When a Peruvian indigenous leader wants to stop a Peruvian development project in the democratic country of Peru, where does she go? The odd answer is: to the US Congress. Daysi Zapata Fasabi, Vice President of the Interethnic Development Association for the Peruvian Amazon, went before a congressional commission on April 29, 2010 to "request that the US Congress use its good offices to assist our peoples in our efforts to have the Peruvian Government comply with the respect for the rights of the indigenous people, especially in regards to legal property and our ancestral territories". She also asked that the US Congress pressure the Peruvian government to consult with indigenous peoples, take responsibility for the consequences of free trade agreements for the welfare of indigenous peoples, and help in securing the freedom from prosecution of Peruvian indigenous leader Alberto Pizango Chota [3, p. 42].

The contemporary world may be composed of nominally sovereign states but it is also characterized by some degree of American-led global governance – or one might say "government". Effective sovereignty for all of the countries of the world resides partly in each country, partly in global institutions, and partly in the United States. Limits on effective sovereignty apply to every country, though more so to some than to others. The world as a whole is thus characterized by juridical pluralism: all people everywhere are to some degree governed by laws and governments other than those of their own countries. Limits on effective sovereignty are felt most keenly in the poorest countries of the world, where it is a well-worn aphorism that a country lacks true sovereignty when ordinary citizens know the name of their local IMF country manager.

When it comes to the enforcement of global governance decisions that curb the sovereignty of a nominally independent country, sanctions and other interventions cannot be effective unless they are imposed by the United States, and thus sanctions and interventions that are not supported by the United States are rarely imposed by others. America’s four close English-speaking allies almost always follow America’s lead, and though the European Union is not always in agreement it rarely explicitly resists US actions. This formula holds for sanctions against Iran and Russia, regime change in Iraq and Libya, the lack of international law enforcement against Israel, and a plethora of
international police actions in recent decades. Ever since the Suez crisis of 1956 it has been an axiom of international relations that the major European powers do not intervene in the affairs of the rest of the world without active US support. The United States shows no such reticence. Quite the contrary: the United States routinely enforces international legal claims over the sovereignty of other countries while not agreeing to subject itself to international law.

This one-sided juridical pluralism is much more important in shaping the social, economic, and political realities of the contemporary world-system than is usually understood. Contrary to conventional accounts, American hegemony is not in decline but is expanding to constitute a true world-empire. This has ambiguous implications for America's democracy but all-too-certain implications for other countries' democracies, which are progressively reduced to the status of local democratic self-government within a larger imperial system. The net effect of these two trends is that most of the people of the world live under what might be called a monitory empire: monitory civil society operating in a global imperial environment. The passing of democratic politics is now leading to an era of post-politics as social movement activists react to the reality of what is possible to achieve inside an American world-empire. This chain of reasoning begins from the realization that American power is not (as widely advertised) in decline but is in fact strong and growing.

The concept of American world-empire

Sovereignty is never absolute. It has always been the case that many countries and peoples have been forced to cede some or all sovereignty to outside powers through colonialism, protectorates, the "Monroe Doctrine," simple prudence (i.e., the desire not to be invaded), and other mechanisms. More recently, many nominally independent countries have voluntarily ceded sovereignty to secure European Union membership or candidacy. Still other countries must cede sovereignty because the costs of not complying with US or EU trade or border policies is too high to contemplate. In Norway this kind of compromised effective sovereignty even has a name: "government by fax". As a member of the European Economic Area, Norway is obliged to incorporate European Union economic regulations into its domestic legal frameworks but it has little or no voice in the shaping of those regulations.

At the apex of the global system of compromised effective sovereignty sits the United States. This is another way of saying that the United States exercises hegemony over the contemporary world-system. Wallerstein defines hegemony as "that situation in which the ongoing rivalry between the so-called 'great powers' is so unbalanced that one power ... can largely impose its rules and its wishes (at the very least by effective veto power) in the economic, political, military, diplomatic, and even cultural arenas" [5, p. 38]. Hegemony is often misunderstood as a function of economic leadership. For Wallerstein as for Gramsci economic leadership is not the key criterion of hegemony.
The key criterion is the effective control of world’s political, economic, and cultural systems that comes from having the effective power to define what courses of action are conceived as possible in the world. Ultimately, hegemony is in the mind.

Politically, the US not only holds veto power over the United Nations Security Council but also hosts the United Nations itself, determining through its visa-granting powers who can and cannot address the body. The US and its four close English-speaking allies (the so-called "ECHELON" or "Five Eyes" countries) monitor the world’s communications, while the US-controlled NATO alliance is absolutely dominant in Europe. The global reach of American military power needs no recounting. The US has veto power over and effective control of the G7, IMF, World Bank, WTO, and OECD. Those global economic policy bodies that are not under US control (ILO, UNCTAD, UNDP, and the UN regional economic commissions) are largely marginalized. In trade and investment negotiations with Europe, the United States is the senior partner; with countries outside Europe, the dominance of the United States is overwhelming vis-à-vis nearly every other country. Nearly all multilateral trade and investment treaties involve the United States as a party. American firms dominate the internet. The American political agenda – which today includes individualism, militarism, and neoliberalism but also formal democracy and respect for freedom of speech and religion – is indistinguishable from the global political agenda.

Moreover, though American economic dominance is slowly receding, American political dominance is steadily growing. The United States proper is a sovereign state with fixed borders, but the tendrils of American world-empire spread much farther. America’s major English-speaking allies are fully integrated into US politico-military operations. America’s major NATO and Pacific allies are in effect client states; they do not have foreign policies independent of or contradictory to those of the United States. India has largely fallen into line with the demands of US power. America’s great challengers, China and Russia, struggle to exert influence even over their former territorial possessions. At sea, China is challenged by US forces within its own self-declared maritime borders while Russia must contend with a US fleet in the Black Sea. Iran, exhausted by 35 years of isolation and encirclement, seems ready to sue for terms from the erstwhile Great Satan. The logic of bandwagoning ensures that the United States will long remain an unchallenged and unchallengeable global hegemon, irrespective of its current or future gross domestic product.

Yet the United States is more than a hegemon. Since its emergence in the sixteenth century the modern world-system has been a capitalist world-economy governed by global markets in which individual states have had only limited power to shape political outcomes: for Wallerstein, the essence of capitalism is that all states are ultimately subject to the market. In the twenty-first century this is arguably no longer the case. The market is increasingly subject to American governance, increasingly shaped by American-sponsored and in many cases American-dictated
trade and investment treaties. This is especially clear in such areas of corporate super-profits as banking, pharmaceuticals, energy, and infrastructure services. Profits in all of these industries are driven not by market success but by government favor. And it cannot be a coincidence that nearly all of the world’s top technology companies are American.

In the late 1990s or early 2000s the United States, its wealthiest citizens, its largest corporations, and its Davos allies finally overcame the market to impose an economy based on the centrally-controlled political administration of economic rewards: an American world-empire. If a capitalist world-economy is characterized by elite class interests appealing to political states to support their interests in the market, a post-capitalist world-empire would be characterized by elite class interests using their economic power to support their interests in the global political allocation of privileges (e.g., entertainment companies using intellectual property treaties to extend copyrights; resource companies using dispute resolution treaties to evade national environmental regulation; etc.). Historians now identify the 1500s as the period that witnessed the emergence of the capitalist world-economy. When the historians of the future look for a symbolic foundation date for the American world-empire, they will surely converge on September 11, 2001.

**Monitory democracy**

In his magisterial but unaccountably singular The Life and Death of Democracy, Keane identifies three historical lives of democracy: direct, representative, and (latterly) monitory [1]. There is some clear historical telescoping going on here: the first life is supposed to have begun 2500 years ago (dying out with the Macedonian occupation of Athens in 260 BC), the second life to have begun 100-200 years ago (with a near-death in the Great Depression), and the third life to have begun in 1945. Hundreds of years of the Roman republic are passed over in a sentence ("Until the end of the first century BCE, but only for a time, the Roman republic was something of an exception to this anti-democratic trend." [1, p. 127]), no non-Western democracies are mentioned for the years between ancient Sumeria and modern India, and indigenous nations are largely ignored except as victims. Still, the kernel of Keane’s argument – that today’s democracies operate in ways that are fundamentally different from pre-1945 democracies – is both valid and important.

Keane identifies contemporary monitory democracy as "a ‘post-Westminster’ form of democracy in which power-monitoring and power-controlling devices have begun to extend sideways and downwards through the whole political order" [1, XXVII]. He explicitly recognizes it as "a new historical form of democracy" [1, p. 688] in which the "central grip of elections, political parties and parliaments on citizens’ lives is weakening" [1, p. 689]. He identifies three distinct points at which monitory mechanisms articulate with representative democratic
institutions: "citizens' inputs to government or civil society bodies ... [the] monitoring and contesting [of] what are called policy throughputs ... [and] policy outputs produced by governmental or non-governmental organisations" [1, p. 692]. He goes on to recognize that these "monitoring mechanisms also come in different sizes and operate on various spatial scales, ranging from 'just-around-the-corner' bodies with merely local footprints to global networks aimed at keeping tabs on those who exercise power over great distances" [1, p. 692].

Keane traces the dawn of monitory democracy to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights [1, p. 731-734] and the sighting of the dawn to Winston Churchill. In his famous speech in which he called democracy "the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" Churchill continued "but there is a broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters." (Churchill in Parliament, November 11, 1947, [1, p. 581]) Keane calls this "the continuous public chastening of those who exercise power" [1, p. 817] by (among others) "tens of thousands of non-governmental human rights organisations" who "see themselves as goads to the conscience of governments and citizens" [1, p. 735]. Monitory democracy is enabled by an array of "intermediate institutions spanning the entire chasm between the individual and the state." (attributed to Charles Malik without citation by Keane, [1, p. 734])

If direct democracy ultimately died out, electoral democracy suffered only a near-death experience, after which it was reborn as monitory democracy. Why was there not a simple resuscitation of electoral democracy after its mortal struggle with totalitarianism in World War II? Keane does not say, but the explanation seems obvious: the combination of universal suffrage and big government makes true representative democracy unworkable. In a nineteenth century context of limited suffrage and limited government, it is conceivable that most members of the political class could know their representatives, influence them, and take a direct interest in the decisions of governments. In other words, the electorate could effectively monitor the government. This boys' club version of representative democracy cannot accommodate a mass electorate and cannot comprehend the modern bureaucratic state. By the end of the nineteenth century, professional monitors were needed to mediate the participation of ordinary people in national politics; those representative democracies that lacked sufficient monitors slid into populism and autocracy.

The political crises of the early twentieth century were a kind of mass extinction event after which the only democracies left standing were those that had already developed robust civil society monitory institutions and organizations. These monitory institutions and organizations proliferated dramatically after World War II, most of all in the United States but also in the rest of the world, and laid the foundation for the global expansion of electoral democracy. Throughout
the post-colonial world in particular monitory civil society institutions and organizations have themselves driven forward democratization. In poor and middle-income countries these institutions and organizations are often supported financially and administratively by the US and allied governments, by US-based civil society institutions and organizations, and by non-US civil society institutions and organizations that are nonetheless pro-systemic. Truly anti-systemic social movements (e.g., ecofeminism, Zapatismo, pan-Islamism, and indeed Marxism) have been marginalized, contained, or worse.

The system, as such, is monitory national electoral democracy operating within a global framework broadly defined by US power. Thus pro-American Hindu nationalism is acceptable in India but anti-Israel Moslem nationalism is not acceptable in Egypt. Monitory democracies abound, but their viability depends to a large degree on the identity of the monitors. Monitors can even legitimately (in the eyes of the "international community") seek the overthrow of their own democratically elected governments if those governments violate international human (and business) rights norms. Pro-systemic monitory institutions and organizations attract so much more funding and support than anti-systemic monitory institutions and organizations that monitory democracy as a whole is decisively pro-systemic. Anti-systemic voices are only heard in a crisis, and in a crisis they are usually shouted down. Which raises an important question: if all of the viable choices in an electoral democracy are uniformly pro-systemic, is the political system as a whole genuinely democratic?

To the extent that it is a democracy, the United States is itself a monitory democracy. But in a world characterized by limited effective sovereignty, it is perhaps the only one. All of the other countries of the world (to varying degrees) exist in a world dominated by US empire. They fall into line as local democracies with (more or less) limited powers of self-government existing within an American monitory empire – or they endure extreme external pressures in their pursuit of policy independence.

**Monitory empire**

Indigenous leaders are not crazy to go to the US Congress to seek redress against their own governments. They are responding rationally to the actually existing constellations of power that structure their opportunities for influence. As the people of China once petitioned the emperor for redress against their local magistrates, the people of the world now petition the US government for redress against their national states. Keane recognizes that the "power-scrutinizing institutions" of monitory democracy are "no longer confined to the territorial state" [1, p. 697] and emphasizes that its "latticed patterns of power monitoring effectively fudge the distinction between 'domestic' and 'foreign', the 'local' and the 'global' [1, p. 717]. He does not, however, recognize the extent to which democracy in one part of the world is monitored in another. And these "latticed patterns of power monitoring" are not
without form or structure. They are strongly characterized by core-periphery relationships that emanate from Washington and encompass the entire world.

The United States is no science fiction evil empire and the heel of monitory empire does not everywhere stamp out personal and political freedoms. When looking for historical precedents for American empire, the history of the late Roman Republic is more meaningful than a Hollywood film. Internally, Rome was a kind of democracy: Roman citizens enjoyed substantial civil and political rights, including the right to elect many of their most powerful leaders. Of course, domestic Roman democracy (as such) was imperfect, but so is domestic American democracy. The Senate is dominated by the wealthy, money buys access to political leaders, and it is impossible to run for major public office without strong support from wealthy class interests. Corruption is rife, political leaders tend to serve narrow constituencies of supporters rather than the country as a whole, and populist policies are used in calculated ways to distract the poorly-educated and politically inattentive while an entrenched elite governs in its own interest.

This depiction of domestic democratic politics describes contemporary America and late republican Rome equally well. The parallels continue into international affairs as well. Republican Rome maintained a core group of Latin allies with whom it shared both a language and complete military interoperability: the standard Roman army corps abroad consisted of one Roman legion paired with one Latin legion. The Latin allies had broad autonomy in local self-government so long as their laws did not conflict with the rights of Roman citizens or the interests of the Roman state. Thus Rome’s Latin allies are closely paralleled by America’s English-speaking allies. Rome’s non-Latin allies are paralleled by America’s NATO and Asian allies. In the American as in the Roman case, imperial allies are not oppressed as subject nations. Quite the contrary: they cooperate in the subjugation of others. But there was no more confusion in ancient Italy than there is in modern Europe and Asia about who is the empire and who are the allies.

The heel of American empire is felt much more keenly in the world’s peripheries. Of course, the countries of Central and South America have long histories of resistance to “Yanqui” imperialism. Since 1945 the Moslem-majority countries of North Africa and the Middle East have been a major focus of American imperialism. More recently, the United States has taken over from Europe as the neo-colonial master of Africa: note the formation of the US African Command in 2007 and extensive US special forces operations across the continent since then. For scholars who live within the American empire it is easy to take all this for granted, but that is the Gramscian nature of a successful empire: it comes to be seen as normal. From any objective standpoint it would be extraordinary to observe that American troops are simultaneously engaged in combat of one kind or another in Central America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia – at a time of peace. The point is that there is no objective standpoint from which to observe.
Keane (2009) recognizes the ubiquity of American empire, calling the United States "the world's first ever military empire that operates on a global scale" [1, XXXI-XXXII] but he does not seem to see the implications of this for the quality of other countries' democracies. Instead, he continues this passage "and does what it does in the name of democracy, often in tension with Russia, China and the other authoritarian states that have no love or respect for democracy" [1, XXXII]. Toward the end of his narrative he calls the United States "a territorial power dedicated to transforming the whole world in its favour, even if this required using the very methods that its democratic ideology abhorred: political trickery, economic muscle, bullying and violence" [1, p. 801]. This catalog of American wrongdoing, however, criticizes America for falling short of its own democratic ideals; it questions the robustness of American democracy. Keane does not trace the impact of America's "political trickery, economic muscle, bullying and violence" on the quality of other countries' democracies.

By contrast the monitory empire thesis posits that the world already is an American world, a world of de facto juridical pluralism in which a multitude of decisions made by most of the governments of the world either explicitly (e.g., in treaties) or implicitly (e.g., through the mental definition of the possible) take US positions into account. A few of the richest and most powerful countries of the world (France, Germany, Japan) may be monitory democracies on some level, in which robust civil society institutions and organizations mediate the democratic experiences of their citizens with little day-to-day reference to the external world of American power. The United States might object to their contradicting American positions, but as they have no intention of ever seriously contradicting American positions this is of little importance.

For much of the rest of the world – almost certainly for an outright majority of the countries of the world – monitory empire is a daily reality. Not only are their most important decisions often made in Washington, but many of the monitory institutions and organizations that intermediate their local democracies are actually funded from Washington. These local civil society actors are supplemented (or supplanted) by international non-governmental organizations that primarily intermediate between local populations and American monitory empire, not between local populations and their own governments. Thus local social movements become creatures of monitory empire, since to be effective they must influence not their democratic local governments but the larger imperial government that effectively determines the policies they seek to effect. By their very nature, global social movements are creatures of monitory empire, not monitory democracy, since there is no global democracy to monitor.
Implications of American world-empire for civil society and social movements

The monitory democracy thesis rests on a set of propositions that are in themselves fairly obvious: that the United States exerts enormous influence around the world; that to the extent the United States exerts influence inside a country, that country cannot be considered a self-contained polity; that civil society institutions and organizations in such countries must look both to their own governments and to the United States in order to be fully effective. The distinctiveness of the thesis is that it links American primacy to a new overarching governance framework for the world-system as a whole: American empire. Does it matter for practical social movement activism whether the United States is viewed merely as a powerful political actor in a capitalist world-economy or as the controlling polity of a post-capitalist world-empire? Or is this merely an academic debate of little practical importance?

The nub of the world-empire argument is that in a world-empire markets are not ultimately determinative of social change and thus not of fundamental importance in seeking to effect such change. Social movements that continue to target market iniquities in a post-neoliberal world are bound to miss the mark. Thus (for example) anti-austerity activists would be wasting their time in seeking to shut down bond markets or outlaw financial derivatives. In the capitalist world-economy it might have been the case that austerity derived from impersonal market forces. But in the emerging American world-empire austerity derives from political decisions made within an American-focused transnational ruling class and transmitted through American-led state machinery, American-dominated intergovernmental organizations, and American-dictated international treaties. In this context meaningful social change requires change at the top of the global class hierarchy, not change from the bottom. The Polanyian re-embedding of markets in society is no longer sufficient. Society itself is part of the problem.

Activists in contemporary anti-systemic protest movements seem to understand this better than do the social scientists who study them. Protest has largely supplanted politics, and many of those protests – in particular protests associated with Occupy, Anonymous, pirate parties, and other neo-anarchist movements – are emphatically post-political. They inculcate "a disavowal of representation and representative politics in all its guises, whether as the style or mode of oppositional politics, or as the governing paradigm in the form of liberal-democratic politics" [4, p. 160]. This is a highly political post-politics embraced by activists who "strive to resist ... and to construct themselves as actors through performances and lived experience" [2, p. 35]. The twenty-first century’s most active activists have abandoned democratic politics because they recognize (subjectively or – increasingly – explicitly) that the policies that interest them most are not subject to effective democratic control.

This may be too pessimistic a view for many to swallow, but the test of the argument lies not in its palatability but in its utility. The most
effective way to impact policy under monitory empire is to convince the imperial classes of the righteousness of a cause, whether that cause is pro-refugee or anti-Kony. One result of this shift is that media celebrities now regularly serve as brand ambassadors for social causes. Of course, celebrities can help widen the appeal of otherwise obscure causes. But it might be more accurate to see the role of celebrities in terms of monitory empire: the celebrity is used to help spur imperial political intervention in a cause, not to help arouse internal democratic enthusiasm for a cause. Celebrity involvement doesn’t rally mass political movements; it attracts the attention of rich and powerful people. Whereas post-war monitory democracy responded to the grass-roots organization of mass social movements (including many national anti-war movements, civil rights movements, environmental movements, and women’s movements), post-neoliberal monitory empire responds to the bureaucratic organization of elite social movements in pursuit of discrete (often celebrity) causes.

The implication of the transition to monitory empire is not that mass movements will cease to exist. It is that mass movements will cease to be successful. Seen from this point of view it is perhaps not surprising that the Occupy movement — the contemporary social movement par excellence — rejected the very goal of success. Similarly the World Social Forum is famous (or notorious) for putting more emphasis on process than on power. Anonymous hacktivists have no model for governing whatsoever. Yet these are some of the most successful monitory actors on the contemporary global stage. If the success of a social movement is to be measured by the actual accomplishment of positive social change rather than by the accomplishment of discussions about positive social change, many of today’s most successful civil society actors are not social movements at all. They are post-political anti-actors. They are the institutional and organizational monitors of empire.

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