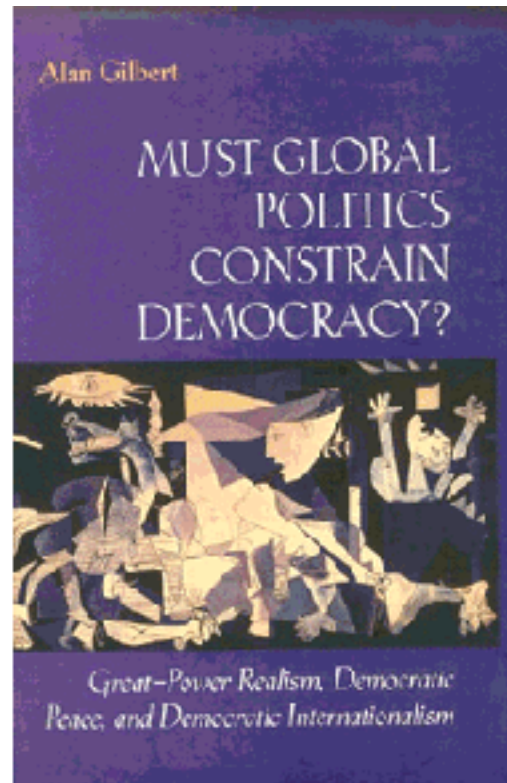


## Review

Alan Spector

Alan Gilbert, *Must Global Politics Constrain Democracy? Great-Power Realism, Democratic Peace, and Democratic Internationalism*, Princeton University Press, 1999

Professor Gilbert's ambitious work promises a great deal. In the context of the growing debates over "globalization," it delivers a strong, well-developed polemic against several types of "realists" in political theory who argue that global involvement by the U.S. will necessarily result in some injustice. It is in his debates against these "realists" that this work is most successful. Gilbert astutely grasps an essential aspect of Marx's world view -- that what most people consider a humane, "moral" way of organizing the world is also the most practical way ("realistic" if you will) of organizing the world. This essential insight is particularly important. Dissolving the false dichotomy between what is "realistic" and what is "moral" is crucial. The maintenance of that dichotomy allows those who would justify oppression to condescendingly compliment those who support human equality and social justice on their fine moral character while dismissing their arguments as hopelessly unrealistic. And beyond debates within academia, we see the maintenance of that dichotomy in popular discourse similarly used to build active support for and passive acquiescence towards oppressive policies. Gilbert's insistence on the practicality of what would be considered "moral" policies is an important aspect of this book.



In his discussion of how imperial policies can destroy freedom within the "home" country, Gilbert draws on his deep knowledge of classical, ancient political philosophy and history. He insightfully develops the dialectic between repressive policies abroad and the need to suppress political freedom at home (which he calls "anti-democratic feedback") in order to consolidate and concentrate power needed to achieve those imperial ends. He engages numerous mainstream political theorists and skillfully exposes the contradictions within their pro-imperialist arguments. He also skillfully differentiates

his view of "democratic internationalism" from "ordinary pluralism," which uses similar rhetoric but continues to vest power in the status quo. Chapter Three is particularly strong in its discussion of Marx and the insistence on internationalism -- a welcome contrast to many other writers, including many "anti-globalists," leftists, and even some socialists, whose vision of a just society has been limited to their own country.

But if the book's challenge to mainstream liberal, realpolitik, and neo-liberal thought is its strong point, the book is less successful in asserting just what a realistic, egalitarian approach might be: "realistic" both in terms of actually working to meet the needs of the world's people and also in terms of being able to take power from those (the capitalist class) who have killed hundreds of millions directly and indirectly in the pursuit of profits and power to protect those profits. This is a problem for many standpoints that define themselves as "radical" -- allowing for a sharper critique of capitalism than standard reformists make, but hesitating, vacillating, and getting mired in ambiguity, abstraction, and agnosticism when the issue of revolutionary Marxism is hanging in the background. Or perhaps foreground is a better term, because sharp critiques of capitalism that fully grasp the overt destruction and indirect waste really make the issue of revolutionary Marxism appear like that much clichéd "three hundred pound gorilla in the corner" that is difficult to pretend does not exist. The problem is not simply that the book does not embrace revolutionary Marxism -- after all a writer is entitled to his or her perspective! The problem is that the book opens the door to such a deep and comprehensive critique of capitalism, and then does not seriously engage revolutionary Marxism as an alternative. Yet it is clear that much of the critique is consistent with Marxist analysis.

Instead, the work repeatedly hinges on the concept of "democracy." But "democracy" is one of those concepts that has different meanings to different people, and unless those differences are directly confronted and hashed out, it becomes likely that genuine political debate will be blurred over as all sides agree with the rhetoric, but each taking a different meaning from it. Is democracy based on formal voting? Who counts the votes? Who hires the people who count the votes? Who controls the media? And most importantly, has the capitalist class ever demonstrated a willingness to give up power in the context of being defeated in elections? One need only look to Indonesia, Chile, and a hundred other places to see the intense violence that capitalists have used to suppress the popular majority. Gilbert clearly does understand this, as he effectively gives many other examples of these actions. And for those with other illusions about the bourgeois state, recent events in Italy, where secret police instigated violence and other police agencies beat and bloodied peaceful protestors (many in their beds) and then made a particular point about destroying videos and other evidence of their actions -- these events should further convince observers that the capitalist class, when faced with a minor threat, resorts to overwhelming violence. (And further, that those police mechanisms were in place even during the years that the "Left" supposedly controlled the Italian government.)

Heroes in the book include Martin Luther King and Gandhi. But King's non-violent strategy did not win the major gains attributed to the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, most of the narrowing of the income gap between black and white workers, for example, had taken place by the late 1950's, as much a result of U.S. capitalism's post-war

expansion; furthermore, it was always clear that Malcolm X was standing in the wings if the U.S. government did not accede to at least some of the anti-racist demands. While Gandhi was important in helping India achieve political independence from Great Britain, it has been argued that a comparison between India from 1950-1975 or so and China, during its socialist years demonstrates that far more lives, and in particular, years of human life, were lost in India, with its purported peaceful transition and democracy, than in China, even taking into account the lives lost during the violent revolution and the many who died of famine in the 1950's. Gilbert stretches his analysis in a particularly unsatisfying way when he confronts the following anti-pacifist argument: "Some suppose that a Gandhian movement could work against the 'nice' British but not against the Nazis. But this objection disregards the brutality of English colonialism. It also ignores the need for a revolutionary situation, as in Eastern Europe in the late 1980's, that will allow a movement -- whether nonviolent or violent to succeed" (p. 193). But this is evasive. Of course the British were responsible for genocides also, but is Gilbert saying that therefore the Nazis could have been defeated non-violently? Clearly Gilbert does not say this. In fact, at other points in his work, there is obviously respect for "violent" movements, such as the war against slavery in the United States. The entire issue of whether the capitalist state can be replaced non-violently is evaded throughout the work, as if, perhaps, Gilbert is so concerned with convincing the mainstream, "realist" liberals of the need to oppose the oppressive, exploitative policies of imperialism that he wants to avoid offending them. It is not the place of a reviewer to attempt to express the motives of a writer, of course, but the ambiguity on the issue of the state, certainly one of the most important questions in political philosophy, is frustrating.

There is, perhaps, too much faith that the various anti-globalist (anti-imperialist?) grassroots movements can eventually weaken, or take power from the imperialists. Gilbert admirably demonstrates respect and hope in the grassroots, rather than in various elitist schemes. But again, the issue of confronting the military might of the imperialist nations is not addressed adequately. At least if the book had taken a thorough-going pacifist position, it would have been more consistent. It is the ambiguity that runs through many of the political issues that can be disconcerting. Finally, some might take issue with his evaluation as "democratic" of the movements which overthrew the various Communist Parties in Eastern Europe. In some cases there were large uprisings. In other cases, the uprisings were relatively small. In many cases, large amounts of funding from the CIA, from the Vatican, and from other Western capitalist governments played a role in undermining those governments. In many cases, the old Communist Party leaders simply dropped their affiliations and took part in the massive looting of public wealth that has characterized the new regimes, often with many of the old "Communist" leaders holding important positions of power. And in any case, while the Communist Party-led regimes of the 1980's were not controlled by the grassroots people, neither are the new regimes, and it is becoming clear that the new regimes are presiding over a terrible decline in standard of living, education, health and health care, and increased mortality, along with a rise in racism, anti-Semitism, and the expulsion of the Roma (so-called "gypsies") from some parts of Eastern Europe. Any work that applauds the supposedly "democratic uprisings" ought to address the "anti-democratic" outcomes of these supposedly spontaneous, grassroots rebellions.

In sum, then, Gilbert makes a strong and compelling case against imperialism and illustrates how destructive these policies are to both the victims in the neo-colonies and the great majority of people in the imperialist countries. But in his attempt to win over the mainstream, he glosses over many important issues of who controls the state and the egalitarian policies could be instituted and enforces. In a sense, the "realists" might be said to be empirically correct if politically/"morally" wrong -- global politics is "imperialism" and it does necessarily "constrain democracy," by massive force when necessary. While Professor Gilbert has added to the sharp critique of contemporary global politics, he has not provided a convincing alternative scenario.