

Reading Culture, Identity and Space in US Foreign Policy

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I nundated by “theories” about the putative role of Islamic and Arab culture in shaping Middle East politics, one might ask: what role does American culture play in US foreign policy? In recent years, some of the most innovative contributions to the study of US relations with the Middle East have come from investigations into the role of culture, identity and space.

Drawing on Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Douglas Little’s **American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945** (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) sets out to explain how negative cultural stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims have shaped American popular attitudes and policies toward the Middle East. This readable and insightful survey is littered with examples of derogatory images from American popular culture and condescending comments from policymakers. It remains unclear, however, how these cultural biases generated policies and alliances that frequently shifted to find new modes to promote US interests in changing geopolitical contexts. *American Orientalism* is most illuminating for exposing American habits of seeking to remake the region in the US image and pretensions about the universality and superiority of American ideas and ways of doing things.

Focusing on a critical period in the late 1950s, Salim Yaqub’s **Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East** (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), seeks to challenge such “culturalist” explanations of US policy as presented by Little. Yaqub’s rich, detailed narrative traces the rise (and decline) of US efforts under the anti-Communist Eisenhower Doctrine to shore up traditional monarchies in reaction to the rise of Nasser and Arab nationalism. Yaqub claims that the US and Nasser operated within a “shared moral framework” that proclaimed the virtues of national independence and economic development, but that, in pursuit of strategic interests, they differed over means and methods. The value of Yaqub’s critique of culturalist approaches, however, is limited by the very nature of such approaches. Culture is of limited explanatory power when it is viewed as a set of “fixed” ideas and attitudes rather than as a context in which meanings are formulated.

US Middle East policy in the late 1950s was in flux, but what might have shaped the decisions of policymakers was an American Cold War culture that viewed geopolitics primarily in terms of American spaces under threat from Soviet encroachment. Such is the possible implication of Henry Bromell’s Cold War spy novel **Little America** (New York: Vintage, 2001). The story recounts the fate of a Middle Eastern kingdom called “Kurash” which closely resembles Jordan in 1958. There is one major difference. The country has been erased from the map. Bromell begins his tale by telling us that the plucky monarch was assassinated and a few years later the territory swallowed up “like a snack” by Syria and Iraq. The novel centers on the quest of the narrator, now a history professor, to reconstruct what happened in the fateful year of 1958 and learn what role his own father, a CIA agent, played in those events. While some of the descriptions and names might sound awkward, the political and cultural context is portrayed with uncommon sophistication. Bromell, who has written for high-quality TV shows like “Northern Exposure” and “Homicide,” folds into the story of his fictional Kurash real elements drawn from regional politics and US covert operations in Jordan and neighboring countries while imagining an alternative endgame. Moreover, the title *Little America* refers to the cultural space, as well as the state of mind, Americans forged while living in the Middle East in the late 1950s. As it happens, Bromell was raised in such a space, and his father worked for the CIA.

To better understand the relationship between American culture and US policy, one of the best works to turn to is Melani McAlister’s **Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945** (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). Adopting what she terms a post-Orientalist approach, McAlister argues that American cultural engagement with the Middle East has not been limited to “us vs. them” oppositions and the practice of “othering.” It has also relied on practices of affiliation, appropriation and cooptation in which the Middle East has been critical to the formation of identities and meaning for various cultural and religious communities within the US. Through a series of careful readings of films, novels and media images, the book demonstrates how a “web of meanings” produced by these representations and discourses has facilitated, and sometimes challenged, the expansion of US power in the Middle East.

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McAlister begins by exploring how the language and logic of early Cold War discourse drew upon the Exodus narrative in representing the threat of Communism as a form of slavery from which the US, cast as a Moses figure, provided hope for liberation. Layered on this reading, McAlister explores biblical epic films released during the era, such as *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, which were popularly viewed as Cold War allegories. McAlister suggests an interlacing of these readings whereby Americans understood US Cold War policy as a form of “benevolent supremacy” in which the US embraced independence movements in the Third World but feminized these new nations by ascribing their role within a US-dominated order as one defined by a consensual but unequal union as in “right-ordered marriages.”

Epic Encounters outlines a struggle between alternative visions of the role the US should play in defining the global order. The more liberal vision posited that the US should accommodate the rising power of rival states (Germany, Japan, OPEC) by playing a managerial role in world affairs. McAlister explores this vision through a reading of the US tour of *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibit in the late 1970s. In official and popular discourse the Egyptian relics were presented and discussed as part of the “common heritage of mankind” rather than as the exclusive property of contemporary Egypt and its national heritage. In a similar way, she suggests Americans viewed US efforts to manage the production and flow of Middle East oil in terms of “imperial stewardship” serving not US national interests but the wellbeing of the global economy.

Most illuminatingly, McAlister traces the rise to dominance of a rival, conservative view of the US role in the world. This morally charged geopolitical vision rejected accommodation with rivals to US power. It sought to expunge what it viewed as the domestic roots of US failure in Vietnam, including a lack of will and the erosion of unity caused by the anti-war and feminist movements. McAlister traces the role that popular understandings of Israel played in this transition. She emphasizes not the role of the American Jewish community or the Israeli lobby but that of evangelical Christians, guided by biblical prophecy, who read Israeli expansion in the 1967 war and its muscular approach to counter-terrorism as a guide for the US. This moral geography (a term drawn from Michael Shapiro) was popularized during the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis in which the Americans viewed themselves as a (sometimes feminized) nation of innocents subject to violent, unprovoked assault. In media imagery, political commentary and popular films, US involvement with the region was erased while Iranian actions were viewed as irrational and explained as dictated by adherence to the tenets of militant Islam.

In some of her most original passages, McAlister dwells on race. For example, she explores the appropriations of Egypt and Islam within African-American communities that led them

to generate less benevolent understandings of the role the US played abroad. Her discussions of race are part of her post-Orientalist project to show how US-Middle Eastern cultural relations involved complex interconnections between heterogeneous cultures. Following this claim, McAlister argues that, in the context of American debates about multiculturalism, the

moral authority wielded by the US military in the 1990–1991 Gulf war depended on its embrace of racial diversity (which she terms “military multiculturalism”). Discussing the film *The Siege*, however, she notes how this racial multiculturalism failed to incorporate Arab and Muslim elements that could only be viewed as (potentially threatening) outsiders.

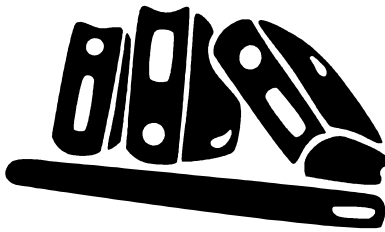
McAlister does not suggest a causal relationship between culture and politics,

but shows how most Americans have continually constructed a self-image for themselves as citizens of a benevolent world power acting to support universal principles and interests. In this way *Epic Encounters* provides a guide to understanding post-September 11 US policy even though the book was first published in September 2001 and focuses not on policymakers but on popular culture in the domestic US sphere. With a new post-September 11 chapter organized as a series of readings of now familiar media images, the rich tapestry woven throughout the book creates a matrix for understanding how the Bush administration has been able to advance policies and invoke solidarities which a few years ago would have been almost unthinkable. As McAlister concludes, “To oppose US policy [in the Iraq war] was to suggest the Arab or Muslim people did not have the right to democracy; support for the push towards war was brandished as an anti-racist credential.” To the degree that the “Bush Doctrine” resonates among Americans—supported by a saturation of media imagery continually portraying the United States as “an island of liberty in a sea of danger”—it threatens to establish a new dimension to the definition of US interests in the Middle East that could be difficult to dislodge.

Culture, as geographer Derek Gregory argues, is intimately connected with space and spatial practices. In ***The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*** (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), Gregory draws heavily from Edward Said’s notion of “imaginative geographies” which fold distance into difference to generate what Gregory calls “architectures of enmity.” In contrast to McAlister’s subtle readings of media representation, Gregory’s text burns with passion and anger. Diverted from his ongoing project on the culture of travel in nineteenth-century Egypt, Gregory set out to tell the spatial stories of ordinary people in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq victimized by state violence unleashed in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Most of the events covered by *The Colonial Present* are familiar. What drives Gregory’s plotline is a theoretical apparatus appropriated from Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the figure

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of *homo sacer* in ancient Roman law. The *homo sacer* is a legal term referring to those viewed as outside the law. This operation creates the “space of exception” inhabited by those subject to the sovereign’s power but excluded from any protection, with neither rights nor voice. In a series of twinned chapters about Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, Gregory uses this abstraction as a means to depict the unrestrained actions of the US, Israel and US-led forces in these three places. The chapters build upon each other to portray the landscape of what Gregory terms the “the colonial present” in which metropolitan cultures continue to privilege their own interests and mobility by denying the sovereignty of uncivilized “others.”

Gregory argues that, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the US folded the deterritorialized network of al-Qaeda into the bounded space of Afghanistan to create a territorialized military target. At the same time, due to al-Qaeda responsibility for the attacks the territory of Afghanistan could be viewed as a space outside of civilization. Thus, the inhabitants of this space were reduced to targets on a map or simply coordinates on a bombing grid.


Gregory begins his Palestine chapters by noting that Zionism constructed Palestine as an empty space, inhabited by only mute objects. Israeli territorialization, he argues, was coupled with Palestinian deterritorialization. These chapters provide a detailed survey of microtopographies of the colonial present. He shows not only how Palestinians have been displaced from land and homes, but

effectively disconnected from space itself. Drawing on the work of Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, Gregory relates how this process has only been intensified by the Oslo process in which Palestinian space has been splintered with internal boundaries while Israeli West Bank settlements were expanded outward and connected by a fluid network of militarized highways, bypass roads and communications infrastructure. Meanwhile, lacking control over their borders, airspace and underground resources, Palestinians have been subject to a three-dimensional matrix of monitoring and control consisting of aerial surveillance, watchtowers, checkpoints, separation walls, roadblocks and hilltop settlements. This sets the scene for his retelling of the brutal 2002–2003 Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in which Palestinian society was viewed as located within uncivilized, barbarian space, allowing Palestinian civil infrastructure to be targeted and destroyed.

In the Iraq chapters, Gregory emphasizes how the war was conveyed as a cinematic performance in which American knowledge about Iraq, as presented in the media, was conveyed in the idiom of military knowledge with its specialized means for visualizing space and time. For example, aerial maps listed potential targets while the commentary focused on explaining the tools and techniques needed to make opaque spaces (such as urban Baghdad) transparent.

The Colonial Present is unrelenting. Gregory’s powerful indictment barely pauses to consider the limits of its own narrative or the complexities of processes discussed. It nevertheless offers a compelling spatially oriented lens through which to view ongoing processes of war, violence and occupation. *The Colonial Present* can also be read as a warning about those who seek to claim that September 11 has led to the “collapse of distance.” Such a view is on display in the *9/11 Commission Report*, which concludes: “9/11 has taught us that terrorism against American interests ‘over there’ should be regarded just as we regard terrorism against America ‘over here.’ In this sense the American homeland is the planet.” Echoing McAlister’s readings of American popular culture, Gregory notes that with the construction of “America’s Iraq” we now hear rhetorical claims such that “Americans in Iraq presumably do not count as ‘foreign’ because they are universal soldiers fighting for a transcendent Good.”

Finally, one for the kids. **Addicted to War: Why the US Can’t Kick Militarism** (Oakland: AK Press, 2004) comes in the form of a comic book and launches its polemic against the economic and social costs of American militarism through the voice of a mother explaining to her son why his school must hold a bake sale to pay for not only books but also toilet paper. Written and illustrated by Joel Andreas, an anti-war activist and scholar of the Communist revolution in China, this “exposé” portrays American warmaking abroad and militarism at home as driven by the powerful economic interests of the military-industrial-corporate media complex. This storyline flattens much of the political complexity found in US-Middle East relations and fails to consider how culture and affect shape, and pose obstacles to reshaping, US policy. Nevertheless, as an exemplar of American anti-war pop cultural production, it is suitable for activists of all ages. ■



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