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Geopolitical Regression and The American Empire

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REVIEW ESSAY

Geopolitical Regression

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When Kaplan (2009) published “The Revenge of Geography” in *Foreign Policy*, Karen Hooper sent the article to fellow analysts at the private intelligence firm Stratfor (Strategic Forecasting, Inc.), prompting one of them, Mark Schroeder, to wonder, “[d]id this dude steal from us?” George Friedman, the founder and CEO of Stratfor, reassured his colleagues that “Kaplan is a real smart guy,” and Bayless Parsley, Middle East analyst at Stratfor, specialist among other things in “proofreading, geopolitical analysis” (Parsley 2013a), urged them to “read ‘[B]alkan [G]hosts.’ [T]hat’s the reason I went to the [B]alkans,” before noting with admiration that “[K]aplan was also writing about the [C]aucasus before anyone knew how to spell it. [E]ither called it ‘[O]nward to [T]atary [sic]’ or ‘[E]astward to [T]atary [sic]’ (Parsley 2013b; cf. Kaplan 2000b). Friedman viewed Kaplan’s work as symptomatic of a pressing need: “When geopolitics is required, it shows itself in many places” (Parsley 2013b). Kaplan is now chief geopolitical analyst for Stratfor after Friedman identified him for his colleagues as someone he “would trust with my legacy” and who could “mentor the analysts” at Stratfor (Friedman 2012). Cometh the hour, then.

Yet Kaplan has not always presented his work as geopolitics. In a foreword for one edition of *Balkan Ghosts*, he claimed that the book was “essentially ... a travel book that has ... acquired a public policy significance which I never intended” (Kaplan 1996b, ix). The subtitle of *Balkan Ghosts* was “A Journey Through History,” and *The Ends of the Earth* (Kaplan 1996a) was subtitled, “A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century,” and *Eastward to Tartary* (2000b) had as its subtitle, “Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus.” Upon its republication (Kaplan 2003b), the 1988 work, *Surrender or Starve*, lost as subtitle, “The Wars Behind the Famine” and acquired, “Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea,” whereas Kaplan’s survey

of the western United States, *An Empire Wilderness* (Kaplan 1998), was subtitled “Travels into America’s Future.” Travel was Kaplan’s first love.

Following Fussell (1980), Kaplan celebrates the glory days of travel writing, before prepackaged tours, and when itineraries and obsessions were fed by the study of history and literature. In those times, travel writers “were generally not concerned with geopolitics,” although their “uncanny ability ... to describe a scene resulted periodically in insightful political analysis” (Kaplan 2004, 188, 189). In some measure, Kaplan shares a common traveling trait in offering discomfort as his witness. From West Africa, he reported that “on foot ... you learn the most. You are on the ground, on the same level with Africans rather than looking down at them. You are no longer protected by speed or air-conditioning or thick glass. The sweat pours from you, and your shirt sticks to your body. This is how you learn” (Kaplan 1996a, 25). On a train in 1998, unease hinted at geopolitics: “[t]he compartment was now jammed with people standing in the aisles: men with outlandish clothes, shaven heads and unshaven faces, and the most violent of expressions, spitting, coughing in my face, and stepping on my feet as ashes from their cigarettes. Profanity ruled. The middle-aged couple across from me cowered in fear as the train slowly crossed with wide Danube into Bulgaria” (Kaplan 2000b, 57). “Travel is work” (Kaplan 2004, 185) that takes you to places not often seen by your kind, and whence you report of things not often experienced by your people. In Colombia, he welcomed an opportunity to travel in an armored car with U.S. Special Forces through Arauca, a “ratty hellhole” of a town because “[a]ll the briefings in the world were not as revealing as the indefinable essences gleaned from visual contact” (Kaplan 2005, 82, 81).

Travel is a distinct way of learning, privileging the visual, and Kaplan reads eyes as windows on the soul. In a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, Kaplan met a Liberian who had spent time in California: “I warmed to his eyes. Their

aspect was western—just barely though” (1996a, 22). At the Liberian border, he saw another “young, muscular man [who] stood stoically by the side of the road, wearing an Elvis T-shirt. His eyes were terrifyingly vacant. There was no economy here, nothing” (1996a, 27). In Romania, he reflected on the “unusually high standard of efficiency” brought to the town of Sibiu by its Saxons before noting of one young man that “[h]is flaxen hair and intelligent-looking blue eyes betrayed him as a Saxon” (Kaplan 1994, 174, 175). Of course, these impressions were formed selectively and with hindsight for Kaplan spoke in English with the man in the refugee camp, and in German with the blond Romanian. The vacant eyes of “Elvis” were never animated by conversation, and yet the judgment is made, pretty vacant.

Western-centric perspectives often register otherness as lack. Traveling with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan for periods in the second half of the 1980s, Kaplan (2001, 17) remarked of his hosts, “Their Moslem fundamentalism lacks political meaning because Afghanistan, unlike the Arab world and Iran, never had an invasion of Western culture and technology to revolt against.” He reached this conclusion without the benefit of intimate conversation because “Arabic (and Persian too) was a language I disdained, even though I knew the alphabet and a few simple phrases. Like Greek, Arabic struck me as a flowery, ostentatious language structured for poetry and demagoguery, but without Greek’s flair for intellectual subtlety” (Kaplan 2001, 107). Nevertheless, and in a chapter entitled “Noble Savages,” Kaplan (2001, 108) explained how he had reached a more positive view of Islam, at least in Afghanistan, for here it was, he concluded, a matter of genuine piety and not the “collective hysteria” of Iran. These Afghan tribesmen had no need of an ideological union imposed by an autocratic regime; never having lost their aboriginal faith, they displayed Islam as “it was originally intended to be” (Kaplan 2001, 109). It is in the modern world of states not tribes, of politics not tradition, that difference becomes threat. Safe in the past, the other might remain a noble savage.

Travelers come from the modern world and are struck by what they find exotic, or uncomfortable about the places they suffer to visit. But they are also disposed to explain the first in terms of the second. Kaplan (1996a, 4, 7) finds that “[a]t the equator nature is a terrifying face from which humankind cannot separate itself,” that “[i]t almost certainly is not accidental that Africa is both the poorest and hottest region in the world,” and that in traveling to *Ends of the Earth* he could explain “humanity in each locale as literally an outgrowth of the terrain and

climate in which it was fated to live.” Kaplan is particularly wary of forests. He argues that Russian civilization has been shaped by its origins: “Clustered in the forest with their enemies lurking on the steppe, the Russians took refuge in both animism and religion” (Kaplan 2012, 159). In fear of the Mongols from the steppes, Kaplan believes that Russians learned to accept totalitarian government. Of Liberia, he remarks that in a forest “where one’s view is blotted out by every manner of tree and creeper (each containing its own ‘spirit’), men tend to depend less on reason and more on superstition,” producing “an indefinable wildness” so that “perhaps, the forest had made the war in Liberia. I have no factual basis for this, merely traveler’s intuition” (Kaplan 1996a, 28, 27). Traveler’s intuition is casually environmentalist.

Modernity, states, and cosmopolitanism stall atavistic identities forged in long communion with variegated nature. The past might again be the future, or as Kaplan (2012, xx) puts it, “With the political ground shifting rapidly under one’s feet, the map, though not determinative, is the beginning of discerning a historical logic about what might come next.” And this is how Kaplan travels into geopolitics. In Arizona, he sees waxing Indian and waning federal power and from the map of Indian territories, he discerns a new landscape animated by old enmities: “The reemergence of North America’s vast and increasingly vast archipelago, with its resurgence of ethnic consciousness ... can only lead to increased conflict among the Indian tribes themselves as the power of the federal and state governments declines. A more politically and economically significant Indian America will likely be a divided, balkanized Indian America” (Kaplan 1998, 188). In this respect, Kaplan’s taste for classical history becomes an urgent way to read the present.

Kaplan (2004, 17) has always sought out “books linked to the landscapes and seascapes through which I traveled.” He assures us that Gibbons’ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789) has a scent of “disturbing freshness” because it “instructs that human nature never changes, and that mankind’s predilection for faction, augmented by environmental and cultural differences, is what determines history” (Kaplan 2000a, 111, 113). For Kaplan (2004, 90), “[m]yths offer ultimate, condensed truth.” In this respect, “[a]ncient history ... is the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century” (Kaplan 2002, 14). In reading classical history so that he can take an informed interest in the landscapes and places that were its setting, Kaplan finds other lessons, not about history, but about modern politics and international relations. Reading

Livy's account of the wars between Carthage and Rome, Kaplan (2002, 32) sees in Hannibal a "pre-technological Hitler." More fatefully, however, he also suggests that "Livy shows that the vigor it takes to face our adversaries must ultimately come from pride in our own past and our achievements. Romanticizing our past is something to be cultivated, rather than to be ashamed of" (Kaplan 2002, 36). Although we should idealize our past, we must not idealize the international present. We should judge ends not means and must learn to abjure any philosophy of humility and self-abnegation; rather, we should follow Machiavelli and embrace "a pagan ethic that elevated self-preservation over the Christian ethic of sacrifice, which he considered hypocritical" (Kaplan 2002, 52).

This reading of ancient history legitimates a tragic worldview. In this fallen world, "idealism shorn of ... realism is immoral" (Kaplan 2003a, xv). Because, in the mid-1980s, U.S. President Jimmy Carter would not intervene with force in Ethiopia, his gift of food aid exacerbated conflict fueling the communist production of management of famine for sectarian ends that "should cure those in the West of the delusion that humanitarian means are sufficient to achieve humanitarian ends in Africa" (Kaplan 2003b, 159). It was held by some that Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, in arguing that the Balkans were scored through with ancient hatreds, helped those advisors of President Clinton who were cautious about an armed intervention seemingly bound to founder in the face of tribal blood feuds. Kaplan called this use of his work, cynical and styled the noninterventionist position, "Western cowardice," making it clear that he wanted "strong military intervention against the Bosnian Serbs" (Kaplan 1996c). By the end of the last century, Kaplan (2000a, 181) was bemoaning the "deformities of domestic peace," which he saw as draining politics and culture of seriousness. Kaplan (2005, 3). He applauded the posture of President Bush after the attacks of 11 September 2001, noting with evident satisfaction that "by the turn of the twenty-first century the United States military had already appropriated the entire earth, and was ready to flood the most obscure areas of it with troops at a moment's notice."

In this spirit, Kaplan (2005, 11, 14) went out on patrol with the U.S. military to explore the reality of empire, which he characterized as "singular individuals fronting dangerous and stupendous landscapes," insisting that "the drama of exotic new landscapes has always central to the imperial experience" so that an account of empire "had to be about travel." Repeatedly he finds the U.S. military to have been reinvigorated by its active service in Iraq and Afghanistan: "When you scratched the surface of

airmen's emotions, you learned that they too, like Marine and Army grunts, saw the pre-9/11 period as a bad dream—a time when, even during the air campaigns in the Balkans, risk was not tolerated in the way it was now" (Kaplan 2008, 63).

The imperial future for the United States, as described by Kaplan, has two strands. The first are small-scale activities. Among these is the training of "indigenous troops" in foreign places, or what he calls "imperial maintenance" (Kaplan 2008, 5). They also include preserving access to foreign facilities, such as airfields or warehoused supplies. Beyond this, there are the unconventional, counterterrorism actions of covert forces, including murders, kidnapping, psychological warfare, sabotage, and interrogations. This dispersed militarism was compared by troops to the wars against indigenous peoples in the nineteenth-century United States, although they spoke in somewhat different terms: "'Welcome to Injun Country' was the refrain I heard from troops from Colombia to the Philippines, including Afghanistan and Iraq. ... The War on Terrorism was really about taming the frontier" (Kaplan 2005, 4). One officer at the Pentagon told Kaplan (2008, 9) that "[a]fter Iraq, we hope not to be invading a big country for a long time, so we'll be reduced to low-profile raiding, which the U.S. military has a very long and venerable tradition of from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." Kaplan (2008, 8) described a preventative war on terror that conflated humanitarian and combat preparations: "the logistics of humanitarian assistance were similar to the logistics of war: both demanded fast infiltration and the movement of men and equipment to a zone of activity. It was all about access." And access came with local engagement: "The way to avoid future quagmires was to be engaged in more places, not fewer" (Kaplan 2008, 8).

Access requires the military to win hearts and minds and, for Kaplan, that work can best be motivated in ways that eerily recall the business of travel, and travel writing. There is, for Kaplan (2004, 24), a love of landscape that rises to a passion: "The more beautiful the landscape the more you want to devour its past and culture: all intellectual life rests ultimately on aesthetics." Beauty and possession are related. In the Philippines, he describes a night out with some members of a Joint Special Operations Task Force: "We were accompanied by the girls who did the team laundry, for \$20 per month. These girls were typical *Filipinas*: small-boned, symmetrically featured, and walnut-complexioned beauties, with twangy, mellow Spanish-style voices and subservient oriental manners, a devouring mix of South America and Asia" (Kaplan 2005, 158). There is a conflation of landscape and women in the

way he develops this theme over the next few pages. He writes that “Western men simply loved Asia” and “[p]articularly in the Philippines, which was a land of smiling and stunning women” (Kaplan 2005, 161). For the men of the Joint Special Operations Task Force, sexual relations with local women were disallowed by military regulations “[a]nd that was a shame, at least in my opinion” (Kaplan 2005, 158), for elsewhere in the Philippines when married quarters were removed from bases and “soldiers interacted more with the locals,” the consequence was “a better relationship with the immediate environment” (Kaplan 2005, 175). In Thailand, he finds that the local relationships on which the United States can rely have been built by ex-soldiers who stayed behind after military service having “married locally. They constituted proof that you could serve your country best by loving the indigenous culture most” (Kaplan 2008, 82). There is not a trace of irony, or embarrassment, in this explication of the relations between aesthetics and empire.

Alongside the aesthetics of small-scale engagement, Kaplan also sketches a broader-scale strategic strand of U.S. imperialism. Here, he notes that “our world is increasingly one without a superpower” for the rise of countries once judged underdeveloped is “leveling the geopolitical playing field” (Kaplan 2011a, 327). Kaplan (2011c) suggests that in the past decade the world has passed beyond the post-Cold War moment of singular U.S. military superiority: “Although U.S. soldiers and marines have slogged their way through the mountains of Afghanistan and the alleyways of Iraq, countries of the Indo-Pacific region have been quietly building their maritime, air, cyber and space capacities.” This is the arena for the high-tech warfare of air forces and navies. It is also the context for Kaplan’s (2011b, 168) reflections on the relations between maps and chaps, or between those “vast impersonal forces ... about which we can do little” and the singular individuals who, “against great odds, succeed at overcoming these very forces.” Johnston (2013) has already reviewed Kaplan’s (2012) broadly environmentalist argument in these pages, but it is worth noting again just how static is the geography that is having its revenge: “Geography is merely the unchanging backdrop against which the battle of ideas plays out” (2011b, 177), so that insofar as determinism is defied, geography is, too.

And still, there might be grandeur yet in a geographical view of things. It is striking that in *Monsoon*, Kaplan (2011b) describes the intense and long-standing interactions between societies distributed around the Indo-Pacific region. He describes how the monsoon winds helped shape a trading system that flung far and wide people,

products, and philosophies. These interactions had a historical geography that belies the notion that identities are shaped predominantly by physical environments, static or dynamic. Kaplan also describes these trading systems as creating interdependencies that give many an interest in a sort of maritime commons. Those relations likewise develop from and into a sort of political geography. *The Revenge of Geography* begins by allowing the idealists of *Mitteleuropa* to float the notion that “a culture in and of itself comprised a geography every bit as much as a mountain range did, or every bit as much as Soviet tanks did,” before bringing in the geographical realists to insist that the notion “simply has no reality on the relief map” (Kaplan 2012, 6, 9). The book closes, however, with Kaplan (2012, 332) urging the United States to “prepare the world for its own obsolescence. That way it labors for a purpose, and not merely to enjoy power for its own sake.” By drawing China into a set of economic interdependencies across the Indo-Pacific region, Kaplan (2012, 219) would hope that the United States might “make a [straits] war too costly for China to seriously contemplate.” If China enters alliances to share the burden of maintaining the maritime commons, then, suggests Kaplan (2012, 346), a new “stability guaranteed by a balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere” might allow the United States “to advance nothing less than the liberal intellectual cause of a *Mitteleuropa* writ large across the globe.”

This is probably as far as a broadly realist analysis can go, and it is certainly better than the *force majeure* celebrated in Kaplan’s (2002) earlier calls for “warrior politics.” The realist emphasis on balancing the relative forces of states, however, leaves out of the picture the grid of inequality and the related issue of the relations between states and corporations. For all his concern with empire, there is precious little here about the economics of imperialism. After all, corporations compete for resources and implicate states in their wake. And to speak of the global war on terror as “taming the frontier” (Kaplan 2005, 4) insults the First Nations peoples who were dispossessed and slaughtered. Geopolitics too often inherits the unexamined privilege of travel.

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