

Imagined Boundaries? The Legacy of the Cold War on Today's 'War on Terror'

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ALEXANDER WARD, OCT 2 2011

The echoes of the imaginary geographies associated with the Cold War undoubtedly underpin many of the geopolitical phenomena that typify the current 'War on Terror'; inherent to the geopolitical discourses of both eras are binary distinctions; distinctions between good vs evil, us vs them etc, all stemming from a firmly rooted 'conflict of ideologies' (Huntington, 1993, p159). These are sustained representatively through the establishment of an ideological hegemony, as certain political stances become embedded in common knowledge, thus constructing the political identities of 'the other'. Naturally, the extent to which the imaginary geographies of the Cold War are applicable to contemporary geopolitical discourses is limited; the increasing influence of technology and multiculturalism have all served to challenge the overarching similarities between both eras. However, the resonance of Cold War-esque imaginary geographies can still be seen to characterise US foreign policy, especially in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks.

The imaginary geographies of both the Cold War and the War on Terror are binary in nature in so far as they serve to draw a line between two antagonistic constructions, e.g. good vs evil. The conceptual origins of these distinctions lie in Orientalism. In their heyday, colonial and orientalist discourses "did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word" (Said, 1978, p60). This highlights a fundamental element of imaginary geographies; the fact that they are inherently constructed through perceptions of the 'other', rather than the actual characteristics of those perceived. Thus, the "system of knowledge about the Orient" (Said, 1978, p6) created certain representations that served to distance it from the West, both culturally and politically. A similarly important aspect of imaginary geographies is the implicit moralistic inferiority of the 'other'. Said (1978), referring to a colonialist standpoint, identified an assumed sense of "superior ontological status" (Said, 1978, p62) of the 'White Man' over the 'other'. This superiority was based on an inherently colonial discourse that implied an idea of the white man as possessing values that were "liberal, humane, correct" (Said, 1978, p62) in stark contrast to those of the Orient, whose discursive constructed identities, underpinned by gross generalizations of homogeneity, were those of unruliness and barbarianism.

These ideas of binary distinctions and moral superiority were commonplace in the Cold War. After mutually taking Berlin in 1945, the fate of Germany and all her conquests were to be decided upon at Yalta and Potsdam. Here, the very ideological differences that were to underpin the Manichean geopolitics that characterised the Cold War era came to light, as disagreements upon the future of Germany arose. This, as well as the deeply rooted fear of the communist ethos, dating back to the Bolshevik deposition of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917, sparked a resurgence in American isolationism (Agnew, 1998). Now, the Soviet Union represented the dangerous 'other', just how the Nazis had. In the eyes of Truman in particular, to be different was to be wrong and the stark difference in ideological agendas upon which these two nations formed were to fuel the underlying antagonism between both states. Accordingly, the national identities of the two states were thus embedded within the fear or rejection of all other entities not pertaining to their own individual ideologies. Hence, commonplace within the geopolitical practices of both superpowers was the ostracization of ideological threats embodied by the other as relatively "abstract terms such as 'communism' and 'capitalism' took on culturally loaded meanings" (Agnew, 1998, p110) (Ó Tuathail, 2006). Consequently, the construction of imagined geopolitical spaces that underpinned the binary politics of the Cold War

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era ensued. Within these spaces, groups of nations/people were homogeneously typecast, depending upon which region they inhabited. Accordingly, "the Cold War was constructed through particular policy iterations that depended upon binary distinctions" (Agnew, 1998, p209). These distinctions were embodied by the notions of 'freedom vs. totalitarianism', 'capitalism vs socialism' (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p190) and more poignantly 'good vs. evil', which produced political divisions that formed a lens through which geopolitical events were contextualized and subsequently decoded.

In the Cold War, these emerging imaginary spatial divisions within geopolitics were naturalized by the three important concepts: the establishment of an ideological hegemony, the threat of the domino effect and the US policy of containment. According to Painter & Jeffrey (2009, p208), "the repetition of geopolitical ideas within the practical performance of politics" serves to shape geopolitical discourses via representation, establishing an ideological hegemony. Here, "detailed scripting of some of the most ordinary and mundane aspects of everyday life" (Sharp 2000, p31) allow the permeation of certain political understandings and ideologies into what is generally accepted as common knowledge. As a result, this common knowledge forms a framework through which certain policies are deemed reasonable or unacceptable, leading to the acceptance of some forms of policy and the dismissal of others (Painter & Jeffrey, 2009).

The sustenance of an ideological hegemony by the US in the Cold War era can be mainly illustrated by numerous political speeches made by major US politicians regarding the Soviet Union. Perhaps, most striking of all, Reagan's (1983) polemic 'Evil Empire' speech aptly highlighted the imagery and binary stereotyping that characterised the era. Here, he suggested that the world was entrenched in "a struggle between right and wrong and good and evil" and that the Soviet people were characteristic of those "who would enslave their fellow man", implying a synonymy between the Soviet people and a distinct lack of moral responsibility as now, "Satan was seen to reside in the East" (Agnew, 1998, p28). Hence, he very clearly highlighted the type of rhetoric that filtered through to the attitudes of Americans. Naturally, Reagan was one of the more rhetorically outlandish American Presidents but this wasn't the only example of anti-Russian rhetoric evident in the speeches and political practices of the American administration. Truman (1947), speaking to Congress, proposed that the "terrorist activities" of the USSR were threatening the "very existence" of Greece and Turkey. Here, both gross exaggerations and questionable truths contributed to the construction of 'evil' that many Americans associated with the USSR. Accordingly, he suggested that it was the responsibility of the United States to "assist free peoples" to overcome totalitarianism, thereby further reinforcing the moralistic, humanitarian identity that the US had assigned themselves. Additionally, he claimed that if the US didn't "take immediate action" then a 'Domino Effect' could ensue, resulting in "confusion and disorder [communism]" spreading throughout Europe and Asia, which would serve to threaten the West as well as the East due to Russia's undeniable desire to conquer all those who oppose her (Kennan G, 1947).

Eisenhower had, to a certain extent, questioned this Domino Effect and so of course, there was doubt in its veracity but "the seed had, however, been planted in the rhetoric of US officialdom" (O'Sullivan, 1982, p69). Thus, the theory still emphasized the imaginary geographies of the epoch as it automatically transformed the geopolitical world into a battleground between communism and capitalism (Ó Tuathail, 2006) where "every nation [had to] choose between alternative ways of life" (Truman, 1947). In response to this apocalyptic threat of a communist world, the launch of the Marshall Plan in 1948 and formation of NATO in 1949 epitomized Kennan's (1947) idea of containment that Truman and subsequent Presidents adopted as the cornerstone of US policy. These organizations served to politically, militarily and economically bind numerous states to the US, as did the subsequent Soviet responses: COMECON and the Warsaw Pact. As a consequence, the remaining states were forced to side with either of the former (Ó Tuathail, 2006). This naturalized the binary geographies as a framework through which the geopolitical struggle between 'good' and 'evil' was conceptualized (Agnew, 1998).

This global partitioning was further reinforced by the popularization of nuclear weapons. Due to the long range of these weapons, military space experienced a "new emphasis on virtuality" (Agnew, 1998, p29) in so far as the devaluation of space and the increasing range of these new weapons further coerced nations to take sides, defining "two geopolitical spheres of influence" (Agnew, p107). This served to amplify the imaginary geographies that epitomized the geopolitical zeitgeist as now; geopolitical space was divided into either a bloc of danger or a bloc of safety. Hence, this binary construction, upheld by the iteration of political ideals through various cultural outlets

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allowed a political climate whereby "the complexity of global politics was reduced to abstract absolutes" (Agnew, 1998, p210) creating a stark political division between the USSR and the US that "obscure[d] complex realities with simple concepts" (Dalby, 2006, p305).

According to Craig (2009, no page no), "the Global War on Terror represents a continuation of America's Cold War". Evident in Bush's (2001b) speech to Congress following 9/11, the binary nature of the imaginary geographies that characterized the Cold War became relevant once again as Bush proclaimed to the world, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". This construction represents an inherently dualistic view of the world where the focus on the war on terror forms a key organizing agent of geopolitics that "interpolates all other issues into a manichean structure" (Campbell, 2002, pa.13). Moreover, Bush's Reagan-esque rhetoric of US moral responsibility to "defend freedom" (Bush, 2001b) served to establish, like in the Cold War, a hegemony whereby America's moralistic identity represented a "beacon of hope" for freedom (Bush, 2001a). Hence, any attack on the US came to represent an attack on democracy and freedom (Campbell, 2002). Contributing to this hegemony is the move away from formal to popular geopolitics and the spaces of representation in which they operate (Painter & Jeffrey, 2009). As opposed to the Cold War, where the rhetoric of political leaders predominantly served to construct the imaginary identities of the 'other', the role of the media had a much more profound impact on the West's perceptions of those associated with the attacks (Campbell, 2001). According to Gregory (1995, p447), it is "imperative to understand the ways in which anxiety, despite and fantasy enter into the production of imaginative geographies". Accordingly, in the immediate wake of 9/11, the media's use of certain symbolic images allowed the permeation of certain ideologies into the ideological framework of the public (Mobed, 1994). The principle process of this hinged upon the abrupt and unexpected nature of 9/11; as all struggled for comprehension of what had happened, connections made between the attacks and the distant and unfamiliar Arab world (by the media) instilled an almost overarching construction of those 'responsible', highlighting how the confusion surrounding the event enabling a more powerful hegemony to be established, accentuating the binary geopolitical climate of the time.

In terms of constructing the enemy, similarities can be drawn between the McCarthy-esque attitude of the US government during the Cold War and the contemporary domestic policy of the US. Nowadays, the expanding definition of terrorism reflects the idea of ideological exclusion as increased government paranoia regarding terrorist activity, "relying on group identity rather than individual conduct" (Cole, 2003, p29), leads to the false labeling of people as terrorists in a vain effort to fight the unfightable (Campbell, 2002).

These evident binary distinctions have not only been established via hegemonic processes; Kennan's (1947) containment theory has been surpassed by the "emergence of integration as the basis for the imaginative geography of the war on terror" (Bialasiewicz et al, 2007, p418). Given that the war on terror is less territorial and more ideological in nature (LaFranchi, 2006), US security hinges upon encouraging other states "to mesh with [their] attitudes and perspectives of the world" (Bialasiewicz et al, 2007, p405). As a result of integration, the imaginary geographies of the War on Terror have "split the whole world into two camps" (Bin Laden, 2001).

The arguments above emphasize the geopolitical continuities within the Cold War legacy and its application to the war on terror. However, there are factors that limit the extent to which the two eras are comparable. Perhaps, in this era of globalization, multiculturalism could pose a major threat to the foundations upon which the aforementioned imaginary geographies are based. Globalization has undoubtedly caused a homogenization of cultures and as Said (1993, pxxv) postulates, "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous". Here, of course, Said was speaking of cultural imperialism in the late 70s and so if anything, the relevance of this idea is amplified today as both cultural imperialism and multiculturalism are undoubtedly stronger (Said, 1993) (Said, 2001). Thereby allowing for "new types of subjectivities and forms of political solidarity between places" (Agnew and Corbridge, 1989, p286), challenging the relevance of imaginary geographies in a post 9/11 geopolitical climate, especially those that are binary in nature.

All things considered, the imaginary geographies of the Cold War are, to some degree, applicable to the current War on Terror. Deeply rooted in Orientalism, the continuity behind these binary distinctions of good vs. evil and enslavement vs. freedom has in both instances, served to create spaces of representation within which people and groups are perceptually homogenized according to the attitudes encompassed by virtually the same pro-US

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ideological hegemony evident in both eras. Furthermore, evidence of the partitioning of the global geopolitics into two antagonistic camps can be seen in both epochs; in the Cold War via the domino theory and containment and in the War on terror via integration. As a result, in terms of imaginary geographies, the War on terror, in some ways, almost directly mirrors the Cold War, despite their different causations. However, contemporary geopolitics "in deconstructing its own vocabulary and critically exploring the forms of practical geopolitical reasoning" (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p200) (multiculturalism in particular) has served to negate the reduction of geopolitics into two relatively abstract absolutes and has led to a questioning of the similarities between the two eras. That said, one only has to look at contemporary political rhetoric and the ongoing inorexable ideological conflict to realize that this limitation can only go so far.

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