



European Journal of American Studies review of *Postmodern Imperialism: Geopolitics and the Great Games*

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Recent history for even the casual observer of international affairs has been plagued by wars and conflicts in specific regions of the world. The wars in Central Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq respectively, seem to indicate the latest machinations in the imperial designs of the USA. For many, using the term imperialism and connecting it to the USA is at best inappropriate. For others, American interventions in particular countries or specific regions of the world represent the practices of a hegemonic power and the expansion of an American empire. Some even argue that the nature of American imperialism is utterly novel, and deserving of a new label: 'postmodern imperialism.' As the title of Eric Walberg's book, his examination of the trajectories of contemporary imperialism includes scrutiny of the geopolitical interests of the USA and its "new developments in financial and military-political strategies to ensure control over the world's resources" (27-28). While *Postmodern Imperialism* primarily focuses on key aspects of imperialism, geopolitical analysis and commentary forms the foundation of Walberg's narrative.

Geopolitics is a discipline which has experienced the vagaries of at times being embraced and acknowledged as a serious field of study, while at other times being treated with disdain and derision. Its late 19th century popularity was replaced with contempt during the first half of the 20th century due to two catastrophic world wars and the discipline's association with grand Nazi strategies of global conquest. Walberg defines geopolitics as "the use of politics in controlling

territories, where certain geographic positions are more strategic than others, for resources, historical and socio-political reasons (19). The power struggle between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War, although centered on a 'balance of power' relationship, was equally focused on the abilities of each country to develop measures and strategies to gain an elusive 'upper hand' in the superpower contest. Once the Cold War ended, many declared not only the 'end of history,' but also the growing irrelevance of geography due to the accelerated pace of globalization and the arrival of 'the global village.' Post-Cold War 'disorder' coupled with the events of 9/11 has compelled many to re-think such celebratory narratives and acknowledge the increasing complexities of the contemporary world. The 'structured chaos' of the Cold War has been replaced by a more fluid international 'order' characterized by instability, unpredictability, and flux. Due to such conditions since the end of the Cold War, there has been a revival in the discipline of geopolitics. In many ways Walberg's volume, *Postmodern Imperialism* represents an effort to provide a critical analysis of not only contemporary geopolitics, but also the terrain of key imperial-geopolitical developments since the late nineteenth century.

Postmodern Imperialism is divided into five main chapters. In these chapters Walberg focuses on specific historical periods, largely chronological in its scheme, with main focus in the latter part of the book on the roles played by the USA and Israel. In dividing global history since the late nineteenth century, Walberg uses the term "Great Game" to designate the historical period. As he explains, the term "Great Game" refers to the nineteenth century rivalry between Russia and Britain (17). For instance, GGI refers to the imperial maneuvering of the nineteenth century up through to the Second World War. GGII is the label for the period of the Cold War in which the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, competed with each other for global influence. GGIII focuses on the post-Cold War period from around 1989 to the present. There is a sub-category named "Endgames" which is also used by the author to represent transitional phases between the larger historical periods. A key starting point for any discussion about the evolution of contemporary imperialism requires coverage of the British Empire; and it is here where Walberg begins his discussion of GGI. The British Empire became a hegemonic power by "playing off other powers against one another," building a global economic network which would serve the interests of the center at the expense of the periphery, and when 'diplomatic' efforts failed, the use of military power was utilized (32). Interspersed in the author's discussion are references to key geopolitical thinkers such as Friedrich Ratzel and his Organic Theory, along with Halford Mackinder and his Heartland Theory. Mackinder figures prominently in *Postmodern Imperialism*. By and large a key focus of the book is on the Middle East and Central Asia, "the heart of Eurasia" (17). Mackinder argued that the Eurasian heartland represents a key geographic pivot area; in short, the country that controls the heartland will control the world.

The weakening of the 'great powers' as a result of World War I, the interwar economic crisis, and the devastation of the Second World War, paved the way for the American entrance into global affairs. The post-WWII period marks the beginning of GGII, in which the USA and the USSR faced off against each other in a struggle for global domination. According to Walberg, GGII was mainly two games: "one directed against the Soviet Union and its European socialist allies, and the other against the nations struggling for independence from imperial control (55). America's weapons, however, were not only of a military nature. A key element in its arsenal was the rising power of the US dollar and its status as the world's reserve currency. The

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economic power wielded by the US was institutionalized by the creation of international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and GATT. As was the case with the Marshall Plan, an important US objective during the Cold War was to create a strong capitalist order to challenge the rising influence of communism. Walberg provides extensive coverage of CIA sponsored coups, interventions, and wars orchestrated by the US in order to maintain a dominant position over the Soviet Union, and if possible, 'roll back' communism in the periphery. One of the most interesting examples of American involvement abroad is the case of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of 1979. US covert assistance to the Islamic fundamentalist mujahideen was significant and created the conditions for a Russian withdrawal during the 1980s. This endgame, as Walberg indicates, "empowered political Islam and created a battle-hardened cadre of skilled guerrilla fighters" (91).

With the collapse of the USSR and its Eastern European client states during the period 1989-1991, ushered in a dramatic change in international relations. The bi-polarity of the Cold War years was replaced by the unipolar dominance of the USA. As the sole superpower in the world, the US embarked on creating a 'new world order' of peace and global stability. Wars in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa proved the need to revise the celebratory tone of the immediate post-Cold War period. What began to emerge, according to Walberg, was a concerted American effort to gain control and influence in Mackinder's 'Eurasian heartland.' This "renewed and energetic thrust by the US," states Walberg, "for world economic and political hegemony...from the Balkans to China's frontiers...required the securing of oil supplies in both the Middle East and the newly opened central Asia" (100). The arrival of the neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administrations, and the events of 9/11 helped in implementing the geopolitical-imperial agenda of the US. A new enemy emerged and a 'War on Terror' was declared. US relations with Muslim countries and American-Israeli relations form an important area of focus in Postmodern Imperialism. Pacifying Israel's neighbors was and remains a cornerstone of US foreign policy in the region. According to Walberg, think tanks and the Israeli lobby have a tremendous influence in shaping US policy in the Middle East. The war in Iraq and present-day tensions with Iran over its nuclear program reveal an overlapping of interests between the US and Israel. While for Israel the issue might be security in the face of a strong regional power, for the US, geopolitical and economic interests abound. Hence, according to Walberg, the interests of both countries converge in keeping the region immersed in conflict, division, and disintegration (130). As stated above, this theme of American-Israeli cooperation in the region receives extensive coverage by the author. He traces the evolution of Zionism and discusses at length the role played by Jews in global finance. For some readers, Walberg might be viewed as being too critical of Israeli actions, whereas others might find his analysis to be appropriate.

Readers unfamiliar with twentieth century global history might face some challenges due to the somewhat dense and at times encyclopedic rendering the century's political developments. Narrative development is clearly given less of a priority than providing information and coverage of nation-state profiles and detailed accounts of selected events. Some might also find Walberg's 'great game' nomenclature as unnecessary and complicated. There also might be some questions over the concept of 'postmodern imperialism.' Would the terms neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism cover what Walberg is describing? How can imperialism be 'postmodern'? His use of the center-periphery relationship sounds a lot like Immanuel

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Wallerstein's 'World Systems Theory'; and the absence of references to Nicholas Spykman's notion of the Rimland Theory is equally perplexing. Despite these observations, in sum, *Postmodern Imperialism*

represents a timely intervention in the current state of affairs in international relations. In many respects, Walberg's volume is a bold attempt to make sense of the contemporary world we live in. His analyses and interpretations provide another and more critical way of seeing the events that have occurred over the century. For those who are searching for a critical perspective and stance towards US foreign policy and the role of Israel in global affairs, then

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is an ideal selection. I think Walberg captures the importance of his book in his preface where he discusses his feelings about living in the Islamic world and the impetus behind

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. He writes that living in the Islamic world "has given me the opportunity to experience alternative realities, to step back from my western heritage and see more clearly how the western world confronts and plays with other countries and cultures. There are many such journeys of discovery by people coming of age politically. I hope my reflections provide readers the opportunity to step back from their frame of reference, and help them understand the games we are forced to play" (16).

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Postmodern Imperialism available at <http://claritypress.com/Walberg.html>