

Grano Series – *The American Empire*

This speakers series, held in Toronto at the Grano restaurant, explores the potential and limits of American power in the 21st century through the ideas of four outstanding thinkers.

JOHN LUKACS

1 THE SPEAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, at this
2 point if I could really follow my instinct, I would
3 just sit down and listen to myself, which will not be
4 at all comparable to what Conrad said about me, and
5 I'm afraid that my short talk -- it shan't be very
6 long -- will have very little or none of the wit of
7 Conrad, but there I go. I must try. And the trial is
8 not an easy one in part -- that's my last reference to
9 Conrad -- because Conrad will probably not agree with
10 ninety per cent of what I'm going to say but as the
11 great French writer, Georges Bernanos, said, "Le
12 bonheur c'est un risk."

13 The other more difficult thing is that Patrick
14 gave me a title, a topic on which I'm supposed to
15 talk, which is terribly serious and -- are Americans
16 imperialists with a question mark. Well, I made some
17 notes the other day and here I go.

18 And the first problem, if it is a problem, is
19 the very word imperialist. The word imperialist,
20 until about 140 years ago, simply meant people who
21 liked emperors. Imperialist, as we mean it today, as
22 a popular jingo kind of inclination to like empires --
23 imperialist appears in the Oxford Dictionary, English
24 dictionary, only about 1868. But there is such a
25 thing, but you must understand that imperialism is

1 really part of a democratic element in a nation,
2 rather than an aristocratic one.

3 And in this respect yes, there is some
4 imperialism in the tendencies of the American national
5 character. All kind of a character or a nation's
6 character -- although sociologists deny there is such
7 a thing. It is not a category. It is a tendency.
8 And the tendencies which involve both actualities and
9 potentialities do exist.

10 Now, Americans were nationalists from the very
11 beginning. This is true, especially of very young
12 nations who want to find a certain kind of identity
13 and take a pride in the fact that they established
14 themselves, but American popular sentiment in that
15 direction was not always in accord with the leaders,
16 especially not of the founders. There's a duality
17 here in the history of American foreign relations,
18 very well exemplified by the man who was probably, I
19 think almost surely, the greatest American Secretary
20 of State in the 200 years of the republic, John Quincy
21 Adams who, on the one hand, could really force the
22 Spanish to agree to a rather hard treaty which really
23 extended America's frontiers but, on the other hand,
24 he said the immortal words in 1821, almost in the same
25 speech where the Monroe Doctrine was framed by him, --

1 he said, "We are friends of liberty all over the
2 world, but we don't go abroad in search for monsters
3 to destroy." I doubt whether anyone in the present
4 administration has ever heard of John Quincy Adams and
5 his words.

6 Now, in America -- when you speak of America
7 in generalization, we have to make a distinction I
8 often make and it's not an academic distinction; the
9 distinction between public opinion and popular
10 sentiment. Public opinion, yes. In a democracy,
11 obviously a lot of the course of the nation is
12 dictated or rather governed by public opinion. But
13 these terms are very sadly confused, especially in the
14 last hundred years and especially nowadays. When we
15 speak of public opinion polls, this and this and that,
16 what is trying to be ascertained or measured or put
17 into figures is really popular sentiment.

18 Popular sentiment and public opinion are not
19 the same things. They are not the same in the United
20 States. I am certain they are not the same in Canada.
21 I'm sure they're not the same in Zambia. Public is
22 not popular and opinion is not sentiment. Popular
23 sentiment is an inclination, a powerful inclination,
24 not always clearly ascertainable or phrased.

25 Public opinion in the 19th century, as Walter

1 Bagehot said, "is the opinion of the bald men at the
2 back of the omnibus." You know, people who read
3 newspapers and they were, even at that time, a
4 relative minority even in a democratic nation or
5 rather such as England.

6 Now, we can see in American history this
7 discrepancy between popular sentiment and public
8 opinion. We can see it as early as the 1840s. In the
9 1840s, it was a kind of an Irish-American demagogue
10 who coined this word of manifest destiny and the
11 United States in a manifest destiny to rule the entire
12 North American continent, so forth and so forth. And
13 you don't have to be a profound student of American
14 diplomatic history to know that about the very same
15 time when the manifest destiny slogan was coined and
16 became very popular, any political party that would
17 have -- that supported the notion, and this involves
18 your country, 54-40 and Fight would have had a popular
19 majority. But they were overruled by the president,
20 by the more educated kind of public opinion that
21 existed in the United States and, without great
22 difficulty, they decided on the 49th parallel.

23 And this is one example where the interests of
24 the American state did not quite coincide with the
25 inclinations, powerful inclinations, of popular

1 sentiment. Those in charge of the American ship of
2 state were more cautious. This existed several times
3 through the 19th century. Some of it involving your
4 country, Canada. In most cases, involving Cuba where
5 there were very important popular movements in order
6 to so-called liberate or invade Cuba and add it to the
7 southern states. The majority of the southern states,
8 who otherwise spoke of state's rights and
9 independence, were in favour of annexing and invading
10 Cuba and sometimes even of those parts of Mexico which
11 were left to be independent or non-American after
12 1848.

13 And we can see this discrepancy between
14 popular sentiment and public opinion all through the
15 Lincoln administration and its relationship with Great
16 Britain during the Civil War. But then, in 1898,
17 there comes a change.

18 In 1898, in the 1890s, there is no such
19 discrepancy. American public opinion, educated
20 opinion, feels a strong tendency, "Why does not the
21 United States also extend its empire?" as indeed in
22 those days, or rather in those decades, the British
23 did, the French did, the Italians did, the Belgians
24 did and so forth and so forth. The war of 1898 was
25 really a result of a powerful pressure both of public

1 opinion and popular sentiment. Popular sentiment was
2 for the war but so were educated Americans such as
3 John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt and so forth.

4 This was also a great change in the entire
5 geographical history of the world. No matter what
6 Copernicus discovered and what Magellan discovered
7 during his travels, politically speaking the world did
8 not become round until 1900. It's about 1900, for the
9 first time, we had two great imperial powers that were
10 not European, that were willing to extend their sway
11 beyond their immediate reach. They were the United
12 States and Japan. And what the United States and
13 Japan did or did not do between 1900 and 1914 had a
14 very important effect even on the European war. So as
15 a side remark, I would say that's when the world
16 became politically round.

17 Now, people speak a lot today, I think it's a
18 very imprecise term, of American exceptionalism.
19 People say that America is exceptional. Well, I would
20 say this is true but not true enough. Let me tell
21 you, going off the topic, just to amuse a little bit.
22 I will not be able to even come close to Conrad's
23 shadow, but there was this Irish biddy and the women
24 came around for tea in the afternoon and asked her,
25 "Is this true about the young widow up at the end of

1 the village?" And she said, "It's not true, but it's
2 true enough." And I have often told my students that
3 a historian has to approach things in a very opposite
4 way. There are things that are true, but they're not
5 true enough.

6 And I think American exceptionalism is one of
7 these terms that confuses things, rather than
8 clarifies them. But something happens after the war
9 of 1898 and the First World War with somebody like
10 President Wilson, where American exceptionalism or
11 nationalism or nascent imperialism becomes a kind of
12 universalism. Universal is what's good -- it's not
13 only what's good for America is good for the world,
14 but make the world safe for democracy.

15 In my reactionary sign you say that this is a
16 disastrous idea. I think the question before us and
17 before our descendants is can we make democracy safe
18 for the world, which is a very different question
19 which, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville would have
20 understood but Woodrow Wilson did not.

21 Now, we speak now about American imperialism
22 as an issue. Wilson's universalism, whatever it was,
23 was defeated in the election of 1920 and defeated by
24 people who ever since that, again rather inaccurately,
25 have been called American isolationists. But you know

1 it is in the nature of democratic society, perhaps
2 especially of Americans, there is kind of a split-
3 mindedness there. The American isolationists, very
4 few of them were really isolationists. They, in the
5 1920s or beginning in 1919, were very much opposed and
6 with some reason about American involvement in Europe,
7 but they were extreme imperialists when it came to the
8 Caribbean, to Nicaragua, and even to Asia. So, you
9 see, isolationists and introventionists for the next
10 25 years is usually defined, almost without exception,
11 "Who is the enemy?"

12 The same thing was very true about Franklin
13 Roosevelt in 1939 and '41 and thereafter, who was
14 sometimes, some people say, unduly cautious about
15 isolationist opinion but I'm not criticizing him now.
16 What I'm saying -- what is so very interesting, very
17 telling, impressed me very deeply when I came to this
18 country right after the Second World War, that the
19 American isolationists, many of them who were bitterly
20 opposed to the United States giving help to Britain
21 and getting involved in the war against Germany, in
22 1946/'47 became the most, the loudest advocates of a
23 crusade against the Soviet Union. What was so
24 isolationist about this?

25 They are examples of a certain kind of

1 American split-mindedness that I think characterizes
2 American popular sentiment but, sadly, even American
3 governmental policies till this day. The split-
4 mindedness should be very evident when we speak of the
5 American political terminology. We could really say
6 that there were American presidents and statesmen, not
7 only John Quincy Adams but, I don't know, George
8 Evans, Hugh Stinson, other people, who were much more
9 conservatives, much more conservative than was popular
10 sentiment.

11 But, you must understand, that until about
12 1950 the word conservative was avoided and eschewed by
13 all Americans. Senator Robert Taft, Robert A. Taft,
14 who was supposed to be the idol of the present
15 conservatives in the right-wing Republican party, in
16 1950 said, "I am not a conservative. I am an old-
17 fashioned liberal," he said.

18 By 1960, conservative begins to be an
19 acceptable word in America and by 1980, more Americans
20 regard themselves, identify themselves as
21 conservatives than as liberals. This is a tectonic
22 change of very great importance in this country, and I
23 don't want to go into discussing or illustrating the
24 absurdity of this and the absurdity that most American
25 conservatives don't want to conserve anything.

1 They are not conservatives at all, not in
2 their domestic policy, not in their foreign policy.
3 But what this means, that the Republican party -- and
4 I, for taxation reasons, am still a registered
5 Republican, I'm sad to say -- but the Republican party
6 has become the populist party in America. The
7 populists who, a hundred years ago, were on the left
8 wing of the Democratic party -- this has greatly
9 vanished. Their descendants have become Republicans
10 and the Republican party, in every sense of the word,
11 has become a populist party and thereby demonstrates
12 the sad descent of democracy into populism against
13 which the founders tried to argue and legislate and
14 write a constitution.

15 This is a very complicated thing, ladies and
16 gentlemen, because we are told in a democracy, the
17 people speak. The people do not speak. It is people,
18 men and women, who speak in the name of the people.
19 So instead of democracy being the simplest kind of
20 basic government built on human choice, the very
21 structure of events, the very course a state sets in
22 the modern age, in the twentieth century, especially
23 the United States, is not made by the people but by
24 people who speak in the name of the people, one step
25 removed from reality but also one step which seems to

1 echo very closely what their managers think and
2 perceive as popular sentiment.

3 I end this brings about another problem
4 involving public opinion and popular sentiment,
5 involving majority choice. You see, what the
6 opponents, conservative opponents of democracy feared,
7 the tyranny of the majority. Yes, it exists. But it
8 is far more complicated than it used to be in the 19th
9 century, because we have not only the United States
10 but I would say in every democratic nation, hard
11 minorities and soft majorities. And it is within the
12 province and the capacity of hard minorities to
13 exercise an influence over popular sentiment way
14 beyond their numbers and also way beyond their
15 intellectual property.

16 This is what is happening in the United States
17 today. Now the political categories, right and left,
18 and especially conservative and liberal have lost
19 their meaning. Not entirely, but largely so. Look at
20 the great change. Look at Woodrow Wilson, who was
21 defeated in 1920 but now, 90 years later or 80 years
22 later, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Richard
23 Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush are all Wilsonians.
24 All Wilsonians, all universalists, which is a very
25 difficult and complicated problem and issue before the

1 American people. American universalism, which can do
2 a great amount of harm not only to places in the world
3 but to the standards of honesty and decency within the
4 political discourse of the American people themselves.

5 I copied out a quote that Alexander Hamilton
6 got from Machiavelli, the prince, which I think is
7 very apposite, very applicable to my adopted country
8 today, which says:

9 "Fortune smiles on the well situated, the
10 enterprising and the courageous, but not on
11 the over-confident, the reckless and those who
12 willfully ignore the past."

13 Thank you.
14