

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Joel Wainwright, *Geopiracy: Oaxaca, Militant Empiricism, and Geographical Thought*,
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Geography has always been a discipline intertwined with military institutions and military power, although the ways in which that relationship is both structured and manifest shift over time. In the present, its most public manifestation to academic geographers is probably the existence of the Military Geography Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers, and that group's sessions at the annual meeting. As a sub-discipline of contemporary academic geography, traditional military geography understands its rationale as the application of the tools and techniques of geography to the solution of military problems, and publications such as Eugene Palka and Francis Galgano's (2005) *Military Geography: From Peace to War* and John Collins' (1998) *Military Geography: For Professionals and the Public* expound a view of geographers' praxis as essentially assistive to military efforts. Traditional military geography, it has to be said, has prompted little interest, critical or otherwise, amongst those working with contemporary geography's more politically alert or radical approaches over the past few decades. The development and funding of the American Geographical Society's Bowman Expeditions—an ostensibly independent scheme enabling geographers to conduct fieldwork for the purposes of data collection and mapping in 'foreign areas' (as AGS promotional materials call them)¹—may well have proceeded quite untouched by critical intervention were it not for the complaints of those on the receiving end of researcher interest in one of the first projects under the scheme.

The project in question—*México Ingígena*—was funded by the Foreign Military Studies Office of the United States Army and undertaken by a team of academic geographers from

¹ See <https://www.amergeog.org/research-special-projects/bowman-expeditions>

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the University of Kansas under the Bowman Expeditions scheme. It involved the survey and mapping of land, property rights, and indigenous dwelling patterns of rural Zapotec communities in the Rincón de Ixtlán of Oaxaca, Mexico. In two open letters published in 2009, two groups in the region under question—the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO) and the community of San Miguel Tiltepec, Oaxaca—set out their complaints about the project, which revolved around the absence of researcher transparency about the purposes of the research and its funding by the US Army, and the ultimate uses of the data and analyses generated. The emergence of debate and controversy for academic geography in North America about this project, and the wider issues it raised, came thanks to the interventions of ‘the researched’ making explicit their view of the project as a form of geopiracy, an unsanctioned form of plunder. In his book *Geopiracy*, Joel Wainwright traces the contours of the ensuing debate about the project. What makes the book so compelling, though, is Wainwright’s exposition of the wider conceptual and ethical issues which spin out from what was originally conceived, in *México Indígena*, as a straightforward mapping exercise. This book is an excellent example of how sustained consideration of both practice and theory can open up space for deeper understanding of the politics of geographers’ praxis.

Wainwright’s focus is on the wider arguments, cautions, politics, and ultimately ontologies indicated by the *México Indígena* project as a programme of work undertaken under the rubric of the Bowman Expeditions. The latter have been understood and funded, broadly, as exercises in mapping (following Isaiah Bowman’s trinity of ‘exploration’, ‘location’, ‘measurement’ as the purpose and function of geography). With the intention of work funded under this programme to map difference in spatial terms, the programme has been framed and justified by arguments about the necessity of countering an absence of data. Tellingly, this knowledge gap or ‘geographic ignorance’, has been constructed by proponents of the Bowman Expeditions as a source of danger for US security and its foreign policy. In

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

this particular instance, the *México Ingígena* project was also framed as a political intervention on behalf of a group of Latin American indigenous people. Wainwright presents an argument for this type of empirical geographical research to be seen as a form of militant empiricism, and his narrative picks apart how military funding was secured and a project mapping indigenous people and land rights proceeded, ostensibly as an evaluation of a Mexican government programme for (neoliberal) land reform. When challenged by critics within the geographical community, because of the initial complaints of UNOSJO and others, the professional association response through the Association of American Geographers was, in Wainwright's telling, basically supine. The AAG has had no formal role in the Bowman Expeditions, these being funded and overseen by the AGS; however, for Wainwright (and for many working in academic geography), as the organisation which claims to represent professional geography and geographers in North America, and which has a considerable global profile, the AAG might have been expected to take a position on this issue of the politics and ethics of research conduct and funding, not least because the generation now leading the institution is broadly that which three or four decades previously had been at the forefront of geography's radical critique of the entanglements of capitalism and imperialism in the discipline's sense of purpose. For Wainwright, the charge that the AAG should remain a disinterested by-stander in the debate concerning a separate organisation (the AGS) simply does not stick. In contrasting it with the action taken by US anthropologists through the American Anthropological Association in response to the incorporation of their profession and discipline within US military programmes to map Human Terrain Systems (the AAA Executive Board having determined that the HTS work violated the AAA's Code of Ethics), Wainwright then asks us to consider the difference between the two. This he ascribes to geography's disciplinary disorganization in the face of the US military's changing use of geographical thought.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Wainwright's central thesis here is that, in the Bowman Expeditions, we are witnessing the re-ascendance of a militant empiricism in geography, a 'geography counterinsurgent' working in the service of US hegemonic ambitions 'fraying amidst global crisis, yet confidently jittery at the dawn of an era of drone warfare' (p.43). Geographers are, at present, 'standing awkwardly' (p.59) astride a divide between critical human geography replete with its critiques of the militant empiricism inherent in the discipline's former guises, and a form of geographical praxis driven by the Bowman trinity, enabled by the technologies and applications of GIS. The purposes to which geographical knowledge is put are changing, such that geographers themselves are being co-opted to a praxis which has much deeper ontological and epistemological consequences. In turn, this is raising once again quite profound questions about what geography is, what it means, and what it might be for, and particularly the ways in which geographical thought becomes 'disciplined' through the political and social contexts in which geographical practice takes place. Wainwright goes on to explore how new forms of engagement with post-colonial critiques of geographical knowledge might work through concepts of planetarity and abiding, drawing respectively on Spivak's and Nietschmann's articulations of these to suggest alternative ways of envisioning and enacting geographical praxis involving fieldwork in places that are not the researcher's own. He offers eight concluding theses—instructions for thinking through the wider lessons learnt from the Oaxaca controversy and the geopiracy identified by those on the receiving end of the Bowman-funded *México Indígena* project: that we must 'unlearn or destroy' (p.86) the discipline of geography's inherent empiricism; that we should face up to the multiple ways in which geography remains complicit in the service of empire through its traditional commitment to empiricism in service to state militaries; that critique of, for example, the individuals implicated in the Oaxaca controversy be seen less as errors by those individuals but rather as the effects of disciplinary entanglements of empire; that we remain alert at all times to the potential for geography to be 'weaponized' given this latent empiricism; that we

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

recognise the deep roots of geography's enrolment in military thought and practice to their point of origin in the 15th century European voyages of colonial 'discovery'; that we learn to accept the possibility of a world that resists empirical closure; that we resist the notion as geographers that we should always and inevitably seek to speak for and represent the objects of our study, in the spirit of Spivak's post-colonial critique; and finally that issues such as the Oaxaca controversy remind us of the need to remain alert to the disciplining effects of the discipline on geographical thought and practice.

This is a provocative and absorbing book. It is worth noting that the format—it is published in the Palgrave Pivot series²—is well-suited to the kind of critique which Wainwright makes, being published quickly and at a length longer than a conventional journal article (thus allowing for greater exposition of nuance and detail) but shorter than a conventional academic monograph (thus allowing for focus). The polemical style and pertinent critique make for refreshing reading, about geographical praxis and the politics of being simultaneously implicated within the US imperial project and wanting to think through strategies for resistance to empire. Does the book open up a space for further, or new, critique and debate about geographers' involvements with military institutions? It certainly adds to existing critique, not least because on the basis of the evidence that Wainwright presents, the Association of American Geographers as a professional association which could be expected to take a view on such matters has appeared reluctant to engage with these questions of disciplinary military involvement, appearing instead to want to just acknowledge the issue—and move on (see also Wainwright 2013). Wainwright takes steps to avoid personalising his critique of the AAG's actions and pronouncements through its officers, quite correctly identifying as his target the wider issues concerning collective disciplinary engagements rather than individual actions. *Geopiracy*, then, is part of a broader, ongoing

² See <http://www.palgrave.com/pivot/>

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

debate about how geography engages with the military machine with which it has always had a relationship. Its particular value sits in its raising the profile of an issue that so often sits just below the radar of the majority of geographers. More specifically, it emphasises the complexities and contingencies of ethical choice around involvement in research with military institutional partners, as something which runs through research from inception, via execution, to dissemination. The significant question here seems not to be about affirming or negating engagement with military institutions—this would be far too simplistic a choice for those of us working in, with, and on the military-industrial-education complex³—but rather a more nuanced set of questions around the possibilities and limits of knowledge about the purposes to which research can be put. Further questions, beyond Wainwright’s remit, follow on from this, concerning the extent to which researchers can or should embrace or reject absolutist positions about engagement with military forces and institutions when undertaking research on military topics, and quite nuanced questions about, for example, the differences that national military contexts might or might not make to these questions for geographers working in a range of national contexts. So *Geopiracy* is a useful book, as much for the ideas it provokes beyond its immediate focus, as for the arguments it makes about a specific example of practice and its wider conceptual and practical logics.

References

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³ In the interests of transparency, I should declare an interest here as someone who has received funding from the UK defence establishment (via the Ministry of Defence-Economic and Social Research Council joint funding scheme, reference R000223562).

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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