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The Shield of America

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Philip Bobbitt. The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History. London: Allen Lane/ Penguin 2002. 922 pages. £25.

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There is a strong tradition in the United States which connects academic writing in the field of international relations, with the development and practice of foreign policy, a lineage in which George Kennan, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski have been among the leading modern figures. Philip Bobbitt has advised both Democrat and Republican Administrations in recent times, and although he has not himself been a great wielder of power, The Shield of Achilles belongs in this tradition. It speaks directly to its time. 'We are in a moment in world affair when the essential ideas that govern statecraft must change,' is his opening sentence (p xxi). Threats to the survival of states that formerly could come only from other states are now ubiquitous, 'owing to advances in international telecommunication, rapid computation, and weapons of mass destruction.' The Shield of Achilles was written before the events of September 11 2001, but its argument anticipated such an attack, and scarcely needed to be changed to take account of it.¹ 'If, some historians argue, the twentieth century began in August 1914 it may be that the twenty-first century will be said to have begun in September 2001.' (p 820). The proximity of Bobbitt's thesis to the position of the current Bush Administration is evident. Arguments that it sets out in abstract terms (e.g. for the mobilisation of whatever coalitions may be appropriate for

¹ By contrast, the arguments of Hardt and Negri's Empire (2000) were severely jolted by the September 11th events and their aftermath. An account of a new kind of 'empire', depending on international consensus and legality, based on what Hardt and Negri believed had been agreed norms necessary to interventions in the Balkans and in the Gulf War, have come up against evidence that the Bush Administration was now imposing its power on the world in the manner of a more traditional empire. On Hardt and Negri's book, see 'Empire: A Postmodern Theory of Revolution', *New Political Economy* Vol. 7, No. 3, 2002.

interventions against specific threats, or describing the impotence of the UN in face of threats to security) have since been put in blunt terms by senior figures in the George W. Bush government. Bobbitt has been an advocate of war on Iraq.

However, while most of the world perceives President Bush's stated view of the world as alarmingly crude and simplistic, Bobbitt has written a remarkable treatise on the history of states and inter-state relations, in developing his view of this epochal transition from one international order to another. Since so much of his analysis provides theoretical underpinning for what the United States is now doing, and noting the references he makes to current state papers, we would be unwise to underestimate the George W. Bush administration's strategic coherence. Just as with President Reagan, it seems that a populist and folksy leader who reveals not a glimmer of intellectual curiosity, can in certain circumstances provide an effective front for a formidable deployment of power.

The Historical Origins of State Forms

Bobbitt in the first half of his book ('States of War') sets out to explain the evolution of state forms by reference to the success or failure of states in war. 'Each epochal war', he writes in summary, 'brought a particular constitutional order to primacy.' 'The peace treaties that end epochal wars ratify a particular constitutional order for the states.' (P. 346). The historical sequence is outlined as princely state, kingly state, territorial state, state-nation, nation-state, and market-state. Thus the Thirty Years' War established the supremacy of the kingly state, which was ratified in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648; of the territorial state by the War of Louis XIV, ratified in the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713; and of the state-nation by the Wars of the French Revolution, sealed by the Treaty of Vienna of 1815.

A crucial but contentious feature of Bobbitt's narrative is his explanation of the emergence and hegemony of the nation-state. Whilst a regulated international order of nation-states was formally ratified by the Treaty of Versailles in

1918, following wars of national unification in Europe during the nineteenth century, and the First World War, the intended settlement of nation-states failed. Instead, a prolonged but intermittent war took place, between democratic, fascist and communist states. Bobbitt defines 1914-1990 as the epoch of the Long War, which ended with the defeat of communism in Europe. But the settlement which was ratified by the Peace of Paris in 1990 is bringing not the ruleful order of nation-states envisaged by Woodrow Wilson at Versailles (an approximation to the inter-state order of 'Perpetual Peace' envisaged by Kant in 1795), but instead the undermining of nation-states and the rise of a new state form, the market-state, in a world which is now dominated by the power of the United States. 'Mindful of the past, we can expect a new epochal war in which a new form of the State - the market-state, asserts its primacy....' (P. 815). 'The September attacks can be understood as the first battle in this new war,' he writes in his postscript. (P. 820).

The theory that underlies The Shield of Achilles, that success in war is the ultimate determinant of state forms, presupposes the necessity of violence and conflict in human affairs.² It has a Hobbesian (and Machiavellian) presupposition, that only the deployment of power can restrain aggrandisement, and thus maintain peace between men, through the threat or exercise of force by a sovereign power. This principle explains and justifies the role of states in governing their subjects or citizens. It also explains how they conduct themselves in relation to other states, in seeking as much power over other states as their means will permit. Even if states may not themselves be inherently aggressive, they are compelled to maximise their capacity to exercise violence if they are to avoid being subject to the aggressions of other states. C.B. MacPherson's The political theory of possessive individualism³ (Oxford University Press 1962) pointed out how Hobbes' ideas of innate inter-individual and inter-state conflict became foundations of competitive market economies. Economic actors within

² 'The State is born in violence: only when it has achieved a legitimate monopoly on violence can it promulgate law; only when it is free of the coercive violence of other states can it pursue strategy.' (P. 336).

³ C.B. MacPherson (1962) The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke. Oxford University Press.

capitalism, Marx and MacPherson noted, were forced to be aggressive if they were successfully to defend themselves against the aggression of others. Thus, in a world of competition between self-interested actors, power and not morality is what counts.

Bobbitt's argument takes account of different forms of power, but largely in relation to how these contribute to the capacity of states to coerce each other. The evolution of state forms from the princely state to the nation-state was determined in his view by the superior capacity of the later state forms to organise peoples and economic resources in the service of increasingly 'total' forms of war. Ideologies, such as nationalism, the ideal of membership in a self-determining nation, have been a mobilising resource in establishing the competitive advantage of some state forms over others, during the French Revolutionary wars and afterwards. A cause of the collapse of empires, first the Ottoman, then the Austro-Hungarian, later the European colonial empires, was the mobilisation against them of nationalisms. Although Bobbitt's central argument is that wars determine state forms, he seeks to avoid undue reductionism by taking account of the many factors which explain why different state forms have prevailed in different epochs.⁴

The Contemporary International Order

The second half of The Shield of Achilles (called 'States of Peace') is concerned with the problem of how peace and security are to be maintained in the twenty-first century. Bobbitt's view of this is based on two key assumptions. The first is the pre-eminence of United States military power, following its defeat of the Soviet system. The second is that the nation-state is becoming obsolete. With its weakness is collapsing also the rule-based international order which it was hoped could be based on the emergence of self-determining nations. If this was not yet feasible in 1947, with the formation of the United Nations, because of the persistence of the colonial

⁴ There is not space to describe this here, but Bobbitt's book is exceptionally interesting in much of its detail, for example in its references to classical jurisprudence, and in its accounts of diplomatic history (it has a remarkable defence of Castlereagh.)

empires and the divisions of the Cold War, one might have expected this would become possible after 1990. But instead, Bobbitt argues, the nation-state is being superseded by the market-state⁵, and a different international order is needed.⁶

The decline of the nation state has several major aspects, in Bobbitt's view. In the first place, it de-territorialises the means of violence. Threats that formerly came from bounded territorial states, or from state systems such as the Soviet bloc, may in future come from anywhere, in the form of biological, nuclear, or 'cyber' attacks which will target the informational networks of the world. Forms of deterrence which might be effective in face of threats from territorial states will not be effective against dispersed networks of terrorism. In the second place, nations are becoming powerless to defend themselves, just as they have already become unable to guarantee the material living standard of their citizens. Instead of being guarantors of their citizens' well-being, states have to settle for the role of providing them with opportunities, that is to say facilitating their involvement in the global market economy. Such a view is being put into practice in New Labour's reforms of the welfare state.

In a world where nation-states are neither the principal armed threat, nor capable of protecting themselves against such threats, Bobbitt argues that different systems of defence are called for. Providentially, the United States is at hand to make these possible. As the preponderant power, it is alone in a position to organise and implement responses to the various global risks to security. Bobbitt sets out persuasive arguments for this hypothetical role of the USA as a power of last resort (chapters 26 and 27, especially page 803). Suppose, he says, there were a rogue state, or terror group, threatening the

⁵ Not wishing to oversimplify, Bobbitt argues that the market-state comes in three varieties, the entrepreneurial (USA), the managerial (EU) and the mercantile (Japanese). He explains the necessary functions of these states in market societies.

⁶ Bobbitt argues, not quite in so many words, that the new constitutional order of market-states needs its epochal war to bring it into being. ('We must establish a consensus....War provided the means by which consensus was established in the past. Peace resolves issues that war has defined, winnowed and presented in a way that is ripe for resolution.' P. 277). Iraq must for him be the second battle in this epochal war.

world with 'weapons of mass destruction' – say a nuclear attack. Whose responsibility would it be to respond to this threat? Would it really be reasonable, he asks, given recent experience of international division and inaction in the face of lesser threats (in the former Yugoslavia, for example) to wait for consensus to arrive, or for the United Nations to achieve a capacity and willingness to act? Surely in such circumstances the United States would be justified in taking action – even pre-emptively, he suggests – with whatever allies could be enlisted in support - or as Bush has called it in the current context, with a 'coalition of the willing.'

One can recognise the compelling logic of this argument in an extreme circumstance, without agreeing that this should be the defining logic of the entire international order. In a similar way, one might agree that Vietnam was justified in intervening in Cambodia in 1970 to halt the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime, without proposing that nations are in general entitled to act as belligerent humanitarian neighbours whenever they wish. Extreme situations may demand extreme remedies, but they do not thereby become norms for everyday.

Although Bobbitt rightly draws attention to many tendencies which have been weakening the nation state's power to determine its own existence, (or at least most nation states – the USA is the significant exception to the rule) it is the nature and potential of armed force in the contemporary world that is decisive for his argument. This follows from his general view, that it is the outcome of wars that ultimately determines state forms and inter-state relations. It is ultimately because the military and associated power of the United States finally resolved the 'Long War' of the twentieth century, that it is now in a position to shape the next historical epoch.

Before accepting this proposition, however, one needs to look carefully at Bobbitt's analysis of the 'Long War'. Should we conceive this as one war, or several, and if several, over what differences were they each fought? Here we need to return to theory. Bobbitt gives too much weight to war as the major determinant of the evolution of states. The historical sequence he

describes, from princely states as least as far forward as nation-states, is explained as much by the demands for extended citizenship developed over generations, as by the outcome of wars between states.⁷ His Hobbesian, 'realist' view that states should be conceived as power-seeking entities ignores the specific natures of states and the competition between the different social systems that they rule. At stake in the war with the fascist powers in the 1930s and 1940's were opposed conceptions of society. Similarly, in the contest between the capitalist and communist powers during this entire period, conflicting conceptions of economy and polity were at issue. These were wars not merely between states, but between social systems and their competing values.⁸

The reason for the failure of the ideal of international order proposed at Versailles was that the participant nations were either not committed to a universal democratic order, or were unable to sustain democracy at home because of their intractable social divisions. The victorious European powers were rulers of empires, which they had no intention of giving up in favour of a universal principle of national self-rule. (It later took many anti-colonial wars to bring about a semblance of universal self-government.) The principal defeated power had been ruined by its defeat, and by the vindictive short-sightedness of the victors. The Nazi regime which then emerged was committed to the imperial conquest of Europe. Soviet Russia was engaged from 1917 in a different and opposed trajectory of state-led modernisation. The period from 1918 to 1945 saw the near eclipse and defeat of the principles of national self-determination and democracy set out by Woodrow Wilson at Versailles.⁹

⁷ One of Bobbitt's purposes is to 'revise the widespread assumption that economics and sociological conflict are the basis for all historical phenomena.' (P. 336)

⁸ Justin Rosenberg's (1994) *The Empire of Civil Society* Verso, is a valuable critique of 'realist' theories of international relations, arguing that they neglect the attributes of social systems that determine what states are and how they relate to each other. Bobbitt does take account of differences between modern social systems, describing a contest between the Anglo-Saxon, Asian and Continental European models of capitalism, but these differences have a subordinate place in his analysis.

⁹ Woodrow Wilson and his adviser Colonel House, characterised to good effect in this book, are the 'idealist' antithesis of Bobbitt's 'realist' position.

In the period after 1945, another and better attempt was made to construct an international order based on Kantian principles of 'perpetual peace'. Democracy was strengthened by the defeat of the fascists, and in both Europe and America political power was deployed to constrain and regulate the markets whose ravages had contributed to destroy the 1918 settlement. The dominant nation states after 1945 sought to protect their citizens from economic risk and uncertainty, and to create the condition for advances in their standards of life. (Ernest Gellner¹⁰ and Zigmunt Bauman¹¹ have pointed out that this was part of the *raison d'être* for nation states.) The 'post-national' forms of shared sovereignty that we see emerging in many international institutions and agreements, and in a system of partially pooled sovereignty such as the European Union, have taken these democratic purposes and sought to implement them in a more exposed global environment.¹²

The question is, why is a moment which might have seen the post-imperial triumph of national self-determination and democracy, and a peaceful international order where there are few enemies left, instead interpreted by Bobbitt as a decisive moment of failure of the nation-state and the United Nations? (Bobbitt has little regard for representative democracy, at either national or international level, preferring the choices made through markets.¹³ Must we now be content with the protection of Bobbitt's 'Shield of Achilles', or do other possibilities remain open? Is Bobbitt, as he may see himself, an objective analyst of the inescapable realities of modern power, outlining the least-bad forms of collective security available? Or is he rather the advocate

¹⁰ E. Gellner (1964) Thought and Change. Weidenfeld and Nicolson; E. Gellner (1983) Nations and Nationalism. Blackwell.

¹¹ Z. Bauman (2002) Society under Siege. Polity.

¹² These developments towards 'cosmopolitan democracy' have been described by David Held and Anthony McGrew (2002) Globalisation/Anti-Globalisation. Polity, and in several other works.

¹³ When the United Nations has a 'constitution for a society of market states,' Bobbitt writes '... it will resemble those of corporations, which have weighted voting by wealth.' (P. 301) .He writes off most of the international institutions of the post-1945 period, including the European Union, as irrelevant to the world of market states. (on P. 776).

of a form of quasi-imperial dominion, whose instrument is the market-state and to which there are and should be alternatives?

The answer to this question depends on the view one takes of globalisation, of which this book provides a sweeping account from a strategic and constitutional perspective.¹⁴ He regards the market as an unstoppable and indeed benign driver of change, rather than as a contested system of organisation, whose domination is in part the effect of the ideology and action of governments in the United States and elsewhere from the 1980s till now. From this has followed the undermining of nation-states in favour of the market-state, which' offers a different covenant: it will maximise the opportunity of its people.' (P. xxvi). All is inevitability, given the premise that markets are the main engine of transformation.¹⁵ For Bobbitt, threats to security, which demand a new constitutional order capable of engaging in 'a series of low-intensity conflicts', will come from those unavoidably disaffected by this system, and by the growing weakness of the existing constitutional order of states. He does not see these threats as the outcome of the systemic breakdown of social cohesion which global markets bring about. However, systems which 'maximise opportunities' for some, also maximise risk and damage for many others. Their ideology of individualisation produces both amoral ruthlessness, and, as Castells pointed out¹⁶, retreats to fundamentalist enclaves of meaning and antagonism.

Bobbitt addresses the symptoms of this situation, through the new system of global security of which the invasion of Iraq is another deliberate trial, but leaves its deeper causes unchallenged. His argument is driven by anxiety about de-territorialised threats of force - September 11 before it even happened, and the threats from 'weapons of mass destruction' which are the

¹⁴ There are many similarities between his model of globalisation, and that of social scientists from other disciplines such as Giddens (cited by him) and Castells, though he writes from the perspective of international order.

¹⁵ Historicism is no longer the prerogative of Marxists. (...'we can shape the next epochal war if we appreciate its inevitability and also the different forms it may take.' P. xxiv). Globalisation theory, as Megnad Desai has pointed out adopts Marx's theory of economic transformation, whilst taking global capitalism to be its destination. (M. Desai, (2001) Marx's Revenge. Verso).

¹⁶ Manuel Castells, (1998) End of Millennium. Blackwell.

reason or pretext for the Iraq war.¹⁷ He does not sufficiently question these risks, partly because he holds to an *a priori* Hobbesian theory that actors will always use the powers that they have in their own interest, and because modern technologies have created new destructive means. But this theory addresses only a part of reality, and Bobbitt exaggerates the dangers. (It does not seem probable that terrorist attacks will exact the scale of damage of wars.) Why should we not look to the alleviation of the material miseries and the disrespecting of lives which generate hatred and violence, and seek to remedy those through the exercise of democratic sovereignty, rather than devote such excessive emphasis to meeting force with force? The amplification of terrorist threats can indeed be self-fulfilling, and for certain forms of power, self-serving, since it justifies the primacy of coercion in the conduct of affairs. It may lead us in fact to the security state, always primed for war.

Kant's doctrine of perpetual peace presupposed a human nature which was capable of moral behaviour, an idea of humanity among which respect for others was as natural as hatred of them. The *pax americana* (or *imperium*) implicitly theorised in Philip Bobbitt's book has little use for such benign beliefs, but we diminish them at our peril.

¹⁷ For Bobbitt wars seem to be so historically necessary that they are almost welcome. The fine aesthetic qualities of the book - its title drawn from the *Iliad*, counterpointed by Auden's great poem and others critical of war, are disquieting considering that this is its position.