

The geography of terror

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I believe that *The Colonial Present* is an important, and geographical, contribution to public debate about the War on Terror (Kearns, 2005). One of the central claims of the book, reflected in its title, is that we live in a colonial present—that in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States and, in Palestine, the state of Israel act in a colonial manner. The war on terror is the current form taken by the ideologies justifying colonialism. In the name of civilization, colonial powers have fought against what they have repeatedly configured as barbarism in its nationalist, communist and, now, Islamic forms. *The Colonial Present* is a passionate and critical contribution to our understanding of the dangerous times in which we, and our distant neighbours, now live. We might note territoriality, exceptionality and geographical imaginations as its three main geographical themes. In the first place, geopolitical visions territorialise (Gottman, 1973; Sack, 1986) terrorism. They fix terror to states as sources that can be attacked. This is the terrain of failed and rogue states (Cooper, 2003; Kearns, 2006; Klare, 1996). Secondly, in our own colonial present, certain classes of persons are viewed as undeserving of the rights and attentions upon which the case for liberal democracy usually rests — they are treated exceptionally. These persons either derive from certain spaces or are removed to certain spaces. These are the spaces of exception. This is the world of Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005). Finally, geographical imaginations (Gregory, 1993; Said, 1978) render the world into Manichean spaces of friend and enemy. These are the spaces both of Carl Schmitt (1985) and of Edward Said (1978). In considering these three themes, I want to raise questions about: the significance of territoriality, the relationship between law and exception, and about the purely political or cultural nature of the othering involved in Manichean world views.

The geographical imagination behind the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq did indeed seek to territorialise terror. For Afghanistan, the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom asserted: read Al-Qaeda. For Iraq: read Weapons of Mass Destruction being prepared for Al-Qaeda. However, there is another geographical imaginary at play in the War on Terror. This is the image of the diffuse network, sustained by ideology and covert links. In this version, terror, like communism before it, is almost everywhere, and a certain paranoid style of politics receives its justification (Hofstadter, 1966). The United States must defend itself at the furthest reaches of the globe for the connections that sustain terror extend even there (United States Department of Defense, 2006). This is the language of universal pre-emptive and covert action. The insidious ideology of militant Islam, and the links it spawns, is also thought to reach into the hearts of some of our very own citizens. In the War on Terror, we must identify and root out the enemy within. The ‘coalition of the willing’ must place their own populations under siege and suspend at home the freedoms for which it claims to fight abroad (Agamben, 2005: 3–5; Powers, 2006). In certain significant ways, then, arguments for the War on Terror must de-territorialise terror even as they try also to territorialise it. The War on Terror, then, must reach from the soul of every individual to the very ends of the earth, and yet further still

into the orbital paths of missile platforms and surveillance systems. It is truly global in its ambition.

The second theme I wish to raise concerns the link between the Law and the Exception. It is clear that the suspension of certain laws has been intrinsic to the disciplines of colonialism. *The Colonial Present* shows how frequently national and international law has been abrogated in the War on Terror. In the past as in the present, the governing of colonies frequently involved placing in abeyance laws that were declared to be the normal way the colony was to be ruled. The agents of the colonial power were repeatedly indemnified against prosecution for actions they might undertake in defending that power. Martial law was so routine as almost to be an unacknowledged norm of its own (Hussain, 2003). Indeed, the assertion that martial law was exceptional rested upon the declaration of a virtual liberal democracy that justified colonial rule even as it was honoured most frequently in the breach (Kearns, 2007). In circumstances such as these, suspending laws that are not really extant is perhaps best conceived as the making of exceptional law; that is, as the making of laws deemed to be exceptional even as they threaten to become norms. This means that in the War on Terror, we should be wary of criticizing the supposedly exceptional nature of what transpires since its normalization is both likely and intended. In other words, places such as Guantánamo must be understood as places of exceptional legal creativity. It is not, as Judith Butler (2002) suggests, that the United States lacks categories for the types of persons it is holding and that this linguistic vacuum itself produces intolerable behaviour. Rather, we must understand, perhaps, that the United States wants to avoid the implications of certain existing legal arrangements, triggered either by territorial forms, such as districts with attorneys, or by recognized terms, such as prisoner of war. For this reason, the U.S. administration resorts to neologisms and even to curious territorial arrangements as it seeks the freedom to legitimize extreme forms of interrogation and exemplary torture.

Agamben argues that the 1679 British writ of *habeas corpus* is the birth of modern citizenship (Agamben, 1999: 123). The British sovereign thereby bound itself to produce in court any person it had taken into custody so that the legality of the arrest might be tested. In claiming the right to suspend this writ, and thus refusing to justify detention, the sovereign would be acting in precisely the manner that Agamben sees as basic to all sovereignty, that is the sovereign would be insisting upon the right to decide upon the cases of exception. There is another dimension to sovereignty here, however, and it is one that raises the question of legitimacy, an issue somewhat ignored by Agamben. Surrendering oneself, or accepting the handing over of one's neighbour, to the legal judgement of the sovereign is, I would suggest, important as much as evidence of the legitimacy of the sovereign as the suspension of *habeas corpus* is an expression of the power of the sovereign. Recent developments highlight, I believe, both questions of legitimacy and of power. The pursuit by the United States of bilateral arrangements that allow it to apprehend and remove terror suspects from various parts of the world is, on these terms, the expression of an ambition to global sovereignty, and the signing of such agreements and allowing the United States these exceptional powers of rendition legitimizes that ambition. This is not so much a geography of exceptional spaces as it is the flattening of the different sovereignties of independent states into the juridical space of a global sovereign. As this geography is normalized, so the global sovereignty becomes legalized.

Finally, I would like to comment upon the nature of the self-other distinction that is at the heart of the Manichean geography of friend and enemy. Of course, what happens in the projection of U.S. power beyond its borders is not only about resources, but also about nationalism (Lieven, 2004), about strategic alliances, about the projection and protection of that power

for its own exemplary sake. However, it is about resources too (Klare, 2002). Oil is a strategic resource. David Harvey (2003) is surely right to speak of the importance of the spigot of the world economy. The fact that in the short term the war in Iraq has proven economically incompetent does not mean that its planners did not have other, more lucrative outcomes in mind. Harvey describes as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ the restructuring of national economies whereby global investors acquire title to once collectively owned resources. Harvey focuses on this process as it has occurred under the pretext of structural adjustment policies. We need, I think, a fuller typology of such modern forms of primitive accumulation. Something similar, but also rather different, has been taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union where assets and resources once under state control have been privatized. It is possible that making countries financially responsible for their own rebuilding after war and occupation may serve similar ends, at least where that rebuilding is done by foreign capitalists, but funded by the sale of local resources. Iraq may be an early case of dispossession through reconstruction; mortgaging oil, at ‘fair’ prices, to U.S. oil companies and using the proceeds to pay other U.S. companies to repair the damage after U.S.-led occupation (*Iraq rebuilding contracts awarded: Halliburton, Stevedoring Services of America get government contracts for early relief work*, 2003). In this way, U.S. consumers get a secure and relatively cheap supply of petrol while U.S. investors and U.S. workers get dividends and wages funded by that flow. With petrol prices currently including a premium resulting directly (interruption of supply) or indirectly (political insecurity) from the occupation itself, this form of accumulation by reconstruction looks, at least in the short term, rather ill-advised.

My point in raising the possibility that the War on Terror might serve global geo-economic interests is to ask how war may be economics by other means. The justification for interventions of various kinds may come to include reference to good governance and it would be quite possible for good governance, in turn, to be conceptualized in terms of a commitment to open markets. This is explicit in Bobbitt’s (2003) account of the new world order that he sees as being needed to follow upon the collapse of the certainties of the Cold War. The pressure on Venezuela is in the name of securing better governance but it turns on the ownership of oil resources and the trading of those resources in dollars or Euros (Clark, 2004; Corrales, 2006; Weisbrot, 2006). Before the international outrage over ethnic cleansing, the main complaint against Slobodhan Milosovic concerned his tardiness in liberalizing the economy of the former Yugoslavia (Pilger, 2004). In securing access to resources and markets, there may be a dialectical relationship between force and negotiation, between occupation and the World Trade Organisation, between bellicose colonialism and a more liberal imperialism. In the present, as in the past, colonial force and liberalizing world markets have both equally favoured the powerful and the rich.

In *The Colonial Present*, Derek shows clearly the economic context of Israeli colonial violence in Palestine; occupation is dispossession, Palestinian people lose land and water. This is colonialism red in tooth and claw. Certainly, many of the military and legal innovations of the War on Terror have been pioneered by Israel. However, more liberal policies may produce equivalent results. Neil Smith’s account of Isaiah Bowman and his role in re-shaping American foreign policy interests after the Second World War, emphasizes the distance between the physical-force colonialism of the old empires, such as the British, and the emphasis placed upon economic efficiency by the new imperialism of the United States (Smith, 2003). This distinction between old and new imperialism is perhaps too starkly drawn, for force and economics co-exist in both. Thus, when Bowman referred to countries as too backward to manage their own affairs he was proposing that an external (and economic) standard of liberal governance be used to justify intervention. The stated ideologies of Woodrow Wilson, after the First World

War, and of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, after the Second, may allow a benign reading of U.S. foreign policy intentions but, in all sorts of ways, U.S. foreign policy continues to owe at least as much to the example of Theodore Roosevelt, who justified intervention in Cuba to correct the illiberal governance of Spanish colonialism, and who intervened in the Philippines to defend U.S. territorial integrity at the furthest point from which a threat might come (Meinig, 2000, 2004). In both cases, trade followed the flag, and U.S. business went where U.S. troops had secured 'efficient' governance. After the Second World War, and under the sign of anti-communism, the United States and its allies, most notably the United Kingdom, opposed the nationalization of resources (mainly in poor countries) and promoted both overt and covert wars (mainly in poor countries) to secure good, liberal governance, and good, open economies (Curtis, 2003). The Cold War and anti-communism were never only an ideological fig-leaf for economic self-interest but yet had important economic effects. We should be alert to the possibility that the War on Terror and associated anti-Islamicism might also have significant economic dimensions. The self-other dialectic in the War on Terror may be presented, in Samuel Huntington's (1997) phrase, as a clash of civilizations, but othering may yet serve different and more selfish ends.

The Colonial Present shows that the War on Terror is inherently geographical. It goes further and demonstrates that it is precisely these dimensions that are at the heart of some of the most pressing of political issues. Derek draws on a number of important theoretical perspectives and shows how they can illuminate that geographical politics. This comment has focused on three of the central insights of the book and I have indicated some of the other ways these geographical lessons might be developed. These are not simply theoretical debates for the way we conceptualise territory, law and colonialism influences quite directly the sorts of political developments we might anticipate or desire.

Acknowledgement

In preparing this set of remarks, I have learned a lot from conversations with, and from reading the work of: Stuart Corbridge (2006), Derek Gregory, John Morrissey, David Nally, Karen Till and Gerard Toal.

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doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.01.004

(Un)Settling colonial presents

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“Should this generation, the first to our national revival divide our homeland and heritage? Quite the contrary! It should settle Judea and Samaria – our forefathers’ land... Our historical right to this land is eternal and unquestionable... being engraved