



Morituri Te Salutant

FRANÇOIS DEBRIX 

ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

In this essay, I weave together the readings and appraisals of the volume *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* offered by the contributors to this issue to further reflect on some of the key themes of the book and to highlight the critical provocations featured in this issue's essays.

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I am honored and humbled by the depth and range of critical engagement with my 1999 book, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, offered by Caroline Alphin, Alex Barder, Mauro Caraccioli, Linea Cutter, Francine Rossone de Paula, Brent Steele, and Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay. I am grateful for their scholarship (here and in many other places), I am indebted to the creative and provocative thinking on a variety of issues and topics they have displayed over the years, and above all I am thankful for their friendship.¹

“Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant.” “Hail, Caesar; those who are about to die salute you.” Such was the Latin salutation, commonly uttered by gladiators to the Roman Emperor, prior to their fight in the arena. The spectacle of the gladiators’ disembodiment and, ultimately, of their death, of the violence and blood of their mortal combat, was one of the supposed signs of the Roman Empire’s greatness and splendor, and the mark of the Emperor’s absolute power over the life of all his subjects, Romans and non-Romans alike (to the point that the Emperor, if magnanimous, could choose to spare the life of one of the gladiators, normally the one who remained standing at the end of the fight). Life, any and all life, was an offer, a sacrifice to the Emperor and the Empire. The gladiators’ ultimate sacrifice ritualized this complete surrender to the Emperor.

Disciplinary (neo)liberalism is also about sacrificing individuals, bodies, and lives. Whether it is meant to operate as a simulation of freedom for many of its proponents, beneficiaries, or advocates (many Western subjects, for example) or it condemns and abandons “other bodies” to precarious living and often to blood, violence, and death in the arena of global (geo)politics, disciplinary (neo)liberalism, as Barder puts it in his essay, seems to be “predicated upon the effacement of the other’s alterity.”² Disciplinary (neo)liberalism does so on a global scale, at the scale where visions or projections of new world orders are supposed to be deployed, through UN peacekeeping or through unilateral designs of imperial (and often international reality colonizing,³ to use Rossone de Paula’s turn of phrase) states. But also, crucially, and as Alphin reminds us, disciplinary (neo)liberalism obliterates otherness, alterity, or the outside “at the level of the day-to-day minutiae of neoliberal subjects.”⁴ This, as I suggested in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, is part of what the UN, and some of the UN’s peacekeeping missions, in particular, were mobilized to do in the 1990s. Or, better yet, this was what the UN and UN peacekeeping were, in a way, sacrificed for.

We may be reminded here of Danis Tanović’s poignant and brutally honest 2001 movie *No Man’s Land*. According to this film’s plot, set in the context of the early 1990s conflict in Bosnia, the UN, UN peacekeeping, and crucially the visual arsenal of global media covering the UN’s actions are deployed to rescue a Bosnian soldier who is lying on a motion-activated landmine at the bottom of a trench (he cannot move without causing the mine to explode). Soon realizing that there is no way to remove/rescue the soldier without activating the bomb, the UN brings in the Western media to the edge of the trench where a UN mining expert, with his back to the cameras, pretends to deactivate the explosive, fully conscious that there is no way to save the Bosnian soldier. Claiming that the situation is too dangerous for the media to continue to observe, the UN moves them further away from the site, starts to gather all their equipment, later announces to the Western onlookers that the mine has been defused and the soldier has been rescued, and everyone—UN and Western media alike—finally leaves the area where, it is said, there is no longer anything or anyone to see or worry about. Meanwhile, the soldier remains behind in the trench, still desperately trying not to move so as not to detonate the explosive device underneath him, at least for as long as he can stand it.

In Tanović’s film, what ends up looking like a successful UN rescue operation is nothing more than a *trompe l’oeil*. The simulation of the UN’s, and with it the global West’s, success finds its counterpart in its abject failure for the Bosnian soldier (by extension, for the local actors, and their otherness/alterity), in its occluded yet very real sacrifice of the other’s body. As Cutter

1 A special word of thanks to Linea Cutter, Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay, and Mauro Caraccioli for putting this special issue together, and to Mauro for organizing the initial panel/symposium at the ISA Northeast annual conference in Providence, RI in November 2019 where most of the essays in this issue were first presented.

2 Barder, Alexander D. “The West and its Radical Others” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 16.

3 Rossone de Paula, Francine. “The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021).

4 Alphin, Caroline. “Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 19.

writes in her contribution, the UN, as a *trompe l'oeil*, is “an empty sign.”⁵ In Tanović’s rendition, because it is an empty sign, the UN fails miserably. And yet, at an ideological level (that of disciplinary neoliberalism), it is only because it is a *trompe l'oeil* that the UN can (appear to) succeed in filling the Western/global mediascape with images of yet another rescue by daring UN peacekeeping heroes who embody the (neo)liberal values allegedly championed on a global scale: disinterested altruism, freedom, peace, individual rights, and the dignity of human life. As Steele’s contribution reminds us, images are always readily available to fool the eye, to make anyone believe, but also to galvanize ideological beliefs and believers (as we witness time and again across the (geo)political landscape).

Alphin is correct to note in her essay that “neoliberalism functions, in part, through the simulation of freedom.”⁶ But, by and large, this simulation of freedom is primarily meant for those (in the West, and its many extensions) who have accepted to go along with, or perhaps to abide by, the visions, images, and projections of disciplinary (neo)liberalism in the first place. For many of these subjects—neoliberal subjects, whether they be individuals, corporate entities, agents of governance, nation-states—the enjoyment of or benefits derived from the appearance of being free, or of living, acting, or thinking freely, is not to be doubted. This is why most of these subjects always demand more and more of it and of themselves, make sure that they (again to quote Alphin) regularly “self-monitor and self-maximize” so they do not stray away from the desirable ideological path.⁷ As Cutter nicely argues, turning to philosopher Byung-Chul Han’s thought, these neoliberal subjects—many individual beings and bodies in the West, states, UN institutions, or Western/global media, for instance—must work on (or “smoothen”) themselves to acquiesce to, normalize, live by, and operate according to disciplinary (neo)liberalism’s own “smoothening.”⁸ And these same neoliberal subjects, intent on smoothening themselves, do not find it unusual, abnormal, or inconvenient (quite to the contrary, in fact) that a “global smoothening” takes place. In a way, the world must be made safe, or “smooth,” for disciplinary (neo)liberal freedom.

At the same time, but in line with the need to maintain a simulation of freedom, at least for some, the *trompe l'oeil* operations of disciplinary (neo)liberal subjects, and particularly those of disciplinary (neo)liberalism’s enforcing agents, have another important purpose, as I suggested above. As Yıldız-Alanbay aptly puts it, these operations need to “recolonize or conquer the ‘outside.’”⁹ Put differently, in order for the simulation of freedom to be smooth or seamless “inside” (there cannot be any cracks in or breaches to the simulation), the other (often the non-Westerner), the outside, or sometimes what is perceived as “the local” (as Rossone de Paula mentions)¹⁰ must be colonized, that is to say, reduced to sameness, taken over as well by the belief in the appearance of freedom, or otherwise conquered. Alterity is not allowed/acceptable. Rather, alterity is what must be disciplined (rendered seamless) or, again, sacrificed. Across the world, from the Western world’s inner cities to the killing fields and streets of Bosnia, Rwanda, or Somalia (to only name a few of the sites that were targeted by 1990s UN peacekeeping), subjects and their bodies must be smoothened. They must become neoliberal subjects, which also means that they must and will accept their fates as such subjects, whether they succeed and gain a semblance of freedom in the process, or they fail and are abandoned (or, in a way, surrender themselves) to precarity, violence, and death. Thus, disciplinary (neo)liberalism’s simulation of freedom (for some, not for all) is also, and to refer to Rossone de Paula’s essay, a matter of “colonization,” “force,” and “imposition.”¹¹ Crucially, it also often turns global politics (and its visions about new world orders) into “racial hierarchical orderings,” as Steele notes.¹²

5 Cutter, Linea. “Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations’ *Trompe l'oeil* Games.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 29.

6 Alphin, Caroline. “Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 19.

7 For a more detailed elaboration of the neoliberal subject’s turn to self-maximization, see: Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (London: Routledge, 2021).

8 Cutter, Linea. “Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations’ *Trompe l'oeil* Games.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 31.

9 Yıldız-Alanbay, Şengül. “The Politics of Virtual Security.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 38.

10 Rossone de Paula, Francine. “The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 24.

11 *Ibid.*, 26.

12 Steele, Brent. “Racial Hierarchy, and Critical World Order Studies.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 44.

It is in this sense that one can say, as I sought to say in 1999, that disciplinary (neo)liberalism is imperialistic and why, as Yıldız-Alanbay remarks, I ended my book with an “invitation to adopt an ‘anti-imperialist’ spirit.”¹³ Some form of imperialism is what I thought I saw in 1990s UN peacekeeping’s turn to simulation and visuality/virtuality. And, because it supported it, accepted it wholesale, and clearly sought to benefit from it, what I referred to as the West, via the UN at the time, was imperialistic, colonizing, disciplinary, and, I would now add, sacrificial. One perhaps could say that (neo)liberal freedom, the call to freedom, or the need to fall for the appearance of freedom was/is what drove and continues to drive this imperialist objective, this complete “smoothing” of the global, once again. Back in 1999, I believe that I mostly thought of the imperialistic tendencies of disciplinary (neo)liberalism in spatial terms, that is to say, as wanting to discipline, colonize, and conquer (and if not, as seeking to sacrifice and eradicate) more and more places, lands, zones of otherness/alterity, and people in these spaces (often, people and places marked as racially non-Western, that is to say, as non-White, too). Certainly, the UN peacekeeping missions seemed to display such a spatial (geopolitical) imperialistic and quasi-colonial logic. Moreover, International Relations as a field of study, rightly or wrongly, often urges us to think spatially (although, as Rossone de Paula importantly reminds us, spatially based modalities of global imposition/colonization/disciplinization are always about privileging “a certain ‘vision’ of the future”).¹⁴ Today, I think that I would add that disciplinary (neo)liberalism’s quest for freedom (freedom for freedom’s sake, freedom as an unquestioned good, freedom in and of itself) is colonizing and imperialistic not just in an expansive (spatial) sense, but also, and perhaps mainly, in an intensive way, that is to say, as a result of the insistent call for some (neoliberal) subjects to maximize their sense of self all the time, by and for themselves, exponentially, and in real time too, here and now (an always-to-be-repeated or endless present, perhaps), so that they may ensure that they are the most perfect subjects of freedom that they can be. Such an insistence on self-intensification is just as imperialistic and totalizing (as Byung-Chul Han intimates too), but it is perhaps less about conquering, colonizing, or even converting other bodies, other lands/territories, or an outside (this, perhaps, is partly why Han intimates that the neoliberal self/subject no longer needs or seeks otherness and, instead, looks into imposing modalities of force and violence onto itself primarily).¹⁵

But perhaps to call disciplinary (neo)liberalism (and its implements, including the UN in the 1990s) imperialistic was too broad or too generic a term. Perhaps, in light of the way the ideology of disciplinary (neo)liberalism has unfolded over the last two decades, through capital’s boundless expansion and intensification as well as through (geo)political confrontations with “new” radical others (for instance, Islamic terrorists, after 9/11), our vocabulary needs to be tweaked a bit. And yet, some of the vocabulary we may turn to now is not that new, unfortunately, and also not foreign to the West as a geopolitical and ideological project, as well as to the West’s own history. This is what, I think, Barder is telling us in his essay when he invokes the language of fascism. Barder writes, rightly, that *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* showed how “the West’s appropriation of alterity” was aligned with “latent fascistic desires that circulate and haunt the present.”¹⁶ In this context, an ever-reworked but nonetheless insistent Western fascistic context, the West and the ideology of disciplinary (neo)liberalism that it champions could not but be concerned with what Barder terms once again “the effacement of the other’s alterity.”¹⁷ Behind the veil—or, rather, behind the simulated scripts and scenarios—of disciplinary (neo)liberalism, the West reveals itself to be, at its core, a “parasitical project”¹⁸ (as Barder puts it, and probably a racist project too, as Steele intimates). That is to say, the West remains intent on colonizing or taking over other spaces and bodies to make them just like the West, or to, again, annihilate alterity (unless the other is able/willing to convert; although some “other” bodies will never be allowed by the West to be converted, for

13 Yıldız-Alanbay, Şengül. “The Politics of Virtual Security.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 39.

14 This is an argument that Rossone de Paula develops further in her own book. See: Francine Rossone de Paula, *The Emergence of Brazil to the Global Stage: Ascending and Falling in the International Order of Competition* (London: Routledge, 2018).

15 See: Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017).

16 Barder, Alexander D. “The West and its Radical Others” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 16.

17 Ibid., 16.

18 Ibid.

example when they are designated as “evil terrorists”) so that the rule of neoliberal freedom can be total and unrivaled. One can say that, after 9/11, many bodies, places, and forms of being and life have been subjected to the West’s and, thus, directly or indirectly as well, to disciplinary (neo)liberalism’s “parasitical project.” And, undoubtedly, some (although certainly not all) of these bodies, places, and modes of life/being have sought to antagonize the West because of the West’s ideological project (that is to say, because of the West’s attempt at erasing alterity at all costs, as Baudrillard, for example, suggested in some of his essays about 9/11).¹⁹

So, while contemporary political modalities of disciplinary (neo)liberalism, in the name of the subjects it claims to serve and protect (or enhance) or by effacing others (other lives, other bodies) that stubbornly resist ideological smoothening, may be quixotic (as Cutter avers), taking its projections, fictions, and simulations (of freedom, to start with) for reality across the globe, they are indeed also parasitical (vis-à-vis otherness/alterity), sacrificial (of bodies and lives that do not or refuse to fit, refuse to be free), and fascistic. Again, Tanović’s *No Man’s Land* makes this abundantly clear. When the UN job is done (whether it is actually done or not), when the simulation at that particular site is over (when the images move on to other places, other targets), all there remains to do, away from the gaze of the world’s cameras (which instead follow the path of the simulation and go on to the next projection or fiction), is to apply local cleansing, to erase in the “real landscape” of (geo)politics—to the extent that there still is one—any sign or trace that the simulation did fail, that the ideology did not take, that the other can and does still resist or antagonize, and that the West’s grand schemes are nothing more than violent, sacrificial, and death-proliferating rituals. *Morituri te salutant* indeed.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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19 See: Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2013).

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