

Imperialism And Plagiarism

Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan

[Ed. This article is an introduction to an important and longer piece the authors wrote, "[The Scientist and the Church](#)," which is a part of their extensive body of work that can be found in their [online archives](#).]

(*Swans - May 22, 2006*) Until recently, the purpose of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq seemed hardly in doubt. Thinkers on both the right and the left tended to agree that these invasions were meant to stabilize the Middle East and ascertain the free flow of cheap oil. Events on the ground now suggest that this purpose has failed. The region appears to be growing more unstable by the day. The threat of unconventional weapons, instead of abating, seems to increase. And the price of oil is anything but cheap. It is very expensive and it keeps rising.

Most experts explain these adverse developments by invoking the "mistake theory" of history. It is Barbara Tuchman's *March of Folly* all over again. The Bush administration, goes the argument, failed to understand the intricate realities of the Middle East and the broader ramifications of unilateral action. It overestimated its own military prowess and underestimated that of its opponents. It adopted the wrong strategy and used misguided tactics. No wonder it failed.

But has it really failed?

Over the past year, some observers have begun to question this conventional creed. Perhaps the invasions were not meant to stabilize the Middle East in the first place? Maybe the intention was exactly the opposite -- that is, to make the region less stable? Perhaps the goal was never to lower the price of oil -- but on the contrary, to make it go up? What groups benefit from a more unstable Middle East? Who stand to gain from a protracted "energy crisis"? To what extent have these groups been involved in instigating and propagating the recent regional bellicosity?

These contrarian questions have been raised and answered with much fanfare by a group of radical writers and activists -- Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts -- identified by the collective name "Retort."

In June 2005, Retort published a book titled [Afflicted Powers](#) with Verso. A shortened version of the main chapter -- titled "[Blood for Oil?](#)" -- was pre-published in the April 21 issue of *The London Review of Books*. In these works, the authors challenge the conventional wisdom and claim to advance a new explanation for the recent Middle East wars.

Much of their explanation -- including both theory and fact -- is plagiarized. It is cut and pasted, almost "as is," from our work.

The primary source is "[The Weapondollar-Petrodollar Coalition](#)," a 71-page chapter in our book, *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (Pluto 2002). The Retort authors also seem inspired, incognito, by our more recent papers, including "[It's All About Oil](#)" (2003), "[Clash of Civilization, or Capital Accumulation?](#)" (2004), "[Beyond Neoliberalism](#)" (2004) and "[Dominant Capital and the New Wars](#)" (2004).

In their *London Review of Books* article, the authors credit us for having coined the term "Weapondollar-Petrodollar Coalition" -- but dismiss our "precise calibration of the oil/war nexus" as "perfunctory." This dismissal does not prevent them from freely appropriating, wholesale fashion, our concepts, ideas and theories -- including, among others, the "era of free flow," the "era of limited flow," "energy conflicts," the "commercialization of arms exports," the "politicization of oil" and the critique of the "scarcity thesis." Nowhere in their article do the authors mention the source of these concepts, ideas and theories; occasionally, they even introduce them with the prefix *Our view is*. . . . Their treatment of facts is not very different. They freely use (sometimes without understanding) research methods, statistics and data that took us years to conceive, estimate and measure -- again, never mentioning the source. The same dispossession, with some additions and deletions, appears in *Afflicted Powers*.

The concepts, theories and facts that Retort appropriates are far from trivial. Until recently, these theories and facts were greeted with strategic silence, from both Right and Left. Their publication has been repeatedly denied and censored by mainstream as well as progressive journals (including by the *London Review of Books*, which turned down our paper on the subject). They cannot be found anywhere else in the literature, conservative or radical. To treat them as "common knowledge" is deceitful. To cut and paste them without due attribution is blatant plagiarism.

We responded to these violations of our work by writing "[The Scientist and the Church](#)." The first part of the article details Retort's intellectual accumulation-by-dispossession. It lays out our own theories and research and shows how Retort systematically appropriates (and distorts) this work as if it were their own.

The plagiarism itself, though, is merely the beginning. The next question is why? Why would a group of respectable Marxist scholars engage in such obvious violation of their own principles? How do defenders of the expropriated end up expropriating others?

The answer, we argue, is rooted in the ancient clash of science and church. Retort's plagiarism is part of the constant attempt of every organized faith -- whether religious or academic, liberal or Leninist, fundamentalist or postist -- to disable, block and, if necessary, appropriate creativity and novelty. Creativity and novelty are dangerous. They defy dogma and undermine the conventional creed; they question the dominant ideology and threaten those in power; their very possibility challenges the church's exclusive hold over truth. And that challenge is a cause for panic -- for without this exclusivity, organized religion becomes irrelevant.

The ultimate reason behind Retort's plagiarism is this very type of panic. It is the fear of an organized paradigm losing its grip, the dread of an academic religion witnessing its own decline.

And there is much to worry about. Marxism in the early twenty-first century is very different from the work of Marx. Marx's research was novel, scientific and revolutionary; the texts of many Marxists today (although by no means all) are recycled, dogmatic and often anti-scientific. Marx was sure of his theory and confident of its political potential; many Marxists today doubt their theory and accept its political impotence. Marx continued, till his death, to develop his labour theory of value, to study the dialectical history of capitalism, to broaden his horizons; many of his followers, who already know it all, have given up on new research in favour of reproducing old-new slogans. Marx tried to understand reality in order to change his world; many Marxists today ignore reality in order to defend their faith. Unlike the Marxists, Marx was never a Marxist. He wouldn't

force himself into a box. In contrast, many of his followers swear by an oxymoron: the "Marxist tradition."

We submitted "The Scientist and the Church" to Mary Kay-Wilmers, editor of the *London Review of Books*. She refused to publish it. Instead, she offered us 1,000 words in the letters-to-the-editor section. We reminded her that she had just published a long plagiarized piece and suggested that it was only fair to give us equal space for rebuttal. To truncate our paper by 90 per cent was to make it meaningless. But, then, that was precisely what she wanted. She politely advised us that her offer was more than generous. She also added that, in her view, "a correspondence in the LRB would be the most effective way of airing your disagreements with Retort's position." We were surprised to learn that, in politically correct language, theft has now become a "position."

We also sent a copy of "The Scientist and the Church" to Verso, the publisher of *Afflicted Powers*. There was no response. The editors must have been very busy.

Clearly, nobody wanted to touch this hot potato. And why would they? In the post-modern age of the Blog, it would soon be water under the bridge. Just let it flow.

[ed. Read the full version of "[The Scientist and the Church.](#)"]

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Their work focuses on the political economy of capital and power.

Most of their publications -- including books, articles, course outlines, interviews and reviews -- are freely available from [The Bichler and Nitzan Archives](#).

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