Empire and Intersectionality. Notes on the Production of Knowledge about US Imperialism

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Abstract: This essay provides an intellectual history of US imperialism throughout and since the twentieth century based on the assumption that current academic analysis and debate can only be properly understood as in conversation with social movement knowledge production. The essay shows how critical traditions developed intersectional approaches to the study of empire, primarily between race and class, increasingly augmented by attention to gender, the land, sexuality, and culture. “Empire and Intersectionality” tracks the main currents in the academic literature before and since the 1960s, pointing to the continued overlap with ideas generated outside academia. The discussion then turns to an appraisal of some of the most recent interventions including contributions by prominent public intellectuals.

Keywords: anticolonial discourse, empire, intersectionality, knowledge production, US history

1 The debate about whether the United States is and/or possesses an empire is part of academic and popular discourse like never before in living memory.[1] It is not, however, a new discussion. By bringing into conversation several select works on the subject, my intent here is to survey some of the ways that intellectuals and activists, critics and advocates, have thought about US imperialism throughout and since the twentieth century. By doing so, I want to contextualize current debates, and indicate the ways in which ideas about US empire have been produced in the often overlapping realms of activism and academy. The many contributions to the discourse about this intrinsically transterritorial topic have naturally been derived through looking beyond the nation state; these contributions have also been the product of how global politics have influenced intellectual life in the United States.

2 Comprehensiveness is not the aim of this essay. Rather, by focusing largely on my own research interests on the international left, African American anticolonialism, the globality of US history, and contemporary debates in American studies and related fields, I offer here an intellectual history framework that helps us discern how social movements and academic scholarship are not mutually exclusive. To the extent that others working on intersectionality and US empire find this framework compelling, they will undoubtedly draw attention to further avenues of relevant social movement research and additional crossroads of theory and praxis. Until the 1950s, social and political movements made the most substantive contributions to analyses of US imperialism; by the 1960s those interpretations were beginning to receive greater attention in academic disciplines. But as figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Said, and Andrea Smith exemplify, political engagement and scholarly achievement have long overlapped.

US Empire and its Critics in an Age of Imperial Expansion, Revolution, and World Wars

3 The story of US empire often begins in 1898, when the United States annexed Hawai’i, and began its war against Spain and the independence movements of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. That same year, Charles Conant, financial journalist and international economic policy maker for the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, issued one of the most spirited defenses for US empire:
The irresistible tendency to expansion...seems again in operation, demanding new outlets for American capital and new opportunities for American enterprise. This new movement is not a matter of sentiment. It is the result of a natural law of economic and race development. The great civilized peoples have to-day at their command the means of developing the decadent nations of the world. This means, in its material aspects, is the great excess of saved capital which is the result of machine production.[2]

Conant was echoing his English counterpart Cecil Rhodes, who three years earlier had offered the following anecdote:

I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for “bread,” “bread,” “bread,” and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism.... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.[3]

Such rhetoric did not necessarily guide policy, but empire, whether US or European, was in these important men's minds an economic phenomenon that grew out of capitalism’s inexorable expansion. As we will see, numerous critics of imperialism pounced on this economic point, and a smaller number took up the connection between empire and “race development” announced by Conant. There did exist a lively debate within official circles in the United States about the consequences of imperial expansion, though much of this discussion remained within parameters that assumed the racial, economic, and gendered social order atop which this elite conducted its affairs.[4] Concurrently, a transcontinental conversation was underway involving anticolonial, antiracist, and anarchist interlocutors that ranged from Manila to Havana to New York to London, in which a broader analysis of racial capitalism's imperial inequalities took place.[5]

As it turned out, by 1898, the discussion of the colonial attributes of the United States was already underway. In 1896, the year the Supreme Court enshrined the legality of racial segregation and Ethiopian forces militarily checked the Italian imperial project, W.E.B. Du Bois published The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States, a work that irrevocably linked US history to European empire building. Du Bois contributed to a major theme of African American thought that often infused the international contextualization of the United States with an anticolonial sensibility emphatic of US empire building’s unexceptionality, both before and after 1776.[6] Such sentiments found expression in Du Bois’s most famous line: “The problem of the twentieth century is the color line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”[7]

Du Bois’s contributions to the historiography of colonialism in the United States were themselves part of an old story by the late nineteenth century. His enduring insights were in part the product of a Black radical tradition in which the denial of African humanity attending the slave trade encountered “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”[8] Thus racial slavery and the innumerable refusals and resistances to it helped determine Du Bois’s present, as it continues to do so for our own.[9] The Black radical tradition took shape in collaboration with, and in parallel fashion to, anticolonial praxis and knowledge production by indentured servants, sailors, and Indigenous thinkers.[10]

Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, thinking about US empire was founded upon deep roots. By then, two themes were established that would rightly continue to pervade analysis and debate: the universally agreed upon centrality of economics, and the less widely understood importance of race. More themes would emerge, as would further intertwining of the two then extant. To be sure, there continued to be intellectuals – from Walter Lipmann to Henry Luce to Walter Rostow to Samuel Huntington – and policy architects – from Woodrow Wilson to George Kennan to Robert McNamara to Madeline Albright – who brought their skills and influence to a pro-imperial politics.[11] But none of these figures openly advocated for US empire. Instead, the unabashed imperialism of Conant and Rhodes remained dormant until quite recently.

As McKinley’s wars concluded, as Hawai‘i, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines appeared to become permanently within a US sphere of influence, and as other issues competed for attention, discussion of US empire began to subside.
However, imperialism recaptured political imaginations in the United States – as elsewhere – when the clash of empires conflagrated in 1914. World War One assembled colonizers and colonized for four years of carnage that would permanently attenuate European imperialism.[12] It also set the stage for the new foundation of the Soviet Union and international Communist Parties, whose official ideology opposed imperialism and had a significant impact on conceptions of empire worldwide.[13]

At the heart of the early Soviet position on imperialism was discord over whether to support proletarian internationalism or national liberation in the anticolonial struggle. Polish-born German Marxist theorist Rosa Luxemburg championed the former, insisting that imperialism would only delay inevitable crises by extending capitalism’s dominance, but “even before this natural economic impasse of capital’s own creating,” workers should not capitulate to bourgeois nationalist detours but foment proletarian revolution without delay.[14]

V.I. Lenin disagreed. He was influenced by the English economist J.A. Hobson, whose 1902 *Imperialism* sharply criticized British jingoism and late-nineteenth century British imperial policy.[15] For Lenin, this book provided “an excellent and comprehensive description of the principal economic and political characteristics of imperialism,” but accorded too much explanatory power for the emergence and expansion of empire to the plutocratic structure of British society.[16] The explanation, rather, was in capitalism itself, of which imperialism was a stage. In this formulation, imperialism was driven by increased export of financial capital from the most developed capitalist countries, which in turn led to a division of the world between them.[17] Competition under such circumstances propelled imperialism toward war and capitalism’s imminent collapse, which for Lenin impelled a nationalist-Marxist alliance in which “Communist parties must assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement” in colonized territories.[18] Lenin’s position won the day within Soviet Marxism, with Joseph Stalin pronouncing three months after Lenin’s death that “victory of the revolution in the West lies through a revolutionary alliance with the liberation movement of the colonies and dependent countries against imperialism.”[19]

This debate had two important consequences for theories of imperialism about and within the United States: it signaled the decline of a purely proletarian anticapitalism that viewed anticolonial activity as marginal, and it opened a space within official Marxism in which national, anti-imperial, and antiracist struggle might be accorded irreducible consequence. The early debates of the Third International better positioned Marxists to appreciate how white supremacy was fundamental, not subsidiary or epiphenomenal, to imperialism. And by the early 1920s, for anyone who wanted to contribute seriously to the discussion of US or European empire, such an appreciation was a prerequisite. The early Comintern debates also led, in 1928, to the “Black Belt thesis,” a position initially put forward by African American theoretician Harry Haywood. It argued, following Stalin’s definition, that the Black community in the Southern US constituted a nation. Beyond strengthening the antiracist commitment of the CPUSA, this political line put the national and colonial question within US Marxism and influenced later theories of internal colonialism in the United States.[20]

The World War I era had done much to return questions of empire to centre stage. W.E.B. Du Bois was at the leading edge of this development with his 1915 article “The African Roots of the War” in the *Atlantic Monthly*, where he argued that in the United States a democracy forged in imperialism produced “a new democratic nation composed of united capital and labor” to exploit people of color around the world.[21] By the time the Comintern delegates in Moscow were determining their correct line on the relation between nation, colony, and class, debates swirling around New York about the nature of imperialism made it a capital city of anticolonialism. Here, interconnections abounded: radical immigrants from the Caribbean brought their anti-imperialism to the racial conditions in the United States through organizations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Blood Brotherhood; Irish nationalists joined African Americans in rare moments of interracial solidarity prompted by shared opposition to the British empire; Indian independence leader Lala Lajpat Rai met with Black luminaries such as Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, to whom Rai stressed their common interests in uniting against the international white supremacy that underwrote colonial rule.[22]

Such affinities not only suggested an analogous relationship between the empires of Europe and the racial capitalism of the United States. The anticolonial ferment within the US that accompanied World War I and its aftermath encouraged an intersectional understanding of specifically US imperialism that advanced analyses of the race-class relation. The great Harlem orator, intellectual, and activist Hubert Harrison exemplified this progression in 1921:

The lands of “backward” peoples are brought within the central influence of the capitalist economic system and the subjection of black,
brown and other colored workers to the rigors of “the white man’s burden” comes as a consequence of the successful exploitation of white workers at home, and binds them both in an international of opposition to the continuance of the capitalist regime. Most Americans who are able to see this process more or less clearly in the case of other nations are unable to see the same process implicit and explicit in the career of their own country.[23]

Like Du Bois, Harrison was one of the most sophisticated thinkers on empire of his day. He stressed the external expansion of US power over its domestically colonial attributes, but the way he entangled processes of racial formation and capital accumulation in the international arena, then cast this complexity upon the US example would not be matched in subtlety and sophistication for some time.

13 Despite its sagacity, Harrison’s conception of colonialism could have benefitted from an engagement with Levi General, the compelling speaker and leader of the Cayuga nation better known as Deskaheh. During the early 1920s, Deskaheh made two trips to the League of Nations in Geneva to present the case that the Iroquois Six Nations were a sovereign, “organized, self-governing people” who the League ought to recognize as a “confederacy of independent states.”[24] The Canadian government undermined and scuttled the Iroquois sovereignty action, but Deskaheh’s efforts had a resonating significance. They put before an international twentieth-century audience the continuing centrality of the land to ongoing colonialism in North America. US imperialism, then, was not something external to its borders but was also internally constitutive of the US nation.

14 Beyond the pamphlets and the political knowledge production of the period, the interwar period saw two major scholarly works which shed further light on US imperialism. Scott Nearing, a socialist economist fired in 1915 from the University of Pennsylvania for his opposition to the war, published The American Empire in 1921. Nearing’s book is in some ways an amalgam of Hobson and Lenin. It focuses on a plutocratic “imperial class” who had assumed political control, but it also argued that imperialism and ultimately war were not aberrant elements of US capitalism but a systemic aspect of its development:

Presented with an opportunity to choose between the hazards of war and the certainties of peace most of the capitalist interests in the United States would without question choose peace.... But the capitalists cannot choose. They are embedded in an economic system which has driven them – whether they liked it or not – along a path of imperialism.[25]

The American Empire gave to the conquest of Indigenous territory and to slavery provided Nearing with one of the most enduring themes in the study of US empire, that of a tragic fall from the democratic promise of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For Nearing, imperialism was a betrayal of “the tradition of America” established by the founders, comprised of “a hope, a faith, a conviction, a burning endeavor, centering in an ideal of liberty and justice for the human race.”[26] Despite its many occlusions, oversights, and shortcomings, and despite the fact that Hubert Harrison pointed these out when The American Empire was published, Nearing’s view of US empire as a tragic fall from late eighteenth-century innocence retained its appeal.[27]

15 In 1935, fourteen years after Nearing’s book, W.E.B. Du Bois published his monumental Black Reconstruction in America. Writing against not only the domestically oriented but also explicitly racist historiographic consensus of the profession, Du Bois offered an analysis of the Reconstruction period that, among its multiple accomplishments, demonstrated the internationally imbedded and imperially inclined attributes of that era. Arguing that the actions of the enslaved who struck against their dehumanization and exploitation were central to ending the “imperial white domination” of the plantation system, Du Bois underscored the “common destiny” of people of color throughout the world – “that dark and vast sea of human labor” – upon whose backs rested a colonial system that produced the wealth that “made the basis of world power and universal dominion and armed arrogance in London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, New York and Rio de Janeiro.” One of the great tragedies of Reconstruction’s overthrow by the forces of white supremacy was the attendant consolidation of the “American industrial empire” which enabled and profited from the extinguishment of democracy in the South after the 1870s.[28] Once again, reading Du Bois forced an engagement with the colonial characteristics of the United States domestically and as part of a world system, and it also made explicit how race and class were both determinant elements of US empire. In many quarters, especially those of the historical profession, such lessons did not sink in quickly.

16 In Communist Party circles, where it might be expected that analyses of empire were continuing to develop, 1935 was also an important year. In Moscow, Georgi Dimitrov announced a change of political direction in the Comintern towards a popular front, to be characterized by unity among all antifascist forces “against fascism, against the
of colonialism, as a cause of war and war, against the class enemy."[29] In other words, the antifascist struggle was to take precedence over the anticolonial one. Although the Communist Party of the United States probably enjoyed its greatest influence during the popular front period (lasting officially until 1939, but in practice stretching at least through World War II), it was not a period in which Communists contributed much to theories of imperialism.

This situation changed after 1945. The onset of the cold war prompted a return to an examination of imperialism, particularly that of the United States, in the circles of the CP and its allies.[30] Journals such as the National Guardian, Freedom, The People’s Voice, Masses & Mainstream, and Political Affairs all produced analyses of US empire, and each had absorbed or directly published the perspectives of Dr. Du Bois, who gravitated toward the Communist left from the late 1940s on.

Of singular importance to this journalistic output was Claudia Jones’s writing on US imperialism. Her contributions to Political Affairs, the CP’s theoretical monthly, posited gender to be an indispensable category of analysis alongside capitalism and white supremacy, and thus brought a distinctly antiracist feminism to the study of empire and the politics of anticolonialism.[31] In one 1949 article, Jones deployed an intersectional analysis to insist that Black women in the Communist Party be elevated to positions of leadership, and she warned her comrades that because African American women are oppressed by patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, the “growth of militancy among Negro women has profound meaning, both for the Negro liberation movement and for the emerging anti-fascist, anti-imperialist coalition.”[32] Such multi-layered dissections of empire would remain outside the academy for at least another generation.

The work of Du Bois and Jones were two expressions of a Black radical anticolonialism that spanned the cold war era, though it was the subject of intense state repression. [33] At the end of World War II, delegates from the United States and several colonized nations, among them Du Bois, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, and Jomo Kenyatta, met in Manchester, England for the fifth Pan-African Congress. Their resolutions captured a spirit of militancy and hopefulness that attended the victory over fascism, and they expressed a class-conscious desire for an era of decolonization that they hoped to inaugurate. The attendees also conveyed a renewed conviction that the struggles of African Americans within the United States and those of colonized by European imperialism were inextricably linked:

This Congress supports the attitude of Afro-Americans in offering to unite their effort with trade union labour. This Congress believes that the successful realisation of the political, economic and social aspirations of the thirteen million people in the United States is bound up with the emancipation of all African peoples, as well as other dependent people and the working class everywhere.[34]

This sentiment proved remarkably resistant in the face of anticommunist reaction during the McCarthy period.

Besides presiding over the Manchester Congress, during 1945 and 1946 Du Bois published Color and Democracy and The World and Africa. The former presented forceful arguments about the dangers that awaited a repetition of the post-World War One failure to address colonialism as a cause of oppression and war. “Colonies are the slums of the world,” he intoned, adding that to build postwar European social democracy upon a foundation of imperialist exploitation would give the anticipated welfare states a false footing.[35] And his indictment of colonialism as a cause of war was not only directed against Europe. “Wars for ‘spheres of influence’; wars against countries or groups to reduce them to colonial status and to annex their territory and labor; wars against subordinated and unintegrated groups at home, such as the American Indians in the United States; revolts in the colonies and strife between elements and parties in colonies and quasi-colonies caused by outside pressure”: in enumerating these kinds of armed conflict engendered by empire, Du Bois was unambiguous on the question of whether the United States shared European imperial proclivities.[36]

In The World and Africa, he emphasized African centrality to wealth accumulation in Europe and North America, and in this account he further developed the notion that there might be a chance in the rubble and carnage of the Second World War to build a more lasting peace than that which had followed the First. But since such an opportunity could only be fulfilled through an acknowledgement of the fallaciousness and the consequences of the doctrines of global white supremacy, this proved an unlikely prospect at the dawn of the cold war.[37] In any case, Du Bois remained a towering figure in African American anticolonial thought throughout the years of the Old Left’s departure and the arrival of the New. From the 1930s through the 1970s, Black internationalism persisted in its critique of US imperialism as it drew inspiration from decolonization in the global South.[38] From Du Bois and Jones to William Alphaeus Hunton, C.L.R. James, Robert F. Williams, Ella Baker, and Malcolm X, and
from Stokely Carmichael to the 25 years of radical politics at Freedomways to Huey Newton, Angela Davis, and Amiri Baraka, this tradition was as diverse as it was rich.

Cold War Activists and Academics

Several other streams of anticolonial thought flowed parallel to the Black radical tradition during the two decades following World War II, and each brought a distinct perspective to conceptions of US empire. Another Marxist tradition, one not directly affiliated with the Communist Party, that devoted its attention to empire was a group of economically oriented thinkers around the journal Monthly Review. Founded by educator Leo Huberman and economist Paul Sweezy in 1949, Monthly Review's inaugural issue featured an article entitled “Why Socialism?” by Albert Einstein and a subscription rate that began at 450 and rose to 2,500 in 1950 and 6,000 by 1954, thus evincing the existence of a US audience seeking explicitly Marxist theory in the era of McCarthyism. The monthly featured articles on economics and world politics, and it began publishing radical books once Monthly Review Press was established in 1952. During the 1930s, Huberman had written two popular books, one in 1932 on US history and the other in 1936 on global economics. The latter, Man's Worldly Goods, took up the subject of imperialism, but explained it almost entirely in economic terms, arguing that colonialism was the result of capital's need for markets and materials. Similarly, in Paul Sweezy's more scholarly 1942 Theory of Capitalist Development, he posited that the relationship between capitalism and racism was an instrumental one.

Huberman and Sweezy did not deny that white supremacy had a role to play in the elaboration of imperialism, but for them racism served as the capitalist's tool to divide workers, and therefore unlike in the work of Du Bois, race played a superstructural role in empire building in contrast to the economic engine of history. Du Bois was known to and admired by the Monthly Review editors, and indeed he even contributed to the journal at their request, but a strong economic emphasis – reductionism would not be too strong a word – continued to inform their work on US empire. Still, the output of Monthly Review through its magazine and press kept alive an important and insightful strain of materialist understandings of US imperialism, one that was in dialogue with and had some sway over the emerging fields of underdevelopment and world systems theory. Indeed, through its ongoing publication of new work and republication of classics on the political economy of imperialism, the Monthly Review circle remains an active and influential participant in contemporary debates.

Indigenous and Latino intellectuals also made contributions to conceptions of US empire during the early cold war. In 1949, for example, Cree Metis writer D'Arcy McNickle published They Came Here First, which surveyed the Aboriginal history of the United States and challenged the notion that history began when the Europeans arrived by devoting fully ten chapters to the pre-contact period. In McNickle's account, written as the US government was attempting to terminate its recognition of Indigenous communities, the colonial period blends quite seamlessly into the early national one, and he ultimately concludes that by the twentieth century, “Indians saw their history extending beyond tribal limits and sharing the world experience of other native peoples subjected to colonial domination.”

As a founding member in 1944 of the National Congress of American Indians and a mentor to Indigenous theorists and activists from the 1940s to the 1970s, McNickle helped create an attitude toward US empire described by historian Paul Rosier: “termination and the Cold War context fostered an international perspective among Native American activists, who drew on postwar decolonization movements and Cold War nation building and connected them to domestic concerns over treaty rights.” Concurrently, Latinos in the Southwestern United States, possessed of collective community memories of US conquest and ongoing ties to the Mexican left that transcended the Rio Grande, articulated a politics that emphasized how US colonialism was often layered over that of Spain's two centuries of rule in the region.

By the end of the 1960s, these varied postwar perspectives on US imperialism, the Black radical tradition, Communist Marxism and the Monthly Review crowd, and Indigenous activists began to overlap, merge, and exist in tension with each other and with the antiwar movement, the Chicano movement, Asian American radicalism, gay liberation, and feminism to produce a movement of movements that often viewed the United States as an imperial formation. Like New York just after World War One, broad ranging conversations, debates, and alliances took shape around the country in ways that translated into a multiplicity of analyses of US empire in its diplomatic, economic, gendered, spatial, and racial dimensions. And once again, events and ideas from the global South had direct influence.

The academy, while not leading these developments, was not entirely disconnected from them. The 1960s headquarters for academic analyses of US imperialism was in Madison, Wisconsin, a college town where the left had a long history. In 1959,
Despite the opposition to Williams’s thesis, his direct influence led to Walter LaFeber’s 1963 examination of the economic causes of US expansion at the end of the nineteenth century; Lloyd Gardner’s 1964 monograph, which reinforced Williams’s contention that diplomacy during the New Deal did not depart from the trade-oriented expansionism of earlier years; and Thomas McCormick’s materialist study of US foreign policy in the Pacific during the 1890s. LaFeber and McCormick went on to publish influential surveys of the cold war period, both of which viewed US empire as a largely external, economically driven phenomenon. This “Wisconsin School” of diplomatic history – itself connected to the New Left and especially the movement opposing the war against Vietnam – also inspired further revisionist accounts of US foreign relations, with non-US specialists reinforcing the general perspective laid out in *Tragedy*.

The end of the 1970s and early 1980s represented a moment in which the lessons provided by social movements critical of US imperialism and by revisionist historiography began to coalesce in several key texts. In 1978, Palestinian exile and comparative literature scholar Edward Said published *Orientalism*. Arguing that European and later US imperial hegemony, particularly in the Middle East, has always been made possible through “a process that not only marks the Orient as the province of the Orientalist but also forces the initiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications…as the true Orient,” Said related apparatuses of knowledge production to systems of imperial rule in ways that took seriously culture, race, and ideas. He also later argued that US policy toward the Middle East could not be understood outside an analysis of white supremacy within the United States. *Orientalism* was foundational to post-colonial studies, and slowly began to influence historians of US empire.

Two years after Said’s groundbreaking study, the publication of Richard Drinnon’s *Facing West* marked another very noteworthy addition to the literature on colonialism in the United States, although this work had considerably less impact than Said’s study. By looking at the long relationship between people of European descent and Indigenous peoples in the Thirteen Colonies and beyond, Drinnon emphasized the continuities of colonialism in the United States. From the Mystic massacre in 1637 to that at My Lai 331 years later, a project of violent empire-building at once racial, cultural, and psychologically repressive was carried out on an ever-expanding basis. *Facing West* is in many ways a photographic negative of Turner’s frontier thesis, but in connecting US continental history to “foreign relations,” by arguing – as had D’Arcy McNickle and many other Aboriginal intellectuals – that colonialism in the US was intrinsic to the nation’s identity, and by avoiding a single factor of ultimate historical determinism in favor of an account that stressed the interplay between psychology, race, culture, and economics, Drinnon’s work demonstrates how some of the ideas about US empire generated throughout the twentieth century were coming together.

Then, in 1983, Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* was published. Introducing the indispensible and expandable concept of “racial capitalism,” Robinson’s magisterial study addressed itself to the inadequacies of Marxist theory in coming to terms with Black history and the development of a Black radical tradition. *Black Marxism* is not fixated on identifying an utmost causal factor that unlocks the secret to how the hierarchies of the Atlantic world came into being, and in this sense the book transcends the capitalism-versus-racism debates regarding slavery that garnered a lot of attention throughout the 1970s. Rather, the book spotlights how Europe was racially organized and was not an enclosed geographic entity prior to the rise of capitalism. From here, Robinson chronicles the dialectical unfolding of Western civilization and Black radicalism, concluding with an examination of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. Although not limited to the subject of US empire, *Black Marxism* presented an analysis that would make subsequent work, which downplayed how racism and nationalism were irreducibly constitutive of capitalism and imperialism, appear, at the least, to be less than thorough. Still, some have persisted in arguing that one need know about little else than capitalism to understand US imperialism.
Said, Drinnon, and Robinson’s important studies topped decades of inquiry into US empire, but they were hardly the last word on the subject. The end of the cold war, the increasing globalization of capital, and the belligerence of the most recent US presidential administration have, among sundry other developments, given scholars and activists countless new opportunities to share their thoughts. The recent literature on US empire, which will round out this review and which we can now better appreciate in its contexts, can be grouped into five broadly conceived categories.

**Five Areas of Recent Scholarship**

32 As one should expect, the Marxist tradition continues to make substantial contributions to the study of US imperialism. And as one should also expect, significant disagreement and debate continue within this tradition. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ellen Wood, and David Harvey have all produced recent books that consider US empire, among other things. For Hardt and Negri, ours is an era – beginning between decolonization and the end of the cold war – in which an irreducibly diverse though also economically determined multitude is pitted against Empire, a post-sovereign network of power that the United States helped bring into being but which now has transcended all territorial limits.

33 Ellen Wood disagrees with much in this account, since for her states matter more than ever to the empire of capital that began around World War II and is now presided over by the US military. This new imperialism is not concerned with conquering territory or appropriating property or even establishing commercial dominance but with creating value through a system of nation states engaged in competitive production. David Harvey has also suggested that a new imperialism, this one dating from the early 1970s, is upon us. For Harvey, this new imperialism is characterized by accumulation by dispossession in which social assets – from British utilities to Iraqi oil – are privatized and made available for investment for overaccumulated transnational capital. In this context, where the US economy is in decline, US imperialism still exists but has become increasingly reliant on its ability to dispense violence. Like the Marxist theories of imperialism from Lenin’s day, the details and sometimes fundamental arguments do not concur in these accounts, but each of them grant determinate power to capitalism and much less to race or other factors. Said, Drinnon, and Robinson, let alone Claudia Jones and Deskah, have not made as great an impact here as elsewhere.

34 But the approach of some of these thinkers has resonated more strongly in diplomatic history, a second area that has continued to make rich contributions to the recent literature. Here, the heated polemics between orthodox and revisionist schools has given way to more polite disagreement and, as John Lewis Gaddis announced in 1983, something of a post-revisionist synthesis. There is much orthodoxy in Gaddis’s interpretation of this synthesis, but he points out that “the argument that there was in fact an American ‘empire’” is “the aspect of New Left historiography that postrevisionists are likely to find most useful.” Thus, though not without its detractors, empire has continued to be a topic in the diplomatic field. So have culture, race, and gender, and these have at times overlapped with the imperial theme. For diplomatic historians, the kinds of questions raised by Said, Drinnon, and Robinson began to be asked after the pivotal publication of John Dower’s 1986 book about how racism shaped World War II in the Pacific and Michael Hunt’s 1987 study about how domestically generated ideologies produced through class, race, and culture have played a determinate role in the evolution of US foreign relations throughout the country’s history.

35 Since then, a growing list of diplomatic historians, while not always slotting themselves into the long conversation about US imperialism, have offered multilayered accounts of the gendered, racial, economic, cultural, and ideological elements of how US global dominance has been constructed and maintained. This transnationally-oriented scholarship has begun to elucidate not only how national hierarchies of difference shaped the outward projection of US power, but also how the contested imperial experience overseas conditioned the domestic social order. Finally, Odd Westad’s impressive synthesis of the triangular cold war relationship between the US, the USSR, and the decolonizing world has made diplomatic history’s most substantial contribution to the study of US empire in recent years. Contending that the cold war intrusions in the global South grew out of the imperial ideology that developed since its founding, Westad posits the US’s “taking on of the responsibility for a global capitalist system” as a central explanation for its interventionism. But his longue durée contextualization also highlights the ways that this capitalism has been racial. In sum, an increasing number of diplomatic historians have made use of the kinds of arguments that emerged out of historiographic revisionism and social movements, resulting in an array of astute interpretations of US imperial history.

36 A third area of recent attention to US empire has developed in a direction opposed, but headed directly toward, diplomatic history’s trajectory. Not limited to one field, an interdisciplinary conversation about US imperialism has been taking place among
intellectuals in Black, feminist, ethnic, Indigenous, American, cultural and postcolonial studies, as well as anthropology. In many ways, this dialogue represents a new generation of scholarship following the arrival on campus of the social movements from the 1960s through the 1970s. Said and Robinson’s work has been particularly influential here, as have been more recent publications such as Cultures of United States Imperialism, the landmark collection edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease in 1993.[68] This book marked a crossroads between diplomatic history and American studies where diplomatic history began to emphasize the salience of culture for the study of empire and American studies learned new ways to engage with imperialism and foreign relations.

Nine years later, Amy Kaplan’s The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture demonstrated that lessons had indeed been learned at that disciplinary junction and elsewhere. The Anarchy of Empire, which draws on Said, Drinnon, Robinson, and especially Du Bois, brings together many of the strands of thinking about US imperialism that took place throughout the twentieth century. Kaplan destabilizes the domestic/international distinction, and thus poses questions about the intersections of racial hierarchy, land, culture, exploitation, and sexuality in a frame capacious enough to discern the dynamics of US imperialism at work from the Supreme Court to the Cinema, and from San Juan Hill to San Francisco.[69]

Kaplan’s work should be seen as part of a dialogue with past contributions and with a broad range of current interdisciplinary work on US imperialism.[70] This way one can better understand Andrea Smith’s reminder to Kaplan and others not to view recent expressions of US empire as “a departure from U.S. democratic ideals but rather the fulfillment of a constitutional democracy based on theft and violence.”[71] Smith’s work has been instrumental in underscoring the internal and ongoing colonialism of the United States that stretches from the present back to the so-called “colonial period,” and she shares this insight through a feminist lens. As such, Smith has forcefully disclosed the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect with empire, but also how race and gender based violence have been US imperialism’s indispensable tools, wielded with devastating effect in the hands of state power.[72] Smith, Kaplan, and their interlocutors, have done the most to combine the anticolonialism of Claudia Jones, the sovereignty politics of Deskaheh, Marxist appraisals of imperialism, and the culturally sophisticated anticolonialism of Edward Said.

Fourthly, beyond the conversation going on in American studies and various other fields, scholars whose expertise is outside the United States have also added their perspectives. Given the proliferation of scholarship on US empire in recent years, it makes sense that those outside the US field should want to address themselves to the subject. Europeanists Victoria de Grazia and Charles Maier, Africanist Frederick Cooper, and Latin Americanist Greg Grandin have all turned their attention to US empire, and each has helped situate it in broader comparative and transnational context. Pointing out how US empire building in twentieth-century Europe has often been a product of transatlantic co-creation, de Grazia looks at the commercial context. Pointing out how US empire building in twentieth-century Europe has often been a product of transatlantic co-creation, de Grazia looks at the commercial interests on both shores that have driven a “Market Empire,” while Maier has drawn an erudite range of comparisons between the United States and other imperial formations without actually calling the US an empire.[73]

Cooper’s foray is similarly comparative, though more concerned with calls for clarity and historical specificity across the field of imperial studies than with focusing on the US as the central point of comparison with other empires. In the end, the United States makes for an uncomfortable fit in Cooper’s Colonialism in Question, in that he rightly cautions against confusing the belligerence of recent unilateralism with imperialism, but at the same time can see little that is imperialist about the post-cold war US in claiming that “the most important fact about empires is that they are gone.”[74] In his recent overview, Grandin posts the worthwhile reminder that much of US imperial behavior beyond the Americas was first developed in Latin America, with tragic consequences for societies south of the Rio Grande.[75] In each of these works, the standard themes of race and economies find expression, but the ways in which these scholars situate US imperialism in global history often leads to significant qualifications and rethinking of the ways in which these categories have been deployed by US Americanists.

Fifth and finally, there is another growing body of work on US empire, that expressly motivated by current political events. Among these commentators and scholars are those whose contribution to the US empire discussion is to champion it. Here, some of the points raised by anticolonial intellectuals are often readily conceded, as when writer and journalist Robert Kaplan approvingly makes use of “the red Indian metaphor” in order to argue that today’s critics of the most violent aspects of the US occupation of Iraq from “the cosmopolitan press corps’ unhelpfully impede progress, just as ‘inevitable civilian casualties raised howls of protest among humanitarians back East’ when the US Cavalry undertook its campaigns against Indigenous nations in the nineteenth century.[76] Such ideas can be found across a fair swath of the political spectrum, with liberal Michael Ignatieff characterizing US empire by “free
Markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known,” while conservative pundit Dinesh D’Souza writes that “America is the most magnanimous imperial power ever.”[77] These are the Charles Chomskys and Cecil Rhobishes of our time, united mostly by a firm commitment to US exceptionalism and to a belief in US suitability to preserve order and stability, which for contemporary advocates of US imperialism often trumps other considerations.[78]

And of course, recent events have prompted more writing against US empire, though the fact of their opposition marks the limits of agreement among the critics. Andrew Bacevich, Chalmers Johnson, and Michael Mann, for instance, have published denunciations of post-cold war US international military policy along the lines of emplacement narrated by Scott Nearing in the 1920s, with each of these works presenting recent unilateralism and militarism as betrayals of democratic ideals.[79] Other academics have placed their emphasis on themes familiar to the study of empire. For Immanuel Wallerstein, US decline in the world system is best explained through economics, though he also makes reference to the persistence of racism, while for historian A.G. Hopkins, nationalism and capitalism – often in a relationship of tension and contradiction – have driven US foreign policy as of late.[80] And political scientist David McNally, whose work looks at the many challenges to the US-led imperial system, offers a highly sophisticated materialist genealogy of the current global order that pays attention to how white supremacy has been “more than a tool of the elites,” while ensuring “not to reduce the order of gender to the structure of class.”[81] This literature can only be fully understood against the backdrop of the movement against the recent invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Some of the contemporary political scene’s most astute anticolonial analyses, the roots of which can readily be traced back to their twentieth-century precursors, have been issued by major public intellectuals on the left. I will conclude by briefly pointing to four, all of whose output is linked to political activism.

**Conclusion**

Well-known public intellectual Noam Chomsky remains a high profile figure in this discussion, with one of his recent dissections of the George W. Bush administration’s “imperial grand strategy of permanent world domination” attracting attention at the United Nations, courtesy of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.[82] In his many books on US politics and history, Chomsky has often been most concerned with pointing out the economic motivations for US foreign policy not taken up by corporate media, though he has not ignored how racism and the displacement of Indigenous people from their land have continued to play ongoing roles in North American colonialism.[83] African American philosopher and pragmatist Cornel West, whose interventions in public discourse on the perennial nature of racial inequality have also earned him considerable public attention, has more recently specifically turned to the subject of US empire. Positing authoritarianism, militarism, and “free-market fundamentalism” as the triumvirate of social ills most debilitating to democracy in the United States, West foregrounds the racism of the imperial past in the creation of the present:

> The brutal atrocities of white supremacy in the American past and present speak volumes about the harsh limits of our democracy over against our professed democratic ideals. Race is the crucial intersecting point where democratic energies clash with American imperial realities in the very making of the grand American experiment of democracy. [84]

Drawing upon the African American prophetic tradition, as well as other religious and liberal currents of thought, West portrays a United States where democracy might yet win out over empire, rather than a US to which imperialism is too fundamental to be extricated, but he also, in the tradition of W.E.B. Du Bois and Hubert Harrison, prevents us from flinching from the realities of white racism.

Historian Rashid Khalidi, whose position as Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University places him in an obvious intellectual lineage, has also put forward a critique of US empire building. His *Resurrecting Empire* focuses on imperialism as an outward projection of power, while indicating how US policy in the Middle East has deep roots and is in many ways continuous with French and British behavior before formal decolonization.[85] Khalidi, West, and Chomsky’s work find an appropriate complement in Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?* This short book reminds us that a fundamental component of how the United States exists in the larger world is through the intertwined systems of racialization and wholesale incarceration organized by the prison-industrial-complex:

> Precisely that which is advantageous to those corporations, elected officials, and government agents who have obvious stakes in the expansion of these systems begets grief and devastation for poor and racially dominated communities in the United States and throughout
This passage demonstrates the pitfalls of bifurcating domestic and international arenas in a way that resonates with David Harvey’s notion of accumulation by dispossession, though Davis’s analysis, one formulated in the tradition of Claudia Jones, is more attentive to the intersection of oppressions that reinforce, shape, and overlap with those of capital.

Davis’s academic and political work on prisons brings together several of the themes pertaining to US empire raised in this survey. The proliferating literature on imperialism and in the United States shows no signs of abating, and though its quality remains uneven, it more often than not discloses the embeddedness of US history in the world while critiquing narratives of exceptionalism. [87] The century-plus of thinking on this topic draws our attention to how US empire pervades the nation while it is propelled beyond its borders; how it requires conquered territory from which to stage new invasions; how it creates spaces of privilege and areas of confinement and misery; and how it is driven by economics but also determined by culture, racism, sexuality and patriarchy. As more and more intersectional knowledge is produced, we would do well to continue to reflect on these patterns of US imperialism in global history.


[13] This history is surveyed in Robert J.C. Young, Postcolonialism, especially chapters 10-13.


[19] Joseph Stalin, “The National Question,” in Marxism and the National and
Colonial Question (1924; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), 192. My necessarily schematic treatment here does little justice to the range of debate that informed Communist Party debates in the early years of the Third International, as indicated in To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920 – First Congress of the Peoples of the East, Ed. John Riddell (New York: Pathfinder, 1993); and Jeremy Smith, The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23 (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999). Thanks to Ivan Drury for making clearer to me the heterogeneity of positions before the mid-1920s, and therefore the tragic significance of their being marginalized amid Stalin’s consolidation of power.


[27] Hubert Harrison, “Imperialist America.”


[31] Carole Boyce Davies explains the intricacies of these contributions: “For Claudia Jones, imperialism did not reside solely in its economic-based and international manifestations but in the way it manifested at the domestic and local levels in which black women were the most vulnerable. Claudia’s anti-imperialist politics linked local struggles of black people and women against racism and sexist oppression to international struggles against colonialism and imperialism. Thus she saw these as interconnected in a dynamic set of interactions in which the geopolitical operations of capital were central. For this reason, Claudia Jones saw her various struggles, and her role in them, not as contradictory but as elements in an ongoing challenge to imperialistic domination at local and global levels.” Carole Boyce Davies, Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 60. Also see Rebecca Hill, “Fosterites and Feminists, Or 1950s Ultra-Leftists and the Invention of AmerKKKa,” New Left Review 228 (March/April 1998): 66-90; Kate Weigand, Red Feminism: American Communism
and the Making of Women's Liberation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), chapter 5.


[49] The most influential work from the decolonizing world during this period was Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961; New York: Grove Press, 1963). For the broader context, see David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2000); and Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the...


[57] As recently as 2000, Andrew Rotter pointed out that although Said’s ideas were seeping into diplomatic historiography, he was still infrequently cited. Rotter’s helpful discussion also clarifies the several good reasons why this is so. See Andrew J. Rotter, “Saidism without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History,” American Historical Review 105, no. 4 (October 2000): 1205-1217.


[64] A noteworthy dissent is James A. Field, Jr., “American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book,” American Historical Review 83, no. 3 (June 1978): 644-668. Field’s call for greater specificity returned to the late nineteenth century to quarrel with revisionism, which for him selectively marshaled evidence, overemphasized unified and rational purpose on the part of US actors exclusively possessed of agency, and failed to account for technological development and historical accident. Some of Field’s objections have been more recently echoed, albeit in a less systematic manner, in Frank Ninkovich, The United States and Imperialism (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).


[73] Victoria de Grazia, Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through 20th Century Europe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Charles S. Maier, Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors (Cambridge,
[74] Frederick Cooper, Colonialism in Question, 203.


[79] Andrew J. Bacevich, American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Michael Mann, Incoherent Empire (New York: Verso, 2003); Chalmers Johnson, The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). These works, it must be noted, do not directly invoke Nearing. For Bacevich, Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams are the two leading lights, though Bacevich is also critical of both. Johnson is less forthright about intellectual lineage, though he does make appropriately approving reference to John Hobson on page 28. Mann, whose book is the least careful of these three, appears to be drawing largely on contemporary analyses and media reports.


[81] David McNally, Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2002), 120, 125.


[85] Rashid Khalidi, Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East (Boston: Beacon, 2004).