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Title	The imperial present: Geography, imperialism and its continued effects
Author(s)	Morrissey, John
Publication Date	2013
Publication Information	Morrissey, J. (2013) 'The Imperial Present: Geography, Imperialism and its Continued Effects' In: Johnson, N., Schein, R. and Winders, J(Eds.). The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography. Chichester : Wiley-Blackwell.
Publisher	Wiley-Blackwell
Link to publisher's version	http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470655593.html
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6934

Downloaded 2020-10-23T09:31:42Z

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The Imperial Present: Geography, Imperialism and its Continued Effects

John Morrissey

“In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices”

– Edward Said (1993: 9) *Culture and Imperialism*

Introduction

The era of formal imperialism and colonial expansion may be over but its political economies, its hegemonic knowledges and its composite array of prevailing and hybrid cultures remain. Indeed, in so many ways, the imperial/colonial moment is not past. As Derek Gregory (2004: xv) reminds us, many in the ‘West’ in particular “continue to think and act in ways that are dyed in the colors of colonial power”, and if the long/global war on terrorism has divulged anything, it is that imperialism’s power-knowledge assemblages and abstracted Manichean registers are as potent as ever. Even those interventionary practices that have been recast in the more benevolent language of ‘democratization’, ‘reconstruction’, ‘securitization’ and ‘development’ still betray a (neo)liberal imperial urge, and frequently serve to reinforce long-established imperial modalities of power.

This chapter reflects on this imperial present by exploring some of the focal themes and theoretical concerns of geographers working on imperialism today. I begin by sketching the development of ‘postcolonialism’, arguably the most important theoretical

and political influence in Geography in recent years that has both extended and renewed critical engagements with imperialism, past and present. I outline a number of these key engagements, including the focus on the various functions and legacies of imperial discourse, the import of decentering hegemonic imperial geographical knowledges, and the problem of positionality and representation in geo-graphing the complexities and contradictions of imperialism's myriad overlapping worlds. The chapter then addresses the critical challenge of theorizing resistance, before concluding with an outlining of the enduring imperial modalities of power operative in our contemporary moment.

Imperialism, Postcolonialism and Geography

Imperialism has been viewed as “symptomatic of an epistemological malaise at the heart of western modernity – a propensity to monopolise and dictate understanding of what counts as right, normal and true, and denigrate and quash other ways of knowing and living” (Clayton, 2009a: 94). And certainly the operation of imperial power on every continent rested, and of course continues to rest, on a range of monopolized cultural and geopolitical discourses concerned with race, difference, political economic correction and so on. However, it is important to remember too that imperialism on the ground has always involved social, economic and cultural interactions that were, and are, far more varied, complex and contradictory than many assume (Thomas, 1994; Loomba, 1998; Duncan, 1999; Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Legg, 2007).

Imperialism ‘on the ground’ is also typically referred to of course as ‘colonialism’, and one of the initial challenges in studying imperialism and colonialism is that of thinking through their always intertwined connections and frequently interchangeable meanings (Lester, 2000; Blunt, 2005; Morrissey, 2013). Differentiating between the two

is far from straightforward. To begin with, their political and cultural meanings and manifestations have overlapped and varied greatly, both geographically and over time (Loomba, 1998). In the contemporary moment, some opt to speak of ‘the colonial’ rather than ‘the imperial’ to insist on the ‘active’ implication of the verb ‘to colonize’; Derek Gregory, for example, argues that “constellations of power, knowledge, and geography” continue to “colonize lives all over the world” (Gregory, 2004: xv). Other distinctions drawn underline differences of scale, and for sure questions of scale are important. Robert Young, for instance, conceives of imperialism as “driven by ideology from the metropolitan centre and concerned with the assertion and expansion of state power”, whereas he sees colonialism as operating “on the periphery” and being largely “economically driven” (Young, 2001: 16-17). Young’s work is both brilliant and incisive, but perhaps this distinction is a little too neat. Though we can certainly think of colonialism as typically imperialism’s endgame at the ‘local’, it would be a mistake to either consider the local as always ‘on the periphery’ or overlook imperialism’s perennial concerns with localized technologies of occupation and economic production. In other words, we can never be too neat in differentiating between imperialism and colonialism, and in opting in this chapter to speak of ‘the imperial’ more prominently, I want to particularly attend to questions of relationality, and I want to insist too on imperialism as not just an ‘ideology’ reified by hegemonic discourse, but also very much as an active ‘practice’, replete with an array of functioning technologies of power.

Since the 1980s, the key theoretical influence in geographical approaches to the study of imperialism has been ‘postcolonialism’. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, amongst others, postcolonial critiques in Geography have coalesced around a number of overarching aims (Said, 1978, 1993; Bhabha, 1983,

1994; Spivak, 1987, 1988). These include: decolonizing and decentering Eurocentric/Western constellations of geographical knowledge; acknowledging the difficulties of ‘positionality’ and dangers of locating postcolonial critique outside historical and contemporary imperial relations of power; challenging falsely conceived bounded geographies of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’; and demonstrating the ‘overlapping’ and ‘intertwined’ geographies and social productions of imperial and anti-imperial worlds, past and present (Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Clayton, 2008). One could say that postcolonial geographers share a common goal of theorizing critical conceptions of how imperial and colonial relations of space and governmentality were constructed, represented, normalized and enacted. For Jonathan Crush (1994: 336-337), postcolonial geography is about:

“the unveiling of geographical complicity in colonial dominion over space; the character of geographical representation in colonial discourse; the de-linking of local geographical enterprise from metropolitan theory and its totalizing systems of representation; and the recovery of those hidden spaces occupied, and invested with their own meaning, by the colonial underclass”.

For Edward Said, perhaps the most influential postcolonial theorist, historical ‘imperialism’ equated to “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory”, while ‘colonialism’ was “almost always a consequence of imperialism” and involved “the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (1993: 8). Conceding that “direct colonialism” has now ended, Said has shown how imperialism “lingers where it has always been, in a general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices” (1993: 8). For Said,

neither imperialism nor colonialism are “a simple act of accumulation and acquisition”; rather both are “supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination” (1993: 8). And certainly imperial interventions, past and present, have always been predicated on the production of any given geography that ‘requires’ reduction, reconstruction, regulation and reform.

Imperialism in practice relied, and continues to rely, upon key technologies of power on the ground. These include: cartography; military capability; and legal registers to underwrite colonial violence and (bio)political governmentality. If military capacity was enabled via the law, so too of course was the economic endgame of imperialism: ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (on this last point, see Harvey, 2003; cf. Harris, 2004). Before either took place, however, it was Geography and cartography that prepared the imperial ‘fields of intervention’ across the globe, and in recent years a number of revealing histories of Geography have highlighted the role of geographical methods, practitioners, institutions and societies in imperial practices of exploration and colonization (see, for example, Godlewska and Smith, 1994; Ploszajska, 2000; Driver, 2001; Heffernan, 2003). Cartography in particular was central in the ‘disciplining’ and ‘disseminating’ of imperial knowledges, with maps playing a pivotal role of visual control and serving to both mirror and reinforce political, economic and cultural hegemony. Consider, for example, how sixteenth-century Ireland was systematically geo-graphed as a western frontier of England in need of renewed imperial intervention. Abraham Ortelius’ map of ‘Hibernia’ in 1573, for instance, seen in figure 1, is just one example of a much broader assemblage of contemporary geographical representations (ranging from

patronized maps, woodcuts and travel writings to state papers) that were used to script Ireland as requiring both geopolitical securitization (from the threat of then prominent naval rival, Spain) and civilizing settlement of New Englishmen in what was depicted as a degenerated Old English colony with a seemingly expansive and largely uninhabited Gaelic western frontier.



Figure 1: *Hibernia, 1573*. Source: Ortelius, A., *Additamentum Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. Dublin: Neptune Gallery.

In contemporary Geography, an important starting point in understanding cartography's functioning at the heart of imperialism is the work of Brian Harley (1988, 1989). Harley's sustained critique of the Cartesian and positivist foundations of map-making revealed both the power of maps and the fundamental falsity that they can "mirror accurately some aspect of 'reality' which is simple and knowable and can be expressed

as a system of facts” (Harley, 1989: 82). Methodologically based on semiotics and deconstruction, his work has been especially influential in highlighting the inherent power relations that are reified cartographically in scriptings of human geography (Wood, 1993; Dorling and Fairbairn, 1997; Cosgrove, 2005). For Harley, maps always possessed the potent capacity of “reifying power, reinforcing the status quo, and freezing social interaction within chartered lines”; and his vital contribution to historical geography has been instrumental too in “the broader problematization of all forms of geographical representation”, past and present (Harley, 1988: 302-303). In this sense, his work is still a significant influence in critiques of contemporary imperialism and its enduring reliance on the persuasive, abstracted power of cartographic representation, whether that be via GIS or otherwise, in the name of security, surveillance or reconnaissance (Pickles, 1995; Farish, 2009).

The broader critical tradition that has emerged in Geography of situated, contextualized and historicized analyses of imperialism gives it a particular strength and relevancy, but it is important to underline that theoretical influences have not solely come from postcolonialism, but rather more eclectically from a range of other critical and often complementary positions/politics too, such as feminism, Marxism and political ecology. Collectively, however, the rich array of geographical work on imperial discourses and technologies of power has served to complicate, differentiate and bring into view the multiple conflicting pasts and continued complex effects of imperialism (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Lester, 2000; Blunt and McEwan, 2002). It has problematized too monolithic accounts of imperialism and ostensibly static and bounded notions such as the ‘frontier’ as appropriate conceptual tools in theorizing colonial relations and resistance; with many opting for the concept of the ‘contact zone’ to signal the overlapping nature of

imperialism's intricate human geographies on the ground (Routledge, 1997; Morrissey, 2005; Nally, 2009). Much recent work in historical and cultural geography has also exhibited an interest in the experiences of 'dislocation' for both colonizer and colonized, and this concern has opened an important trajectory of work focused on questions of 'hybridity' and, more specifically, on the hybrid nature of 'colonial subjectivities', as a number of edited volumes attest (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Raju *et al.*, 2006). As a final point here, a range of methodological questions respecting issues such as scale and locationality, what constitutes the 'field' or the 'archive', and how different theoretical perspectives and techniques of analysis can facilitate critical accounts of imperialism, have also been fruitfully engaged with in recent years (Wishart, 1997; Duncan, 1999; Nash and Graham, 2000; Withers, 2002; Black, 2003; Ogborn, 2003).

Imperialism and Discourse

In one of his earliest works, the literary critic Homi Bhabha (1983: 199) notes how imperialism "produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible". Bhabha's point here is that the 'colonized' must always be first produced through 'discourse', and it is this 'imperial' or 'colonial' discourse that legitimizes and sustains imperialism in practice (though both 'imperial discourse' and 'colonial discourse' are commonly used interchangeably, it is sometimes confusing to do so; for the purposes of this chapter, I use the term 'imperial discourse' hereafter). The careful deconstruction of imperial discourse is pivotal to our understanding of how imperialism works. I have outlined elsewhere how imperial discourse can be defined as "the prevailing representations of imperial power" that seek to "normalize imperial mindsets and the rights of colonial intervention" and simultaneously to lay claim to the

power to 'represent' the colonized (Morrissey, 2013). The anthropologists, John and Jean Comaroff, are particularly instructive on this latter point, the question of claiming representational power over the subaltern or 'Other':

“the essence of colonization inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming 'others' by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their own choosing; in making them into the pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios; in assuming the capacity to 'represent' them” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 15).

For the Comaroffs, the power of representation or discourse was key to the European colonization of Africa, for example, which they argue was ultimately “less a directly coercive conquest than a persuasive attempt to colonize consciousness, to remake people by redefining the taken for granted surfaces of their everyday world” (1991: 313).

In recent years, a particular focus on discourse in approaches to the study of imperialism and colonialism, in Geography and a range of other disciplines including especially Anthropology and English, has proven to be intellectually emancipatory in a number of ways. In the context of the broader postcolonial critique since the 1980s, a more politicized academy has engendered a research trajectory that, for Ania Loomba, has sought to both divulge and dismantle the pervasive power of imperial discourse, its “ideas and institutions, knowledge and power” (1998: 54). Loomba is joined by many in underlining the role that imperial discourse played, and continues to play, in imperial practice. Nicholas Thomas, for instance, asserts that imperial practice has always been crucially underpinned discursively, “through signs, metaphors and narratives”, and observes how even “its purest moments of profit and violence have been mediated and

enframed by structures of meaning” (1994: 2). Thomas’ point here is that in any imperial intervention, we find that imperial violence is carefully scripted as ‘necessary’. Furthermore, the typical imperial endgame of economic expropriation is commonly discursively marginalized by prioritized political and cultural discourses such as the notion of ‘bringing civilization’. Thomas also reminds us of the constitutive, rather than external, nature of imperial discourse. In other words, functioning imperial discourses do not work to simply “mask, mystify or rationalize forms of oppression that are external to them”; rather they are “also expressive and constitutive of colonial relationships in themselves” (1994: 2).

This focal question of the constitutive, material context through which imperial discourse and imperial practice work in tandem is taken up by Dan Clayton when he warns against “reducing imperialism to discourse”, and insists upon “the need to materially ground understanding of imperialism’s operations” (2009b: 374). History is replete, of course, with multiple forms of imperial discourse serving to constitutively frame, regulate and enact colonial order and regimes of truth (Mitchell, 1991). In historical and cultural geography in recent years, more sustained engagement with the particularity and relationality of the discourses and practices of colonialism in the colonized worlds themselves has emerged (Lester, 2001; Morrissey, 2003; Raju et al., 2006; Legg, 2007; Stanley, 2008). And this work has taken up, in effect, Jim Duncan’s and Denis Cosgrove’s earlier call for the complexities of imperialism and colonialism to be “unravelling through localized and historically specific accounts” (1995: 127).

Before concluding on imperial discourse, it is important to acknowledge in particular the key influence of Edward Said in much work on imperialism in historical and cultural geography over the last 25 years. Certainly, a fundamental starting point in

understanding the pivotal role of discourse at the heart of imperialism everywhere is his foundational text *Orientalism*, which was first published in 1978 and has since inspired the rise of what is now referred to as ‘postcolonial studies’. Said’s brilliant prose and incisive and courageous politics (especially in the context of his native Palestine) has been particularly inspiring for many. *Orientalism* explored the historical emergence of a powerful European imperial imaginary of the Orient in which the West is continually positioned discursively via a powerful and indeed therapeutic set of binaries, such as us/them, superior/inferior, rational/irrational and civilized/barbaric. The endgame for Said was that all-pervasive and dominant imperial discourses of what he called the ‘Other’ or ‘Otherness’ served to habitually underpin the operation of imperial power in practice by literally ascribing “reality and reference”, and that ascendant imperial power in turn rendered imperial discourses hegemonic (Said, 1978: 321; in this sense, Said was drawing in particular on Michel Foucault’s notion of the ‘power-knowledge couplet’). In introducing the concept of ‘imaginative geographies’ in his later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, in 1993, Said further theorized how the ‘Other’ is typically imagined, vilified and scripted in abstracted, essentialist and deeply consequential ways.

Many geographers have drawn on Said’s writings to deconstruct the operation of imperial power in a wide range of historical and geographical contexts (Gregory, 2001; Lester, 2001; Blunt, 2005; Clayton, 2008). Said’s work has come in for some critique for sure (such as his proclivity towards the written texts of high culture when theorizing imperial discourse, and his rather limited theorizing of the agency of anti-imperial resistance); however, on the whole, his “critical deconstruction of the historical language, power relations and subject positions of the western ‘Self’ and the external ‘Other’ continues to have an enduring and fruitful legacy” (Morrissey, 2013). As Nicholas

Thomas (1994) reminds us, imperialism is an ongoing cultural process in which the ‘Other’ is persistently represented in ways that legitimize racial and cultural differences. And imperial discourse continues to legitimize too interventionary practices across the planet – from ‘geopolitics’ to ‘development’. As Edward Said argued so lucidly in one of his last works before his death, abstracted and Manichean imperial geographical knowledges centrally underpinned and ultimately served to guarantee the launch of what is now the long war on terror:

Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like “us” and didn’t appreciate “our” values – the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma – there would have been no war (2003: xv).

Imperialism and Resistance

In theorizing resistance to imperialism, a key influence and important point of departure for many contemporary postcolonial thinkers is the work of French writer and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon – and especially his *The Wretched of the Earth*, first translated into English in 1963. Homi Bhabha, for instance, in seeking to reject historicist or linear conceptions of causality and inheritance in terms of ‘anti-colonial struggle’, underlines the usefulness of a Fanonian conception of ‘continuance’, in which “the practice of action” has an everyday temporality and an agency constituted in “the singularity of the ‘local’” (2001: 39, 40). For Fanon, the anti-colonial struggle must always be about a “fight which explodes the old colonial truths”; it must have a politics that are “national, revolutionary, and social”; and it must have a violence “committed by the people” and “organized and educated by its leaders” (Fanon, 1963: 147). This, for Fanon,

was how to live “inside history”, to generate new “social truths”, “new facts” and “new meanings”, because without the knowledge forged in “the practice of action”, resistance was “nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets” (1963: 147).

Perhaps Fanon’s greatest intellectual contribution is his engagement with the question of ‘revolutionary violence’, the narration of which has been so discursively subjugated over time by the hegemonic power of imperial discourse. In recent years, postcolonial geographers have shown how on every continent there are long and complex narratives of anti-imperial revolutionary violence and resistance that are under-theorized and often no more than footnotes to history – from Ireland to India, from Ceylon to Vietnam (Morrissey, 2003; Raju *et al.*, 2006; Duncan, 2007; Clayton, 2008). Their limited narration is perhaps for various reasons, ranging from methodological concerns of archives, access and language to arguably a lingering Western and Anglophone world-view that serves to reinforce a metropolitan-centered historiography of imperialism (Lester, 2000; Blunt, 2005). Mostly, however, resistance to imperialism is not the prioritized story because it is commonly not ‘our’ story, and, in the contemporary world, let us not forget the enduring representational power of monopolized imperial discourses that can delegitimize resistance as irrational, barbaric ‘insurgency’, for example, and thereby negate meaningful political and intellectual engagement with the perennially scripted ‘Other’.

Inspired by the broader postcolonial critique of imperialism by writers such as Fanon, Bhabha and others, a range of important recent work in historical, political and cultural geography has addressed the fundamental need for decolonizing and decentering hegemonic imperial geographical knowledges (Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Clayton, 2009b). A key overarching challenge in much of this work has involved recovering and

accounting for the counter-imperial discourses of the subaltern, and geo-graphing the complex spaces and practices of anti-imperial resistance – from autoethnography to legal and constitutional opposition, from economic sabotage to political violence (Crush, 1994; Pratt, 1994; Pile and Keith, 1997; Blunt and McEwan, 2002; Featherstone, 2005a; Watts, 2009).

Theorizing anti-imperial resistance and the violence of the ‘anti-colonial struggle’ is not just important historiographically, of course. Engaging, narrating and learning from the geographies of past anti-imperial struggles matter a great deal for understanding resistance to contemporary imperial interventions (Butz, 2002; Smith, 2003; Jhaveri, 2004; Featherstone, 2005b; Kearns, 2009). Consider, for example, the repeated and myopic shortcomings of Western geopolitical and cultural explanations for the so-called ‘insurgency’ during the recent Iraq war (Gregory, 2008). It is, of course, vital too that we do not overly romanticize or suspend critique when it comes to resistance. As Homi Bhabha writes, we must “eschew the springing wolf’s instinct of total annihilation and the messianic blast of the revolutionary gust of wind” (2001: 40). David Nally (2009: 622) observes, for instance, that inflecting ideological visions of resistance with Spivak’s notion of ‘strategic essentialism’ or using “ethnic categories in order to further certain perceived emancipatory goals” are neither straightforward nor unproblematic endeavors in practice. For Nally, “where ethnic identities are cultivated, and human differences underscored, there is often a vast gap between emancipatory and egalitarian politics” (2009: 622).

Over time, the complex networking of both imperial practice and anti-imperial resistance ensured the manifestation of mutually constitutive political, economic and cultural productions in both the ‘metropole’ and ‘periphery’ (Lester, 2001; Featherstone,

2008). Foucault called this the “boomerang effect” (Foucault, 2003: 103). Just as imperial endeavors were frequently ad hoc and certainly not monolithic or static in character, indigenous responses were typically fluid too and indeed often contradictory, reflecting the entangled co-constitution of the worlds of the colonizer and colonized. In other words, there is always a relational nature to resistance. As Foucault (1978: 95) put it, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”. And this key conceptual challenge has variously been engaged in recent postcolonial critiques in Geography, as David Butz (2002: 15-16) observes:

“An important dimension of these recent examinations has been the effort to describe how the material and discursive aspects of domination and resistance relate; that is, to use the notion of resistance to understand subjectivity as well as agency among subordinate populations. Much of the conceptual context for this effort comes from postcolonial analyses of subaltern subjectivities”.

It is vital, ultimately, to avoid either bounding or essentializing the worlds of the imperial or anti-imperial past or present. This is part of Gregory Castle’s call to adapt a “regional approach” to challenge and complicate what he refers to as “the tendency toward a collectivist postcolonialism” (2001: xi). He draws on Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ to insist on the situated, geographical diversity of imperial practice on the ground (Bhabha, 2001). For Castle (2001: xii), vernacular cosmopolitanism serves to reinforce “the fundamental importance of *location*, the felt experience of the local, which is not collectivized or sublated in a universal historical narrative”. And geographers, in particular, have been especially mindful of this broader

postcolonial critique in endeavouring to offer carefully contextualized, historically and geographically situated research of the intricate spaces of the imperial past and present on every continent (Lester, 2000; Blunt, 2005; Clayton, 2009a).

Conclusion: Imperialism's Continued Effects

What are the ways in which imperialism “lingers” today, as Edward Said once observed? For sure, imperialism lingers in the discursive, in the persistence of functioning imperial knowledges, and all of their abstracted and essentialist equations of geography, difference and threat. As Derek Gregory (2004) has shown, the so-called ‘war on terror’, the interventionary war of our time, has served to reify a Manichean sense of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – all built on well-established imperial registers of Orientalism. And this is not just important in the ‘cultural sphere’. As Bradley Klein (1994: 5) explains in his brilliant book, *Strategic Studies and World Order*, Western geopolitics and its interventionary ‘strategic violence’ continues to draw upon “a variety of discursive resources” that are “widely construed as rational, plausible and acceptable”. Chief amongst these discursive resources are an array of reductive cultural binaries predicated upon simplified dichotomous geographies such as us/them, civilized/barbarous and inside/outside. As Klein underlines, what geopolitics does, together with explicit academic support from Strategic Studies in particular, is to “provide a map for the negotiating of these dichotomies in such a way that Western society always winds up on the “good” [...] side of the equation” (1994: 5). The consequences in terms of legitimated geopolitical violence then become clear:

Our putative enemy, whatever the form assumed by its postulated Otherness – variously the Soviet Union, or Communism, guerrilla insurgents, terrorism, Orientals, Fidel Castro, Nicaragua, Qaddafi, Noriega or Saddam Hussein – simultaneously is endowed with all of these dialectically opposed qualities. Strategic violence is then called in to mediate the relationship, patrol the border, surveil the opponent and punish its aggression (Klein 1994: 5-6).

Contemporary geopolitics extends historical imperialism in various ways, and not just in terms of its perpetuation of imperial registers of difference and Otherness. It relies upon an array of biopolitical modalities of power, for instance, that were first initiated in the era of high colonialism, as Jim Duncan and David Nally have shown respectively for nineteenth-century Ceylon and Ireland – both drawing in particular on Michel Foucault’s recently translated lectures on biopolitics and governmentality (Duncan, 2007; Nally, 2008; Foucault, 2007; Foucault, 2008). And as others have outlined, the legal and biopolitical operations of geopolitical interventions today are sustained by an array of well-established liberal imperial discourses that legitimize the necessity of emergency powers in the name of national security (Gregory, 2006; Dillon, 2007; Kearns, 2008; Barder, 2009). Contemporary imperial geopolitics also works to script the necessity of continued military-economic securitization of the global political economy – and that political economy was built, of course, during the imperial era. As J.A. Hobson (1902: 106) noted over a century ago, the “economic root of imperialism is the desire of strong organized industrial and financial interests to secure and develop at the public expense and by the public force private markets for their surplus goods and their surplus capital”. For Hobson, the “necessary means to this end” centrally involved “war, militarism, and a ‘spirited foreign policy’” (1902: 106). Today, as Thomas Pogge dolefully observes,

“affluent Western states” may no longer practice “slavery, colonialism, or genocide”, but they “still enjoy crushing economic, political and military dominance over a world in which effective enslavement and genocides continue unabated” (2008: 6). And certainly there have been no shortage of recent calls to extend Western military and political economic ascendancy via aggressive imperial geopolitics (Kaplan, 2009; cf. Dalby *et al*, 2009).

Contemporary imperialism has been critiqued by geographers in at least four principal ways: first, focus has been given to the persistence of hegemonic cultural registers of difference via imperial discourses of ethnicity, race, religion, gender and sexuality (Gregory, 2004; Blunt, 2005; Clayton, 2009b; Kearns, 2009); secondly, attention has directed to the political economy of continued Western global hegemony and accelerated capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2003; Jhaveri, 2004; Smith, 2005; Nally 2011); thirdly, critical geopolitical accounts have underlined the abstracted discursive production of military interventionary spaces (and particularly so in the context of the so-called ‘war on terror’) (Ó Tuathail, 2003; Graham, 2005; Dalby, 2007; Hyndman, 2007); and, finally, geographers have sought to interrogate the multiple practices of interventionism in our contemporary world and their consequent contested forms of securitization and governmentality (Desbiens, 2007; Stanley, 2008; Fluri, 2009; Morrissey, 2011). There has, of course, been much overlap of perspective too, and arguably one of the most important overarching characteristics of contemporary geographical critiques of imperialism is a particular proficiency in contextualizing and theorizing discursive and material productions of space, especially in the complex contexts of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, environmental justice and political violence (Sullivan, 2006; Featherstone, 2008; Cowen, 2009; Watts, 2009).

In conclusion, the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the rapacious exercise of crude Western power in the Middle East and elsewhere have brought into sharp relief a series of questions concerning the continued geopolitical and cultural maneuverings of imperialism. Geographers have sought to shed light on multiple aspects of imperial practice today, along with an array of pervasive, prioritized interventionary rationales. In critiquing abstract geopolitical, geoeconomic and developmental forms of imperialism, a key concern has been to theorize and insist upon more humane, nuanced and critical human geographies. Nicholas Thomas perhaps put it best when he reminded us that “relations of cultural colonialism are no more easily shrugged off than the economic entanglements that continue to structure a deeply asymmetrical world economy” (1994: 10). This is precisely why critical human geography today is marked by explicit concerns about imperialism’s lasting cultures, its persistent interventionism, and its continued effects.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Nuala Johnson, David Nally and Anna Stanley for their comments, and to Andrew Bonar Law at the Neptune Gallery, Dublin for his kind permission to use fig. 1.

Biographical Note

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on the key themes and theoretical concerns of geographers working on imperialism today. The chapter begins by sketching the development of one of the most important theoretical and political influences in Geography in recent years that has both extended and renewed critical engagements with imperialism, past and present: ‘postcolonialism’. It outlines a number of these engagements, including the focus on the various functions and legacies of imperial discourse, the import of decentering hegemonic imperial geographical knowledges, and the problem of positionality and representation in geo-graphing the complexities and contradictions of imperialism’s myriad overlapping worlds. The chapter then addresses the critical challenge of theorizing resistance, before concluding with an outlining of the enduring imperial modalities of power operative in our contemporary moment.

Key words

Imperialism; discourse; postcolonialism; political economy; geopolitics; biopolitics; violence; resistance