

AMERICAN EMPIRE AND "NEW IMPERIALISM": HOW GEOGRAPHERS APPROACHED THE WAR ON TERROR FROM 2001-2006

By Ali Jordan

Soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 came the war in Afghanistan, and then the war in Iraq. Prominent scholars including David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Neil Smith, Edward Said, Michael Ignatieff, Niall Ferguson, and Noam Chomsky were among the first to approach these event in their work. I focus on publications from these scholars and others between 2001 to 2006, a period that covered 9/11 through to the early years of the wars. What makes this period important is the urgency of that moment in time. This was an opportunity to hypothesize, observe, and make conclusions as history was unfolding. Through these works, I argue that geographical scholarship at this particular moment in question—the terror attacks of 9/11—represent a culmination of anxieties regarding the efficacy of American liberal diplomacy moving forward. I demonstrate how these authors make visible the underlying contradictions of coercion and consent practiced in the making and maintenance of American empire, and grapple with what it means for the universality of American liberalism to be challenged on the world stage.

Introduction

Soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 came the war in Afghanistan, and then in Iraq. As these wars unfolded, some geographers and others writing with varying degrees of attention to spatiality critically engaged with the existence of an American empire in the face of a nation in denial, and worked through what these wars might mean for the future of American imperialism. Prominent scholars including David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Neil Smith, Edward Said, Michael Ignatieff, Niall Ferguson, and Noam Chomsky were among the first to take up this work, particularly from 2001 to 2006, a period that covered 9/11 through to the early years of the wars. This paper focuses on select publications from these authors during this period for two reasons. First, the overwhelming amount of related scholarship published during this time and thereafter speaks to the impact of these events and the influence they had. Second, although some of these authors have vastly different analytical frameworks, political leanings, and backgrounds, there is consensus on many of the major points raised; they are clearly talking about the same imperialism. This allows for meaningful cross-analysis where these texts converge and differ.

In the following sections, I recount how cases for the existence and implications of American imperialism were argued in select publications between 2001-2006 through the use of key themes such as American liberalism and its relationship with globalization Heartland theory, and imaginative geographies of terror. I situate these works within discussions of the ways in which geographers have discussed American imperialism prior to and after this period to demonstrate its influence. By no means is this an exhaustive reading of how geographers have treated imperialism as

this period is not unique for dealing with imperialism, or even American imperialism at that (Bowen, 1985; Said, 1978), What makes this period important is the urgency of that moment in time. This was an opportunity to hypothesize, observe, and make conclusions as history was unfolding. I argue that geographical scholarship at this particular moment in question—the terror attacks of 9/11—represents a culmination of anxieties regarding the efficacy of American liberal diplomacy moving forward. I demonstrate how these authors make visible the underlying contradictions of coercion and consent practiced in the making and maintenance of American empire and grapple with what it means for the universality of American liberalism to be challenged on the world stage.

Politics and Economics: Globalization as the Vehicle for American Liberalism

Smith's *End Game of Globalization* investigates liberalism past the confines of twentieth century America. The squabble between neoconservatives and neoliberals in the US under the singular title of liberalism is a testament to the triumph of this ideology. Smith noted that through writing classical liberalism into the US constitution, a "natural liberalism", a term which he credits to Louis Hartz, emerged as "an appeal to liberty, equality, and freedom that root[s] its claims in a philosophy of natural rights... common to all man" (Smith, 2005, p. 31). As such, the US constitution was conceived as the antithesis of the British Empire the the US wrestled their independence from. To be American is to be naturally of these "universal," liberal ideals, supposedly, and these ideals form the basis for American nationalism.

Bishai (2004) explored the contradictions built into the liberal imperialism imposed by America to discuss the ways in which the tenets it holds, such as plurality and toleration, are achieved through coercive force which undermine those same universal values it stakes claim to. She also explained how liberalism produces the exceptionalism of American identity, the cultural driver of empire, and prevents citizens from recognizing their nation as an empire. The plurality and tolerance that liberalism champions in theory is limited by the global dominance of the empire that keeps outsiders to the margins. She said, "...[it] ought to be a globally beneficial and acceptable model... [but] policing must occur to marginalize dissent that departs from the moral core that is obvious to all rational people" (Bishai, 2004, p. 52). Further down, she unpacks the "supreme irony" of liberal empire, which is that its universal liberal identity is predicated upon normalizing difference within. This appears to be neither plural nor tolerant.

Some other key elements of liberalism are "economic openness – free trade, free labour movement and free capital flows" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 184). Through organizations like the IMF, the World Bank, and the US Treasury Department, all of which the US has significant influence within, the rules of global economic engagement are set and these rules have consistently supported free markets. This has been problematic for developing countries that are coerced into opening their markets in exchange for debt-financed assistance. Reforms through these means have had little success in those countries. Through this highly unequal power dynamic, a global economy conducive to American exploitation is produced. In this way, globalization only appears to operate as a deterritorialized expansion of the American empire.

The lack of formal empire suggests that territory is not so important to the building and maintenance of American empire, but territory is still critical to the imperial project. The use of this deterritorialized facade is explained in many ways, but one of which is as an aversion to grand colonial projects. Not only are these costly, but they give the outward appearance of empire, a title

that Americans have staunchly rejected. This rejection may be because empire and by extension, colonialism stand contradictory to the liberal values that American Nationalism is founded upon (Smith, 2005, p. 49). This approach achieves imperialist control while adhering to the above. Smith is careful not to say that power becomes deterritorialized. Instead, Smith asserts that power “is always specific to particular places” (p. 51), which is echoed in Harvey’s New Imperialism. Harvey points to similar tensions between the liberal capitalist imperatives to break down market barriers and promote individual rights and freedoms, and the territorializing drive to capture and control resources and territories.

Smith and Bishai, along with others like Harvey, Ignatieff, and Ferguson, are cognizant of a shift in the approach of the American empire that begins with the events of 9/11. First, diplomacy is carried out by garnering international support through the espousal of a universal liberalism. Thereafter, it is traded in for a model of coercion backed by military might. Though the approach was transformed, what remained unchanged was the hegemonic power of the American empire and its claim to morality. The transformation is cyclical and made visible by the works of Harvey, Nourzhanov, and Chomsky, who illustrated the continued presence of coercive territorial strategies of empire that harken back to the imperial geopolitics of the turn of the twentieth century.

Reviving the Heartland Theory: Heartland Theory within the Broader Field of Geopolitics

At the turn of the twentieth century, Halford Mackinder, geographer and defender of British Empire, published one of his most influential works, “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Imperialists like Mackinder were concerned by the changing geopolitical landscape in which Britain’s power appeared to be increasingly compromised by rising powers in Asia. Mackinder’s publication, often referred to as Heartland theory, divided the world into geographical sections of influence, or stepping stones to global power. This theory designated a large swath of land central to Eurasia (Mackinder, 2004), despite vast regional differences throughout, as the geographical pivot of history and goes on to justify its control as of the utmost importance to European stability in the future. He worked to portray a cohesive and ordered Europe, with Britain at the helm of course, locked into a timeless war with an ever-changing horde of Asian forces. The concerned language he used hints that he felt Britain’s supremacy could be up-ended by the awakening of Germany and Russia. Mackinder’s strategic geographies of influence gave way to the emerging body of work that would become geopolitics. In so doing, he embedded an ever-present threat of a chaotic and savage Asia encroaching upon a just and righteous Europe.

In discussing the geo-strategic importance of oil in relation to Iraq’s position within the Middle East in his book, *The New Imperialism*, Harvey evoked the language of Mackinder’s Heartland theory. He said, “...whoever controls the Middle East controls the global oil spigot and whoever controls the global oil spigot can control the economy...” (Harvey, 2003, p. 19). He used this to explain why toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime and gaining further ground in the region would be of interest to the American empire if oil was to be its primary concern. Likewise, Chomsky explained that Iraq, by having the second largest oil reserves in the region and the ease by which it can be accessed, is an advantageous position to hold for the US (Chomsky, 2005, p. 6). Intentionally, it would seem, Harvey’s phrase was almost identical to one found in Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals and Reality* which read: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World” (Mac-

kinder, 1962, p. 106). Although Harvey's language obviously called upon the geopolitical writing of Mackinder, Harvey's analysis was more sophisticated in its approach. While Mackinder's conceptualization of global power was limited to a vague control of territory alone, Harvey considered more deeply the economic dynamics underlying Heartland geopolitics. Comparing Mackinder and Harvey's simplification of their respective geopolitical landscapes, parallels are drawn between Britain-Eurasia and the US-Middle East. However, further readings of the geopolitics underlying Mackinder and Harvey's pieces bring forth questions about Russia's relatively fixed position across both contexts.

Nourzhanov (2006) mentions that even after the Cold War was over, the US had extended new containment policies aimed at preventing Russian control in the Middle East. In substituting the American for the British empire, he explicitly called upon the logic of the Heartland theory to explain that US global dominance was dependent on keeping "continental powers [Russia, Iran, and China] from forming an alliance capable of challenging US hegemony" (Nourzhanov, 2006, p. 65). Nourzhanov's analysis was a departure from Mackinder's more simplistic models of territory as power and like Harvey, he noted that oil played a role in so far as it represented a superficial justification for American occupation in the region, and that "oil [was] merely a pretext for a struggle for domination that really belong[ed] to the bygone era of the Cold War or even classical nineteenth century imperialism" (Nourzhanov, 2006, p. 64). Harvey recalled how Henry Kissinger, once Secretary of State and National Security Advisor of the US, claimed the global power alignments at the start of the War on Terror resembled that of the nineteenth century, and that Kissinger was genuinely concerned that the US could not challenge a powerful Eurasian block (Harvey, 2003, p. 85). Nourzhanov suggested that the danger in pursuing Mackinderian geopolitics in the region, which arguably find resonance with Kissinger, was that it would likely be counterproductive in fighting the War on Terror by bringing further instability to the region. The parallels drawn between the containment strategies used by the US during the Cold War and thereafter, and the geopolitics of Mackinder are evident in both Nourzhanov and Harvey's analyses. However, both Nourzhanov and Harvey diverged from Mackinder in important ways. For example, they work through Heartland theory to explain the unfolding of events rather than to prescribe particular foreign policies. Additionally, their analyses add depth to the simplistic narrative of the Heartland by investigating historical precedence and economic dynamics alongside each other. This speaks to the lingering influence of the Heartland theory and its cyclical revival during these major geopolitical moments stretching from the *fin de siècle*, to the World Wars, the Cold War, and then in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Imaginative Geographies: The War on Terror

Borrowing heavily from the work of Edward Said, Gregory discussed the ways in which imaginative geographies produce spaces that enable war through case studies of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. The concept of imaginative geographies refers to the ways in which places and by relation, people are socially constructed and represented because of their positions within hegemonic relationships (Said, 1979). Gregory said, "[p]eople go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others: that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation" (2004, p. 20). This implied that cultural differences produce conditions under which one "type" can be cast as superior or inferior to another, thus justifying whatever treacherous actions might ensue. By extension, imaginative geographies portray culture as a passive collection of attributes that can be manipulated to fit some agenda.

Gregory made a point of stressing that culture is not just a reflection of the world, but that “culture underwrites power even as power elaborates culture” (2004, p. 8). Understanding that culture is constructed rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon highlighted the power dynamics within hegemonic relationships responsible for doing so.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 became a platform for constructing, or at least revisiting the previously established constructions of the Middle East and Islam, an exercise that Said (2003) explains, has been continually practiced after the 18th Century invasion of Egypt by Napoleon. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Bush used terms like “barbarians” and the “civilized,” and characterized the impending war as a “crusade” (Gregory, 2004, p. 19). This language has roots in liberalism and the Christian crusades. Gregory quoted Fareed Zakaria who said in an essay, “America remains the universal nation, the country people across the world believe should speak for universal values” (2004, p. 23). Later in this same passage, Gregory quoted Veena Das’ analysis, which similarly argues that America is constructed as the privileged site of universal values. Smith also tapped into the far-reaching influence of America as a value system when referring to the phrase, “We Are All Americans Now”, which made appearances in solidarity movements across the world post-9/11 (2005, p. 8). Referring to the previous section in this essay, the model of diplomacy rooted in liberalism that is articulated through global institutions like the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, and others played a crucial role in producing these moments of solidarity. The construction of the US as the site of universal values has allowed American imperialism to globalize the geographical imaginations of a barbaric Afghanistan and Iraq, and by extension through Islam, the entire Middle East.

From Said’s Orientalism, Gregory borrows the concept of folding distance into difference, which is precisely what is done in the making of the War on Terror (2004, p. 17). Ignatieff echoed this sentiment, stating that “[t]error has collapsed distance, and with this collapse has come a sharpened focus in imperial capitals on the necessity of bringing order to the barbarian zones” (2003, p. 21). Gregory explained that within this context, imaginative geographies work in concert with a strategy of locating, opposing, and casting out to conduct a large-scale dehumanization of these spaces (2004, p. 248). The dehumanized occupants simply become targets representing the monstrous and as a result, their deaths have no meaning. In constructing these countries in such ways, the events of 9/11 became not only an attack on America, but an attack on universal values, thus justifying war in these places for a greater good.

Conclusion: Coercion and Consent

The works in question have portrayed America as a liberal empire struggling with the use consent versus coercion to maintain its position as the dominant imperial project. Consent was typically garnered through international diplomatic institutions in the past, but the decision to go to war with Afghanistan and Iraq was unfavourable and isolated the US. In pursuing these wars without the support of the international community, America made it clear that they were willing to use coercion to achieve their goals. This conflict over consent and coercion is shown to arise from the internal contradictions of liberalism which are intensified through its integration with imperialism (Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2005; Ignatieff, 2003; Ferguson, 2004).

One way these contradictions have played out is through spreading democracy by force. Ignatieff noted that “true democracy cannot be ruled by foreigners” (2003, p. 113). In attempting to install

US-friendly regimes in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, then exiting shortly thereafter, the liberal empire attempts to reconcile the contradictory nature of such a project, which extends its control at the expense of the freedom of its subjects, by only doing so for a limited time. Another contradiction at play is nationalism. While empires have often used nationalism to drive their ambitions, America included, it has also been a tool used by their opponents to resist their power. Ignatieff explained that the American campaign in Vietnam that was meant to contain the spread of communism was ultimately thwarted by the nationalism of the Vietnamese people, the same force that fuels American empire and obscures its true nature from its citizens (2003, p. 117).

Coercion through warfare and colonialism was profitable and readily used by empires before this one (Ignatieff, 2003, p. 113; Ferguson, 2004, p. 20), but in the case of America, resorting to those tactics represents the failure of diplomacy and hegemony through globalization. As such, carrying out the War on Terror is a shift towards coercion. Resultantly, America ultimately fails to reproduce the liberal empire as it has defined itself prior to 9/11 (Harvey, 2003, p. 201; Smith, 2005, p. 206). Underlying the struggle of coercion versus consent, there is the question of why anyone might consent to be exploited and oppressed. Through a similar line of questioning, Gregory delivers a witty undoing of “voluntary imperialism”, a concept developed by Robert Cooper that describes “the imperialism of neighbours”. Gregory says, “I have no idea what Cooper’s own neighbours are like, but if they are forever interfering in his life and imposing their own ‘voluntary’ disciplines, then I’m surprised he has not moved” (2004, p. 254). What Cooper seems to be trying to get at is the idea that the world needs the order that imperialism claims to bring. For the American empire, that is the “universal values” of liberalism, the same values that this empire consistently contradicts to further its imperial ambitions. To the idea that empires can be benevolent or well-intentioned, Said remarked, “Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilise, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say soothing words about benign or altruistic empires” (Said, 2003, preface).

The American empire can be explained and understood in a variety of ways. Despite their differences, the authors this essay examines acknowledge the imperialist nature of the nation that Americans would rather not confront. They all arrive at a pondering of what comes next. Even today, this is still not clear. Beneath our main story line, however, is one of geography’s deep relationship with imperialism. Geography has long served as a tool of the imperialist – cartography, environmental determinism, colonialism. This lives on in some of these works. Despite being critical, some of them openly support imperial projects. However, we also see geographers challenging that type of work and getting beneath that history of the discipline to oppose imperialism and literally intervene.

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American imperialism. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. American imperialism. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. "American empire" redirects here. (Well, except for you, Australia and New Zealand.) American historians used to try to excuse America's acquisitions of a territorial empire as something of an embarrassing mistake, but that's misleading because one of the primary causes of the phenomenon of American imperialism was economics. We needed places to sell our amazing new products. And at the time, China actually had all of the customers because apparently it was opposite day. Super Imperialism The Economic Strategy of American Empire. Michael Hudson 2nd edition 2003. (1st edition 1972). This is why the new form of America's inter-governmental super imperialism differs from the familiar old private-enterprise analysis that applied prior to 1971. 6. Preface to the Second Edition (2002). American imperialism is partly based on American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is different from other countries because of its specific world mission to spread liberty and democracy. One of the most notable instances of American imperialism was the annexation of Hawaii in 1898, which allowed the United States to gain possession and control of all ports, buildings, harbors, military equipment, and public property that had belonged to the Government of the Hawaiian Islands. During this time, industrialization caused American businessmen to seek new international markets in which to sell their goods. Others framed American imperialism in the Philippines as nothing new, as simply the extension of a never-ending westward American expansion. It was simply destiny. Some saw imperialism as a way to reenergize the nation by asserting national authority and power around the globe. Debates over American imperialism revolved around more than just politics and economics and national self-interest. They also included notions of humanitarianism, morality, religion, and ideas of "civilization." And they included significant participation by American women. 2. The Discourse on American Imperialism. 3. The Critics of American Empire "Republicans and Conservatives. 4. The Critics of American Empire "Postcolonialists, Marxists, Socialists, and Radicals." They have helped turn us into a new kind of military empire "a consumerist Sparta, a warrior culture that flaunts the air-conditioned housing, movie theatres, supermarkets, golf courses, and swimming pools, of its legionnaires.25. Whatever the original reason the United States entered a country and set up a base, it remains there for imperial reasons "regional and global hegemony, denial of the territory to rivals, providing access for American companies, maintenance of "stability" or "credibility" as a military force, and simple inertia.26.