marx, *The German Ideology* (p. 139)

Straussian writings: Empire is an outgrowth of humanity (p. 139)

rigorous reshaping of the ancients as would-be apologists for the course of modern history (p. 139)

Straussians naturalize war and empire, in order for us to accept it without question as true, universal, and eternal
On “Human Nature”

- Faulty and unproven premise: that human nature is everywhere the same, and it is unchanging, and it is singular
- Misreading Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War*
- Athenians viewed war as a sickness
- Permanent peace is instead not only possible, but natural
- *Hubris* (*hybris*)—tragedy presents us with a subject (individual or nation) succumbing to hybris, that is, to an overreaching or exaggerated optimism rooted in the inability to recognize one’s place in the natural order of things (p. 150)
- *Hubris* is confronted by *Nemesis*
- Strauss produces a reduced vision of a human—mere appetite and passion
- Strauss, claiming to avoid ideology
- Thucydides’ understanding of what it means to be human: *logos* and *ergon*
The signatures of this decay in Athenian political life included a decline in the restraining force of convention (*nomos*), excessive pride and self-satisfaction (*hybris*), self-seeking and overreaching ambition (*pleonexia*), hope unmediated with thoughtfulness (*elpis*), a general lack of foresight (*apate*), and infatuation (*ate*) (p. 155)

“And it is not possible for us to calculate, like housekeepers, exactly how much empire we want to have. The fact is that we have reached a stage where we are forced to plan new conquests and forced to hold on to what we have got, because there is a danger that we ourselves may fall under the power of others unless others are in our power” (p. 157)—Alcibiades

“the measure of the war is never war itself” (158)

Strauss reduces Thucydides’ work to the merely empirical

Imperialist Ironies

“The nemesis of empire was not just nationalism, but narcissism: the incorrigible self-satisfaction of imperial elites, their belief that all the variety of the world’s people aspired to nothing else but to be a version of themselves. (Michael Ignatieff, Empire Lite)

“I Am Iraq”. (Michael Ignatieff, New York Times Magazine)
Ignatieff misappropriated Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (p. 88)

Ignatieff: imperialism is not a pretty thing to look at in practice; what redeems it is “the idea”

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems it is the idea only.” (p. 88)

“The idea”? – that it is “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” = *fetishism*

“But why engage in such projections? In order to resist the truth” (p. 88)—fetishism involves denial…imaginary subjects and relations substitute for real ones

What is denied is projected onto evil “Others” (*demonization*)
“In the case of Western colonialists, practices of pillage and terror are denied, only to be replaced in the imagination by uplifting “ideas” – civilization, morality, progress – meant to redeem the imperial cause. Simultaneously, the violence and terror whose reality is denied are attributed to the “uncivilized” and “barbaric” colonized peoples themselves” (p. 88)

**Imperial Narcissism**

⇒ **Narcissism** and “refusing self-recognition” (89)

⇒ (a) he uttered falsehoods in support of war;
(b) he attacked others for making public declarations virtually identical to his own;
(c) he then announced that his case for war was an “opportunistic” one;
(d) he undertook to cut off the entire debate (p. 90)
Making light of revelations of US atrocities in Iraq

“the willingness of American democracy to commit atrocity in its defense is limited by moral repugnance, rooted in two centuries of free institutions” – Ignatieff (p. 91) = moral superiority

Ignatieff: claiming it’s all about ethics, not politics (p. 91)

Liberal imperialism: Ignatieff’s construction of human rights (pp. 91-92)

Supports empire and war, but proclaims support for human rights

Same perspective on the world as that articulated by American naval planners
Disappeared: The Vanishing of the Colonized Other

→ Other peoples are rendered invisible by Ignatieff, and if or when they do appear, they appear either as barbarians of terrorists

→ Ignatieff “informs us that outside “the developed world” there are “strangers at our gates.” Step beyond our “zone of safety – the developed world – and there they are, hands outstretched, gaunt, speechless or clamouring in the zone of danger.” (p. 94)

→ Not human (dehumanization): Ignatieff announces that all we have in common with them is what “we share with animals.” (p. 94)

→ Ignatieff appoints to himself the right to speak for others
Historical Revisionism and Torture-Denial

→ Historical revisionism on the Vietnam war: “a failed attempt to sustain a democratic republic in South Vietnam”
→ Cancelling out the reality of colonized others is a leitmotif of Ignatieff’s work
→ Ultimate domination: bodies without voices (p. 100)
→ Ignatieff, scholar of ethics and director of Harvard’s “human rights center”, made light of torture at Abu Ghraib

“The U.N. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984), an agreement to which the U.S.A. is a signatory, defines torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purpose as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession” (p. 101)