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Imaginative geographies and geopolitics

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CHAPTER 6

Imaginative Geographies and Geopolitics

Introduction

Soon after the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, wrote that it is ‘the task of democratic politics to prevent the development of conditions which lead to hatred, terror and destruction and not to limit itself to attempts to control them once they have already occurred’ (Agamben, 2001). Agamben points here to the general failure of the western democratic system to prevent the conditions of ignorance, injustice and inequality that lead to conflict and war. Many of the most critical opponents of the current war on terrorism launched as a geopolitical response to the September 11th attacks point to its selective mapping of a geography of danger that serves to bury historical discord and injustice, prior western interference and contemporary geoeconomic interests under a prevailing vernacular of *terror* and *threat*. In a world where *geographical representation* is key, historical geographers can play a critical role in historicizing and geo-graphing places and events, and in so doing dismantling reductive scriptings of distant conflicts. This chapter uses the example of the current moment of global danger to illuminate the role of *affective imaginative geographies* in the legitimizing and waging of war. It initially outlines the historical context of the use of imaginative geographies in the envisioning and representation of conflict before reflecting on the various means by which geographers have critically challenged the conventional scripting of the current *war on terror*.

Imaginative geographies and affect

Throughout human history, geographical imaginings of distant and different *Others* have been employed to both rationalize and frame the waging of war. From the Persian Wars to the Crusades, from the Wars of the Three Kingdoms to the Yugoslav Wars, conflict has been imagined and enacted via purposeful rudimentary mappings of territory and identity, civility and barbarism, threat and terror (war is also typically remembered via simplified representation and performance; see the ‘Place and Meaning’ section). Such discourses frequently submerge underpinning geoeconomic and geopolitical imperatives, and instead utilize *imaginative geographies* to present an essentialist rationale for the exercise of force. Geo-graphing and geographical knowledges, in other words, perform central roles in the practice of war.

Imaginative geographies are produced and disseminated at multiple sites/forums of representation and performance: from newspapers to TV news; from radio to film; from press conferences to public marches; from state documents to the internet (for discussion on these and other sources, see the ‘Evidence and Representation’ chapter). Historically, the circulation of imaginative geographies has served to collectively legitimate a vocabulary of difference in which specific tropes of identity in the form of ‘representative figures’ have come to stand for a whole nation of people (Said, 1978: 71). Stretching back centuries in Europe, for example, the representative figure of Islam symbolized ‘terror, devastation, the demonic’ (Said, 1978: 59):

For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century the “Ottoman peril” lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger.

Elsewhere, equally representative imaginative geographies have established a powerful register of difference, ignorance, fear and hate. From Ancient Rome to the new worlds of the Americas, the barbarians, the uncivilized, the perennial threat lurked just *beyond the pale*.

In the modern world, commentators on the September 11th attacks have typically sought to conceptualize them in the various mainstream mediums of television and print cultures via a discourse of Islamic *terror* (Silberstein, 2002; Chomsky, 2003; Weber, 2003; for more on visual cultures, see the ‘Illustrative Geographies’ chapter). Outside of the sufferings and heroics of the victims and their families, the focus of both state and media attention has been on the identification and punishment of the individuals and more importantly *types* responsible – those who *hate us* and *our values*. This prevailing reductive formula for understanding the post-9/11 world is based on *affective* imaginative geographies that justify and indeed demand retaliatory action in the form of aggression. As Gearóid Ó Tuathail argues, the abiding consequence of the essentialist American reaction to 9/11 was that the decision to invade Iraq was based more on *affect* than intellect:

The triumph of affect over intellect is marked by the desire to attack Iraq even though there is not convincing evidence for doing so. Intellectual deliberation and policy

credibility take a back seat to “instinctive” convictions and prejudices. Saddam Hussein is an “evil-doer,” and in the scaled down world of affect, this alone justifies “regime change” (2003: 853).

In the *clash of civilizations* between *east* and *west*, each side typically refers to the other as *perpetrator* and *evil*, while identifying themselves as *victim* and *good* (the designations *east* and *west* are, of course, reductive and hugely problematic; nonetheless, they are commonly employed as givens – see, for example, Huntington, 1993). It is important to remember that affective imaginative geographies not only function in the so-called west; a mythical picture of a corrupted, infidel and morally doomed west is a common touchstone of essentialist populist discourses in the so-called east. Clearly, however, this contemporary polemical language war masks a longer history of western colonialism and strategic interventions in the Middle East, and an accompanying sequence of violence and reprisal. Neil Smith (2003: xi), for example, reminds us that ‘the historical geography of American globalism has everything to do with the first major war of the twenty-first century, the so-called war on terrorism’. America’s pragmatic political, economic and military support for regimes favourable to US interests in the Middle East, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in which America is seen in the Arab World to overwhelmingly support Israel) and the strategic presence of US bases on Arab soil throughout the region are all implicated in both the assaults of 9/11 and the resistance to the US-led occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, when assessing and critiquing the contemporary Middle East, recognizing and contextualizing its historical geographies is vitally important.

In prompting us ‘to rethink the lazy separations between past, present, and future’, Derek Gregory has been foremost in critiquing the powerful historical and contemporary imaginative geographies that continue to shape our world (2004: 7). Gregory’s *The Colonial Present* illuminates recent western interventions overseas as underpinned by an enduring register of essentialist imaginative geographies: west versus east; good versus evil; civility versus barbarity (2004). Using the examples of the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and Israel’s war in Palestine, Gregory demonstrates how specific geographical representations or *geopolitical projections* serve to not only discursively separate *us* from *them*, but in real terms to dictate the logics of western military intervention and to allow for the subjects of western violence to be rendered as mere objects; whose corporeality has no resonance in the west. As Naomi Klein argues, Iraqi deaths (like those of Afghanis and Palestinians) simply ‘don’t count’ (2004). The extraordinary rendition of tens of thousands to the status of *bare life* in camps in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere reveal the extent to which the omnipresent discursive spacings between *us* and *them* in everyday life have allowed for, and indeed legitimized, the suspension of the most basic human rights of citizens of sovereign states throughout the world (Agamben, 1998, 2005).

CENTCOM’s war on terror: geopolitical and geoeconomic logics

I now want to use the example of United States Central Command (CENTCOM) to demonstrate further the links between geopolitical projection and geopolitical practice. Since its initiation in 1983, CENTCOM has been responsible for the military planning, coordination and implementation of US grand strategy in the Middle East.

Seen in figure 6.1, CENTCOM's 'Area of Responsibility' (AOR) encompasses the world's most energy-rich region, including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (on October 1st, 2008, all of the command's African countries, with the exception of Egypt, became officially part of a new Africa Command). Given its geographic focus, CENTCOM has emerged in recent years as the chief body responsible for the military operation of the US-led war on terror. Accordingly, it has produced various strategic geopolitical projections that have centrally informed the formulation of policy. Its 'theater strategy' document *Shaping the Central Region for the 21st Century*, for example, outlines its key objective:

Protect, promote and preserve U.S. interests in the Central Region to include the free flow of energy resources, access to regional states, freedom of navigation, and maintenance of regional stability (US CENTCOM).

CENTCOM's geopolitical scripting of the Middle East sheds important light upon the strategic and geoeconomic priorities that underlie the so-called war on terror, and the historical context to this is crucial to our understanding. In addition to the geographic focus on the Middle East, the extension of its AOR in 1999 to include the oil-, gas- and mineral-rich Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan only makes sense if a key purpose of CENTCOM is a specialisation on the geopolitics of energy. The importance of the Central Asian states is clear from CENTCOM Commander General John P. Abizaid's Statement before the Senate Arms Services Committee in 2006:

In a region at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the stability and further development of transportation and energy networks is increasingly important for global economic health (US Senate Armed Service Committee, 2006: 41-42).



Figure 6.1 CENTCOM Area of Responsibility, July 2008 (adapted from US Department of Defense (2007))

For the war in Iraq, stated motives about weapons of mass destruction dominated the media networks and public opinion. However, other motives not stated about business opportunities were certainly also present (for more on this, see chapter 17 of Naomi

Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*). The key point here is that military knowledge is commonly not challenged with respect to what it conceals in terms of policy. CENTCOM's scripted strategy functions in a world in which military 'policy' is consistently (and increasingly) used to override and even suppress debate' (Gregory, 2005: 183; see also Harvey, 2004). Military representations are rarely contested in the public realm, yet their interrogation and illumination are crucial to understanding associated geopolitical and geoeconomic practices (Johnson, 2004). If we look closer at CENTCOM's war on terrorism, we can see that it is based on a loosely-scripted 'cartography of danger' that has emerged from a geopolitical abstraction whose reductive formula has rendered 'peoples and places ready for military action' (Dalby, 2007; see also Graham, 2005). This contextualization and representation of the Middle East serves, of course, to deliberately negate the humanity and complexity of the largely unseen human geographies on the ground. CENTCOM's war and actions, however, are also underpinned and allowed for by the careful designation of its AOR as a strategic space in the world vital to *global economic health* and the success of neoliberalism (see Gold, 1988).

The geographical representations of the Middle East by CENTCOM not only legitimize the operations of US military grand strategy but also form part of a wider political and cultural discourse on the region that has produced a moral cartography or imaginary constituted of distinct structures of identity, difference and terror (Said, 1997; Shapiro, 1997). Geopolitical, geoeconomic and ideological dispositions, such as those of CENTCOM's, are neatly maintained and conveyed in the public sphere via the use of simplified imaginative geographies. Edward Said, in one of his last works

before his death, warned of the enduring power of imaginative geographical knowledges in framing understandings of conflict in the modern world. In the context of the United States in the post-9/11 period, he observed the ‘hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché’ and the ‘dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt of dissenters and “others”’ (Said, 2003: xiii). For Said, projections of grand strategy from imperialism to contemporary geopolitics were made possible by ‘the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography’ (1993: 93).

Military geography, critical geopolitics and counter-geographies

In the last decade, the traditional sub-discipline of military geography has been buoyed by advances in GIS technology that have attracted lucrative research and development contracts in the areas of defense and surveillance. As a rejoinder to this exclusively strategic research, many geographers have engaged military geographies in an oppositional and critical manner (Woodward, 2004). For the first Gulf War, for example, James Sidaway (1998) has outlined the quickly mobilized Orientalist representational strategies of the west that were used to reduce a previously heralded secular and progressive Iraq to a place of tyranny personified by Saddam Hussein. In more recent years, geographers have offered geopolitical critiques of the global war and terror and its links to US grand strategy and global hegemony (Agnew, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Dodds, 2005; Smith, 2005; Dalby, 2006; David and Grondin, 2006; Morrissey, 2009, 2011a). One of the vital elements of much of this work in what can be loosely described as *critical geopolitics* is the illumination of the import of

geographical knowledges (particularly Manichean imaginative geographies of good and evil) for the effective operation of hegemonic power (for related work outside of geography, see: Atkinson, 1999; Dodge, 2003). Critical geopolitics has sought to disrupt and interrogate the basis, legitimization and operation of contemporary western geopolitical power and knowledge (Ó Tuathail, 1996). A key concern has been to proffer more humane and nuanced *counter-geographies* that insist on the spatiality and materiality of global space. For the first Gulf War, for example, Gearóid Ó Tuathail has divulged the effacement of the material geographies – the corporeal realities beneath the cluster bombs and so-called smart bombs – by the bloodless ‘electronic spatiality’ of the military machine and a complicit and submissive western media and audience (1993). For the war on terror, Derek Gregory has shown the necessity of ‘a cultural mobilization’ that employs ‘imaginative geographies’ as ‘powerful rhetorical weapons precisely [folding] difference into distance’ (2005: 186). Gregory argues instead for the scripting of counter-geographies that insist on real places with real people, with rights and bodies just like us.

Some of the most important counter-geographies concerning the war on terror have been advanced outside the academy, such as those seen in the unprecedented global public protests against the war in Iraq in 2003. Counter-geographies highlighting key issues such as the geoeconomic importance of Iraq, the longer history and broader geography of western intervention in the region and the cultural complexities and human suffering effaced from abstracted and sanitized politico-ideological and military rationales for the war were forwarded throughout the world. In this context, many geographers played, and continue to play, important roles as public intellectuals

in circulating critiques of the war (and broader war on terror) in a variety of public forums, from critical newspaper and internet articles to solidarity campaigns and public lectures. The dissemination of critical voices of reason, empathy and protest may not have stopped the war in Iraq but they are pivotal to efforts to bring it to an end. The thousands of *pace* (peace) flags (see figure 6.2) flying the length and breadth of Italy in the lead-up to the war did not initially prevent Italian troops being deployed but their continued presence in public space as the war raged on mirrored the country's huge opposition to the war, and the persistent calls for troop withdrawal were eventually acted upon after a change of government in 2006.



Figure 6.2 *Pace* protest, Cagliari, Italy, May 2003. Photo: J. Morrissey

Within the academy, recent years have witnessed a sustained mobilization of research in historical, political and cultural geography that has critiqued the operation of western overseas power and the exercise of force in at least four ways: (i) first, geographers have sought to reveal the historical geographical contexts of contemporary geopolitics and geoeconomics (Smith, 2003; Kearns, 2006); (ii) secondly, attention has been paid to rendering visible the violent geographies of western military interventions (Flint, 2005; Gregory and Pred, 2007); (iii) thirdly, focus has been placed on the predominant geographical discourses of *us* and *them* justifying and buttressing the advancement of western military interventions (Coleman, 2004; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007); and (iv) finally, informed by the work of Giorgio Agamben on bare life and the state of exception and Michel Foucault's writings on biopower and governmentality, geographers have illuminated the functioning of western sovereign power in the spaces of exception of the global war on terror (Foucault, 2007, 2008; Gregory, 2007; Morrissey, 2011b).

Conclusion

Imaginative geographies function in various ways in modern society in identifying and delineating difference. Maintained by fundamental relations of power and knowledge, they frequently serve to disconnect peoples and maintain ignorance, fear and hatred. At the heart of war lies a deep-rooted notion of difference that rests upon a series of imaginative geographies that collectively create a consensual legitimization for the exercise of violence. The initiation of the war on terror demanded the mobilization and maintenance of simplified, accessible, mythical knowledges – imaginative geographies that compelled us to neatly take sides and confidently answer

such questions as *are you with us or against us* (Hedges, 2003). The affective imaginative geographies of the war on terror continue to take our attention and empathy away from a whole series of historical and contemporary human geographies that need to be rendered visible. A more nuanced and humane orientation of critical geographical knowledges can help to counter simplified and politicized scriptings of both foreign conflict and foreign policy. To this end, historical geographers can play an important role in narrating the unseen contexts of contemporary geopolitics and revealing the framed imaginative geographies that have such potent power to render us overwhelmed – through words, images and affect if not through bombs.

Summary

- In a world where *geographical representation* is key, historical geographers can play a critical role in historicizing and geo-graphing places and events, and in so doing dismantling reductive scriptings of distant conflicts.
- Historically, the circulation of *imaginative geographies* has served to collectively legitimate a vocabulary of difference in which specific tropes of identity have come to stand for a whole nation of people.
- Geographical representations/projections serve to not only discursively separate *us* and *them* but in real terms to legitimize and dictate the logics of military intervention and the exercise of violence.
- Geopolitical scriptings of the Middle East such as that of CENTCOM shed important light upon the *strategic and geoeconomic priorities* that underlie the war on terror.

- Critical geopolitics has sought to disrupt and interrogate the basis, legitimization and operation of contemporary western geopolitical power and knowledge, and a key concern has been to proffer more humane and nuanced *counter-geographies* that insist on the spatiality and materiality of global space.
- The *affective* imaginative geographies of the current *war on terror* continue to take our attention and empathy away from a whole series of historical and contemporary human geographies that need to be rendered visible.

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