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Bandits and Biopolitics: Power, Control, and Exploitation in *Cidade dos Homens* (2007)

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Bandits and Biopolitics: Power, Control, and Exploitation in *Cidade dos Homens* (2007)

*I am Favela
Yes, but the favela was never the refuge of the marginal, I said
There are only humble people, marginalized
And this truth does not appear in the newspaper
The favela is a social problem.
—Bezerra da Silva¹*

Stephen A. Cruikshank*

The urban slums of Brazil, known as “favelas,” are sanctuaries for bandits, villains of state power, that have drawn public attention through the narratives of twenty-first century Brazilian film. Else R. P. Vieira notes that “Brazilian films have been sweeping over the *favelas*, catching Brazil’s and the world’s eyes, making ever more visible the burgeoning of these quintessential sites of exclusion, as if they were self-contained cities within the

metropolitan sprawls of São Paulo and Rio” (xiii). Such sensationalism is evident in the 2002 hit film *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), co-directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund. Originally adapted from Paulo Lins’ 1997 novel of the same name, the film’s plot is loosely based on real events that depict the criminal undertakings and drug wars in the Rio de Janeiro favela *Cidade de Deus* occurring between the late 1960’s and early 1980’s. *Cidade de Deus* was met with both domestic and international success, receiving four Academy

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Award nominations in 2004. Two years following the film's initial release, Meirelles and Lund, with the support of 20th Century Fox and TV Globo, went on to direct the four-season television program *Cidade dos Homens* (City of Men) between the years 2002 and 2005. The series met with similar success and was watched by millions of viewers across Brazil who witnessed the unfolding story of two young friends growing up in a favela in Rio de Janeiro among a community of drug traffickers, hustlers, and fellow teenagers. The popularity of the series led to its cinematic release under the same title in 2007, directed by Paulo Morelli.

Morelli's adaptation of Meirelles and Lund's cinematic depictions of criminal youth in Rio de Janeiro's favelas is backed by a local and international acclaim that speaks to a broad public interest in favela narratives. Why, however, is the favelado (the resident of a favela) so popular? The answer to this, I argue, is found in the depiction of "banditry" in the favela and its contingent identification with subaltern struggle that is depicted in the outlaw narrative of the protagonists. As bandits, the youth in films such as *Cidade dos Homens* are positioned outside of the law and segregated economically as poor, racially as Afro-Brazilian, and territorially in the favela. Their marginalized position in the favela consequentially critiques the two sides of a long-standing urban conflict

in Brazil between the metropolis and the slums, between the citizen (o *cidadão*) and the favelado. I contend that what allows the film to cultivate the successful national image of favelados is the presentation of the "biopolitical event" of urban resistance,² an event that has its roots in the hegemonic power system of the favelas. Here I employ the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, drawing on this term's use by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and the post-Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In this respect, I see the existence of the favelas as representing a history of hegemonic control over marginalized territory in Rio de Janeiro and the consequential urbanized exploitation of human bodies. Films like *Cidade dos Homens* provide an effective medium to advertise the biopolitical event of the favelados, aesthetically drawing the viewer into the inherited struggle against poverty, racism, economic seclusion, and urban violence experienced by the "multitude" of favelados.² *Cidade dos Homens*, in this manner, documents a narrative of banditry that exposes the viewership to the hegemonic oppression of favelas and, in doing so, obliges the audience to confront the modern constructions of new subjectivities in Rio de Janeiro's urban culture.

Hegemony is at work in the favelas. This is evidenced not only through the urban war against drug trafficking, but also through the coordinating power of urban

design that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, designated the favelas as the urban “leftovers” to be herded into shantytowns—an example of what Foucault calls a society’s “threshold of [mercantilist] rationality” (102) and what Agamben later attributes to Foucault as the “threshold of biological modernity” (3). Otherwise said, favelas are a threshold of biopower, a place designed by the rationalized exercises of state power to distribute and distinguish wealth amongst urban elite and legitimate this through “bio-logical” segregation tactics in urban environments. Favelas are ruled by biopower because what is truly at stake is not so much the city itself but rather the safety, security, and basic biological rights of its human inhabitants—the favelados—who, as Janice Perlman elaborates in *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (2010), are subjected to the “lack of a well educated labor pool, safe drinking water, [or] reliable electric power” and the “fear of getting killed on the way to work or having one’s child mugged on the way home from school” (9). The lack of physical security in the favelas represents an urban strategy of marginalization, representing what Foucault describes as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy” (16)—an urbanized stronghold of biopower.

To connect the body with the favela

implies two important features of biopolitics: firstly, it implies that bodies are created agents, contingent in the struggles of urban hegemony. Secondly, it implies that the body’s agency is therefore always-already an ambiguous construction. Bodies make up the definitive building blocks of the hegemonic binary: the formative and the resistant, the legal and the outlaw, the political and anti-political, the citizen and the bandit. When these bodies become active in a “multitude”—what Hardt and Negri describe as “an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally” (*Multitude* xiv)—their constructed representation realizes biopolitics. Hardt and Negri assert that biopolitics “is a partisan relationship between subjectivity and history that is crafted by a multitudinous strategy, formed by events and resistances, and articulated by a discourse that links political decision making to the construction of bodies in struggle” (*Commonwealth* 61). Therefore, if we are to consider the favela to represent such a political construction of bodies, what then is the struggle of these bodies, the favelados? This is an important question that Morelli targets in the film *Cidade dos Homens*. In particular, the title of the film blatantly attributes this struggle as an event both within *a cidade* (the city) and occurring between *os homens* (men)—a point that the directors Lund and Meirelles highlight in their television series by playing with the name of their previous

film *Cidade de Deus*. The titular change to *Cidade dos Homens* speaks not only to the continuation of their initial work, *Cidade de Deus*, but also to what appears as a thematic overture of the man-made, rather than God-granted, agency of the favelas. The very change of the titles speaks to the formation of a biopolitical narrative. Depicting the favela as a “city of men” highlights the human condition of favelas. The temporal being, *o homem*, rather than the eternal God, *o Deus*, becomes the proprietor of urban space. Here, St. Augustine’s theological establishment of the *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God), the analogical root of the favela of the same name, gives way to the humanized establishment of the “city of men.” The human bandit, not God, becomes the faculty of violence in the urban world, changing the course of urban design from an omnipotent designation of power to a temporal struggle for power; the power shifts from uncontested sovereignty to the enigmatic resistance against hegemony. *Cidade de Deus* in many ways uses the title of the favela to satirically compare the godless violence and depravity that inhabits it. The title *Cidade dos Homens*, in this sense, removes the satire and presents the favela as what it truly is: not a satire of God’s creation but an honest critique of man’s inauguration of poverty and violence.

Man-made urban violence, a pivotal theme of *Cidade dos Homens*, defines the hegemonic interplay between powers of

the state and the powers of *os homens* (referring here specifically to the favelados). On one side, the law, arriving from outside of the favela, condemns the violent resistance to the law; on the other, *os homens* within the favela experience this violence as a daily reality. This violent reality is what tests the bond between the key protagonists of the film, the two best friends Luís Cláudio (known as “Ace”) and Uólíce (known as “Laranjinha”). Meirelles and Lund’s television series originally depicts both characters as young boys. However, in Morelli’s film version both Ace and Laranjinha are seen as adolescent men entering the heavy responsibilities of adulthood and the temptations of the violent gang-life in their favela community of Morro da Sinuca. The young men are seen throughout two revolving plots of the film that often jump from one to the other. In one plot the film narrates Ace and Laranjinha’s new developments as eighteen-year-old men. For Ace, this involves the recent challenge of fatherhood. Abandoned by his girlfriend Cris, who leaves for São Paulo to find work, Ace is left to raise his young son Clayton by himself. Laranjinha’s development involves the challenge of being fatherless. Turning eighteen obliges Laranjinha to adopt a last name on his identification papers, motivating him to search for his father, who has recently been released from prison after serving fifteen years for murder. With Ace’s help, he finds his

father, Heraldo, after tracking him down using a photo of a football team he was known to be a part of. The second plot revolves around the violent outbreak of a gang war in Morro da Sinuca. After a gang member named Fasto betrays the gang leader Madrugadão (Midnight), Morro da Sinuca turns into a war zone. Outgunned, Madrugadão's gang flees to another favela, Morro do Careca, to recruit new members and Fasto takes over Morro da Sinuca. The two plots are connected through the shared experience of Ace and Laranjinha, who are forced to flee Morro da Sinuca to escape the violence. The war is particularly threatening to Ace since Fasto thinks he is working for Madrugadão and orders his henchmen to kill him. Ace is left on the streets and flees to another favela named Morro do Careca, where Madrugadão and his gang attempt to recruit him into the gang violence. Upon hearing of Ace's dilemma, Laranjinha leaves to search for him. Laranjinha discovers the truth of his father's crime when he confronts Ace, who is beginning an assault on Morro da Sinuca with Madrugadão's gang. There, Ace confirms that his father was shot in the back by Laranjinha's father. The air of betrayal is thick in their encounter, and Ace holds a gun on Laranjinha. The tension, however, is overcome by a heartfelt bond of friendship, and the two later flee the violent favela together with Ace's son, Clayton.

The cinematic portrayal of violence in the lives of Laranjinha and Ace in many ways represents a historical objective of Brazilian film, which since the early Cinema Novo movement has used the art of cinema to publicize the aggressive poverty and violence of Brazilian culture. In the essay "An Esthetic of Hunger" (1965), the Cinema Novo writer and director Glauber Rocha claims that Brazil's incessant poverty gives form to a "culture of hunger" in Brazil. He is adamant that Brazil's cinema is defined by the objective of relaying the struggle of hunger and poverty through violence: "There resides the tragic originality of Cinema Novo in relation to world cinema. Our originality is our hunger and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood [...]. Therefore, only a culture of hunger, weakening its own structures, can surpass itself qualitatively; the most noble cultural manifestation of hunger is violence" (60). According to Rocha an aesthetics of violence in cinema "before being primitive, is revolutionary" (60). For Rocha, then, violence is revolutionary because it defines the moment in which the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized subjects and of their strength and values what they bring to culture. *Cidade dos Homens* continues Cinema Novo's trend of violence, only now it represents the urban-colonial resistance of the favelados. Acts of resistance are presented to Laranjinha and Ace

as two-fold: there is either the resistance to the law, occurring through gang violence in the favelados, or the resistance to the violence within the favela, via escape. Opting for the latter, their decision is motivated by their friendship which, in order to remain, must overcome both the past violence of their fathers and the current gang violence of their present. Their friendship, therefore, depends on both a separation from their past and a reevaluation of their position in the present. Thinking in line with Glauber Rocha's work, one could understand that the two friends are fighting not only against the institutions of violence engrained in the life of favelados but also against their very own culture (the culture of hunger). What Morelli cinematically portrays as an aesthetics of violence, then, is in fact thematically subverted in the film, as Laranjinha and Ace opt instead to leave the violent favela to save their friendship.

Ace and Laranjinha's subversion of violence takes place as the two fatherless young men come to terms with their new-found adulthood and discern the violence within the favelas that, particularly in their case, has been the direct cause for fatherless children—something both Ace and Laranjinha want to prevent happening to Clayton. The figure of the father is, without doubt, the key subject in the film. The film's narrative balances between, on one end, Ace's struggle to identify himself as a father to Clayton and, on the other end,

Laranjinha's struggle to identify himself without a father. In both cases, the film emphasizes the consequential social breakdowns of a fatherless society. Stephen Holden connects this with the rise of the bandit, or "outlaw": "That the sins of the fathers are passed on to the sons is the somewhat thudding message of a movie that hammers home its point by having Ace and [Laranjinha] reach an impasse in their friendship that parallels the relationship of their fathers two decades earlier. In a society of fatherless boys craving role models, glamorous *outlaws* fill the void" ("Movie Review"; my emphasis). In a "city of men," it is men who both cause the violence and create the fatherless society that galvanizes this violence. The bandit is therefore the victim not only of political marginalization but also of paternal marginalization—both being causes of systemic violence and paternal abandonment. The bandit's biopolitical resistance, in this manner, is two-pronged: the resistance against state legality and the resistance against patriarchal dereliction. In this way both Ace and Laranjinha must learn to survive the war of the favela as well as to battle their warring identities as fatherless men. Their full victory is only found by fleeing their violent-trodden home and in doing so differentiating their lives from that of their fathers.

It can be said that fatherless favelados, such as Ace and Laranjinha, epitomize a form of banditry or resistance

against both biological life and political life—between the father and the state, the former absent and the latter exploitative. The combination of both biological and political resistance transforms Ace and Laranjinha into what Giorgio Agamben's philosophy denotes as a *homo sacer*, a man (according to old Roman law) designated as both "sacred" and "accursed," the two denotations of the Latin word "sacer." On one hand, their identities as a favelados differentiates them as "sacred" because they are placed outside of the urban elite's legislation; on the other hand, it is this very position that "curses" them, leaving them fatherless. As "sacred," the bandit is found within the marginalized favela and thus secured against the political violence that threatens it. However, as "accursed," the bandit is found amongst the marginalized violence occurring within the favela itself. This is to say that the bandit is both venerated from the outside and condemned to the violence on the inside. Consequently, violence (the culture of hunger) marginalizes the bandit from all sides. Furthermore, Agamben notes that *homo sacer* is the man "*who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert" (8; emphasis in original). He traces this figure from Roman exiles to the "accursed" runaways of the Middle Ages and as far as the inmates of Nazi concentration camps. As Thomas Lemke notes, each of these cases

are connected through one common trait: "although they all involve human life, they are excluded from the protection of the law. They remain either turned over to humanitarian assistance and unable to assert a legal claim or are reduced to the status of 'biomass' through the authority of scientific interpretations and definitions" (55). To this extent, while Agamben's use of the term "camp" cannot be conceptually divorced from the concentration camps of WWII, it can be used in the context of favelas, for example, to provide a schema through which to think about marginalized social spaces regulated by biopower and subject to politicized violence.

For Agamben, *homo sacer* represents the limited boundaries of rational sovereignty that oversees people's "bare life," which can be understood as the basic existence of people, their bodies, their health, and their well-being. Although not related to their political existence, "bare life" proves to be what makes up the political body, a body that denotes the life and death of human beings as the decisive objective of sovereign power. This is what Agamben considers as "the new biopolitical body of humanity" (9). The "bare life" of the *homo sacer* is labelled as the "sovereign exception" (6); one's exception as "sacred" becomes defined by the sovereign power as "accursed." In this way the "bare life" of *homo sacer* is brought from the margins of political order, outside of the law, and

placed within the very political objectives of sovereign power itself. In our case, for example, the very existence of life for the favelados becomes part of a biopolitical order. The life of the favelado, in this sense, sees an awkward union between what Agamben denotes as bare life (natural being) and political life (political existence). Respectively, these are what Agamben denotes as *zoē* and *bios*, the etymological division of the Greek words for “life”: *zoē* being “the simple fact of living common to all living beings” and *bios* being “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1). Agamben’s new biopolitical body of humanity therefore sees both forms of life subsumed under sovereign rule. As such, the *homo sacer*, whom Agamben confirms as our figure of a “bandit,” sees his way of life (*bios*) overcome by the political demand over his life (*zoē*). Agamben explains his perspective of *homo sacer* as the bandit:

Let us now observe the life of *homo sacer*, or of the bandit [...] his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned

threat of death. He is pure *zoē*, but his *zoē* is as such caught in the sovereign ban and must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude or deceive it. In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more “political” than his. (183)

As Agamben clarifies, the bandit’s life—both its “sanctity” and “curse”—is political. It is political because—thinking in terms of our bandits Ace and Laranjinha—these favelados have been both “banned” and “banished” by political forces. There is a difference between the two acts: they are “banned” from the urban elite but are later “banished” from their home in the favela due to the violence occurring against the state.

To better understand the connection between the bandit and the actions of “banning” and “banishing,” I turn to Pablo Dabove’s literary analysis of banditry *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin American 1816-1929* (2007). Dabove considers the bandit as “perhaps the most important in a series of *dramatis personae* that in post-colonial Latin American culture function as frontiers between ‘domains of sovereignty’” (7). Etymologically, Dabove traces the word “bandit” to the Spanish “*bando*” which represented a written proclamation that ordered outlawed criminals to appear before their given authorities for trial (9).

Rather obviously, it is unlikely that the bandit would appear before the authorities. The bandit therefore sees his identity embedded into a position placed before the law through the *bando*. The law is therefore placed upon him rather than the bandit placing himself within the law. In this sense, the *bando* speaks less to the bandit's fulfillment of the law and more to the legitimization of the law itself. By placing the bandit outside of the law through the written *bando*, the bandit becomes marginalized from the power of the law and therefore becomes a focal point for the multitude of similar subaltern subjects. Furthermore, the bandit's marginalization from the law consequently legitimates the state's performance of power through the act of exclusion. It is for this reason that the favelado represents the modern version of a bandit being that he is a marginal and excluded citizen within the shantytowns originally created by the hegemonic practices of the Brazilian state. In this way, the bandit, the *homo sacer*, is sacred to the extent that he is outside of the state law and yet "accursed" because he is condemned by the *bando*. His very being is defined by his *zoē*, yet labeled by his *bios*, the sovereign *biopower* that overlooks his operations and dictates the quality of his existence. We can acknowledge, therefore, that Ace and Laranjinha are both sacred-and-thus-"banned" (that is legally marginalized through the proclamation of the *bando*) and accursed-and-thus-

"banished" (that is obligated to flee the impeding violence).

Both Ace and Laranjinha are caught in the paradox of the *homo sacer*. They are bandits, residents who are exceptions to the law yet inceptions to marginality. Their *bando* is inherited, destining them to a life of survival within a marginalized territory. Agamben, as previously mentioned, localizes their situation in the figure of the "camp"—"the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (168). In our case, the camp is the favela, the place where bandits become judged by the *bando*, and thereby placed within the sovereign oversight of a state-mandated *biopower*. They are exceptions outside of the law, yet they are ruled from within it. In effect, our bandits' *zoē*, their common ability to live with all beings, is interrupted in the patriarchal failure inherited in their society of violence. *Bios* interrupts their "bare life." Interestingly, *bios*, the prefix of *bio*-logy (realized here in the absence of a *bio*-logical father) represents the "accursed" life of our bandits. On the outside, they live as part of a "sacred" multitude of favelados that have historically transformed the oppressive lack of basic needs into a flourishing community; however, they remain "accursed" due to the *bios*-logical repercussions of being on the outside. As such, they suffer the consequences of their own people's violent resistance, dealt by the system that has

marginalized them. Being an *out-law* has consequently “outed” their need for patriarchal reform; the exclusion from sovereignty has left these young men likewise excluded from their own families.

Despite Agamben’s unique observation of the connection between politics and biological life, his philosophy remains limiting in cases like Ace and Laranjinha’s. Lemke has argued that biopolitics, for Agamben, becomes above all a demonstration of “thanatopolitics” (53), whereby the political project of life is really identified with that of death. Indeed, according to Agamben, “[a] law that seeks to decide on life is embodied in a life that coincides with death” (186). In this sense, the *bando*, proclaiming the favelados as marginal citizens, would correspondingly imply the assertion of a death penalty, definitive of either a physical or a political death. For Agamben, exclusion is death, inclusion is life, and in both cases it is the sovereign power, the nation-state, that is in control: “the body is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power” (187).

In contrast, Hardt and Negri’s interpretation of biopolitics challenges Agamben’s assumption on the basis that biopolitics represents not resistant politicized “lives” unable to oppose the sovereign discourse of biopower, but rather a political

“event” characterized by resistance. This resistance is not futile, as Agamben would assume, since it “it is always a queer event, a subversive process of subjectivization that, shattering ruling identities and norms, reveals the link between power and freedom, and thereby inaugurates an alternative production of subjectivity” (*Commonwealth* 63). Surely Ace’s and Laranjinha’s lives are conflicted due to the collision of their *zoē* and *bios*. However, the “camp” of the favela, through which their bare life and political life are subsumed into one, does not imply their immanent subjectivity to the state and its *bando*; rather, it leaves room for Hardt and Negri’s concept of “de-subjectification,” and, therefore, for resistance. This is evidenced in the moment when Ace holds a gun to Laranjinha’s head. The path of *bios* urges for an ending in violence. Ace’s *zoē* should be subject to his preconditioned environment and history. He should shoot Laranjinha and follow his immanent death as a henchman, leaving Clayton as fatherless as himself. But this is not what happens; the cycle does not repeat. Ace is obliged by his deep-felt friendship with Laranjinha to cut ties with their fathers’ past and depart together from the favela and its violence. Following their stand-off, the two friends return to a family residence where Clayton is being safely cared for. Ace, holding his son, declares his love for him, promising to always be there. Laranjinha has likewise chosen to risk his life for his

friend while acknowledging the inevitable failures of his father. New subjectivities are formed, ones in which the fatherless becomes the father, the violent forgiving, and the trapped liberated. Ace and Laranjinha's choice to identify themselves as "other" than what the favelado has for so long been labelled not only reflects Hardt and Negri's notion of biopolitical resistance and the formation of new subjectivities but also gives way to a new form of life, both for the two young men and for the future life of Clayton. As the film reminds us, all resistance affects generations to come.

To a certain extent the connection of *Cidade dos Homens* with Agamben's biopolitical paradox reminds us as viewers to look beyond the urban structures of poverty and violence found in the favelas and into the physical life of their inhabitants. The film narrates violence as something inherited within the favela and recycled by favelados—a revolving social problem not of marginal citizens but of marginalized people. The bandit narrative of the *favela* reminds us that the "evil" violence is rooted in a hegemonic system long inspired by political objectives. Unlike Agamben, Hardt and Negri's biopolitical agenda proposes a much-needed solution to this, proposing that "love" provides a path for creating a place of self-rule and democratic organization among the common poor. Love, for example, gives Ace and Laranjinha a second chance at life, the

courage to stay loyal to each other, leave the favela, and take care of Ace's son Clayton. This example, however, only posits a deeper problem of favelados, revealing an inevitable tension between love and violence, desire and reality: if violence and poverty contain one inside the favela and love obliges one to leave, the favelado remains trapped between the physical refuge of his body and the material refuge of his home. In either case refuge is lost, and the bandit must choose between his local safety (his "sanctity") or his departure from home (his "curse"). The bandit must choose to lose his body or his place—all-in-all revealing the paradoxical dilemma of biopolitics. In light of this conflict, Hardt and Negri explain that "[l]ove needs force to conquer their ruling powers and dismantle their corrupt institutions before it can create a new world of common wealth" (*Commonwealth* xii). Whether such a force, politically speaking, is possible is a question that cinematically remains overshadowed by powerful images of violence. As it is, any force of love in Brazilian favela films, in lieu of violence, is realized as nothing more than a cinematic gesture of escape, a mere displacement of marginalized bodies within a culture of hunger.

¹ "Eu sou favela," a well-known samba piece, was composed by Noca de Portela and Sergio Mosca in 1994 and has

been popularized in the song versions by Bezerra da Silva and Seu Jorge. For the English translation and further discussion on the samba lyrics see chapter six “Marginality from Myth to reality” where these lyrics are quoted in Janice Perman’s *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (2010).

² See “De Corpore 1: Biopolitics as an Event” in Hardt and Negri’s book *Commonwealth* (2009).

³ I follow the meaning of “multitude” as an expansive politicalized network and common unity of cultural differences as stipulated in Hardt and Negri’s work *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004).

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