Up from the depths: Reply to three critics of Geopiracy

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What is This?
one to become fluent in a language other than the one learned at home. These incursions into unfamiliar countryside can also transform the lives of subjects, especially when they read what has been written about their communities, see the maps made of them, or engage a researcher for the first time.

The Bowman Expeditions have been and will continue to be about learning about the world. That disarmingly simple objective was the clinching argument of Jerry Dobson’s selling point to the FSMO in the wake of the Iraqi fiasco brought on, in part, by the ignorance of American elites in the government and media about the complexities of that Middle Eastern country. The Bowman Expeditions have also trained graduate students in firsthand research. In addition, the funding from FMSO is also helping the venerable 163-year-old sponsoring institution, the American Geographical Society, to weather a rough patch in its cash flow.

In the broad view of scholarly concerns, this book is a tempest in an ideological teapot of the author’s own design. Lack of a *do ut des* arrangement suggests that Wainwright’s pamphlet should not have been published until he at least had a strong case. It is a bottom-feeding exercise, unsubstantiated in most respects, of a salon intellectual in a Gramscian swoon. Suppositions, innuendos, and insinuations are reckless and feckless substitutes for the compelling activity of figuring out, firsthand, places and processes in a diverse world. Geographical knowledge is a banquet, the staples of which are derived from empirically derived studies. Without such studies geography will die as a formal discipline.

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**Response**

**Up from the depths: Reply to three critics of Geopiracy**

**Response by:** Joel Wainwright, Ohio State University, USA

Three reviews, two different perspectives. Craib and Mutersbaugh extend *Geopiracy*’s analysis in important directions and raise provocative questions; from Gade, bitter invective and sullen defensiveness. I begin with the latter to provide a view from the bottom—since that is where Gade is fishing for me—then rise to meet the sunlight with Craib and Mutersbaugh.

Before descending, let me say this. The debate surrounding the Bowman controversy has been overpersonalized. This only reduces our ability to appreciate its deep historical roots and wider political implications. I do not wish to add to this tendency, so I will not reply to Gade’s *ad hominem* remarks.

**Swimming with the Sauerian school**

For those among us who have slogged through Jerry Dobson’s writings on the Bowman expeditions, there is almost nothing novel in Gade’s essay. Gade dutifully summarizes Dobson’s views, but this is no great feat: say what you like about Dobson, his writings are voluminous and transparent. Gade would like us to see the Bowman expeditions as self-evidently virtuous and wonders why I have not ‘laud[ed] Dobson for his prescience, diligence, and entrepreneurial spirit’ (p. 94). For Gade, ‘the Bowman Expeditions have been and will continue to be about learning the world. That disarmingly simple objective was the clinching argument of Jerry Dobson’s selling point to the FMSO’ (p. 96). Dobson could not ask for a more faithful defense. In the end, however, we are simply asked to take Gade’s word, which rests upon that of those he defends. For added assurance Gade says he has ‘no ideological axe to grind’, unlike me—or, I would imagine, Craib and Mutersbaugh.

For those of us who do not simply take Dobson at his word—for those scholars with a modicum of skepticism or with a willingness to consider the potential validity of Dobson’s indigenous critics in Oaxaca—Gade’s attack on *Geopiracy* only raises new questions. If he is certain about the innocent reasons the US military had for funding his fieldwork in the 1960s, why not elaborate upon them and
provide evidence? How does Gade know what the FMSO saw as Dobson’s ‘clinching argument’ in their decision to fund him? How, ultimately, does he understand his own motivations, given his refusal to even acknowledge the influence of ideology?

Gade does not answer these questions. This is not to suggest that I can empirically disprove his interpretation of the US military’s interests in geographical research (including his own work). Yet surely we can say more than Gade with his casual assertion that the US military ‘had its reasons’ for funding his work, which apparently deserve no further attention in his view since these reasons ‘did not extend to controlling decisions about the projects themselves’ (p. 95). That perspective—which has a history I will discuss briefly—does not get us any nearer an understanding of the situation today, where the US military is actively funding, accumulating, analyzing, and employing geographical research to dominate what it calls ‘battlespace’. No, the military does not explain its ‘reasons’. Nor does the military need to directly control a scholar or a research project for the data to be useful. Much of what geographers routinely produce has potential military applications; if the military can assist geographers in conducting research, it may well reap the rewards—whether the ostensibly independent scholar is aware or not.

Isaiah Bowman understood this well. It forms the basis of his arguments for geography’s place in the social sciences and utility to American empire (Smith, 2003). As he writes, ‘the attainment of every objective . . . is aided by having the facts of the earth gathered in flexible form’ (Bowman, 1934: 215). This argument—a truism for the US military today—grounded Bowman’s militant empiricism. It inspires the expeditions carried out in his name.

Gade’s essay provides two clues for further research. First is his statement that ‘the funding from [US Army] FMSO is . . . helping the . . . American Geographical Society . . . weather a rough patch in its cash flow’ (p. 96). This claim, which I suspect is true, implies that the US military is propping up an ostensibly scholarly organization that might otherwise fail financially. Quite a revelation, meritng further reflection.

The second concerns his defense of Carl Sauer’s use of military funding. Sauer’s ghost appears in every defense of the Bowman expeditions, but until now the militant empiricists have not so explicitly appealed to his legacy. Somehow according to Gade, the fact that Sauer took funds from the US military to conduct research in Latin America means that geographers who do the same today should not be challenged or questioned. Yet no one, not even Sauer, is beyond criticism.

We should take this opportunity to inquire into the multigenerational ties between Sauer’s ‘children’ and the US military. Most of those who have participated in or publicly defended the Bowman expeditions (Gade included) are human geographers who trace their intellectual ancestry to Sauer and abide by his conception of the field. Sauer had practically nothing to say about the politics and power dynamics of knowledge—not to mention his military funding—and I think it a fair generalization to say that his intellectual grandchildren reiterate his silence, faithfully if not proudly. Elsewhere Gade writes, ‘the Sauerian circle of affinity has refused the notion that geographic research is most justified when it is applied to solving social problems. Sauer was resolute in insisting that curiosity is the driving force behind doing good geography. He would have been the first to warn of the danger of the “relevancy orientation”. . . . The Sauerians have rarely dealt with the burning issues of the day’ (2009: 32–33). Such unwillingness to reflect upon social problems and politics has proven useful for the US military. As the latest Bowman expeditions reveal (Wainwright, 2013a), getting the US military to pay for fieldwork in Latin America remains common Sauerian practice.

For those of us outside the ‘Sauerian circle of affinity’, important questions remain: Has cultural ecology’s state/military funding shaped the field? If so, how? How has the field’s relative silence about politics been facilitated by its theoretical commitments? To answer these questions, we need a research program analogous to Trevor Barnes’ meticulous studies of the US Cold War’s contributions to geography’s quantitative revolution and its implications for postwar economic geography (e.g. Barnes, 2008). As I have argued elsewhere (Wainwright,
2008, chapter 6), we need to finish the critique of cultural ecology.

**The Euphotic zone**

Sunlight shines on the other reviews. I am greatly indebted to Craib and Mutersbaugh for their generous, critical interpretations of *Geopiracy* and productive openings for further research. Here I will only address one common theme. Craib regrets that *Geopiracy* is ‘in some ways offered from, and directed toward, the metropole’ (p. 89). Mutersbaugh criticizes the book for failing to examine ‘significant Mexican and Oaxacan scholarship, popular and academic, on autonomy and communality’ (p. 92), work showing that ‘everyday Sierra institutionalist practices [have] successfully produced a “geo-communalist” Oaxaca’ (p. 93). To restate these criticisms in more general (perhaps less gentle) terms, these critics imply that *Geopiracy* has at best missed, at worst silenced, the people of Oaxaca. In light of space limitations, my reply will be all too concise.

First, the statement regarding my amateurism in *Geopiracy* was no mere trope, nor false modesty. I am no expert on Oaxaca. I cannot speak a word of Zapotec and while I am familiar with some of the scholars that Mutersbaugh cites, there are several I have never even heard of. A geographer writing on an unfamiliar place should own up to their lack of expertise: I did so (Wainwright, 2012a: 19–20). The question is whether *Geopiracy* fails to fulfill its goals because of my lack of expertise. I think the answer is no. This is not to deny that it may have been useful to include, for example, discussions of the Mexican state and Oaxaca’s rural institutions. But these topics are not definitive for the book’s problematic. We should also note that the critics are (consciously or not, it does not matter) in effect asking *Geopiracy* to be more like their excellent studies of state practices in Mexico (Craib, 2004) and rural institutions in Oaxaca (Mutersbaugh, 2002a, 2002b). The experts ask an amateur to be an expert: as scholars that is always fair game. But we should remember that Said’s (1996) argument for committed amateurism was to defend intellectual, nonexpert, political interventions.

We should be glad that Said, a literary critic, so often plunged his pen to write about US foreign policy, ignoring the ‘experts’ who told him to go back to Conrad. I am not of Said’s stature but the principle is the same. And had I waited to write *Geopiracy* until after reading the rich literatures on Oaxaca and studying the Mexican state, the book would not yet exist. We must consider timeliness.

This aside, *Geopiracy*’s object of analysis is emphatically not Oaxaca. Hence I happily confirm Craib’s suggestion that it is a book written about and toward the metropole. That was the point, one I tried to make as explicit as possible. *Geopiracy* is a postcolonial critique of Anglo-American geographical thought, specifically its militant empiricism; the Bowman expeditions are its case. I am less comfortable with Craib’s suggestion that *Geopiracy* is ‘from’ the metropole. This is not to deny that I live and work in the United States but to suggest that *Geopiracy* was written at the metropole. I hope the book can be seen as deriving from elsewhere epistemologically, that is, as abiding by Oaxaca (see Ismail, 2005).

This brings us to the critical question of representation, subalternity, and geographical thought. I should have discussed this more carefully in my discussion of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Qadri Ismail (chapter 6). The geographical dimension of their thought—for me, an essential postcolonial critique—is inherently complex; my attempt to weave it together probably left too many threads hanging (Trevor Barnes called chapter 6 ‘a bit woolly’). I cannot mend that now, but perhaps I can smooth some seams.

Let us return to Spivak’s ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ at a juncture where she is discussing the fraught question of the relation between the metropole intellectual and subaltern social groups (1988: 259):

> Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the international division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous other referring only to our own place in the seat of the same or the self. Here are subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals and the communities of zero
workers on the street or in the countryside. To confront
them is not to represent (vertreten) them but to learn to
represent (darstellen) ourselves. This argument would
take us into a critique of a disciplinary anthropology.

This passage can be read in a number of ways. I
invoke it as moral injunction and methodological
guideline. However read, Spivak’s argument does
not leave us with a comfortable solution to the prob-
lem of representation—this is a virtue—but only the
task of taking up a critique of disciplinary geogra-
phy (see also Spivak, 2014).8

Thus, if Geopiracy does not explicitly analyze
Oaxaca’s political and intellectual community, this
is not only due to my amateurism and because Oaxaca
was not my object. Still less is it because of my
respect for the indubitable achievements of the peo-
ple of Oaxaca. Rather it is because—insofar as I am
aware of my intentions—when following Gramsci
and Spivak, the encounter with subaltern groups
should not lead one to rush to represent, even (or
especially) when our aims seem altruistic. Remem-
ber: the geographers of the Bowman expeditions
went to Oaxaca to map (represent) with benevolent
intentions. Rather than seek to repair their work via
a counter-map, I sought to critique it, asking how we
(geographers) have learned to represent our-
selves. Like Spivak (1988: 247), ‘my view is that
radical practice should attend to this double session
of representations rather than reintroduce the indi-
vidual subject through totalizing concepts of power
and desire’. Hence I did not proceed to show that
the communities have ‘successfully produced a
“geo-communalist” Oaxaca’, to cite Mutersbaugh
(p. 93).9 Evaluating such a claim would likely have
led me to exploring, locating, and measuring prac-
tices in Oaxaca. My task lay elsewhere: to critique
our empiricist episteme, to question how we repre-
sent ourselves, to invoke the rupture of planetarity.

Bigger fish to fry

Would this were only an academic debate. In June
2013—around the time these critics started writing
their essays—the US military gave an additional
US$3 million to the University of Kansas geogra-
phers to extend their Bowman expeditions across
Central America (see Wainwright, 2013a). Mean-
while, the US military has rolled out a number of
other ‘human geography’ projects, making the
hyperbolic claims of Geopiracy’s fifth chapter only
too timid. So while they reveal much of what we
face today, the Bowman expeditions are by no
means our greatest concern (Wainwright, 2012b,
2013a, 2013b). Let me conclude by quoting the core
of my argument about geography and the US state/
military today (Wainwright, 2013a):

The Bowman Expeditions represent only one side-
project for the US state/military and a small one at that.
Thanks to Edward Snowden, the NSA’s spying has
been exposed and we’ve learned how hundreds of
thousands of people in the US have been subject to
government surveillance. The situation is much worse
when we consider US state surveillance of the rest of
the world. The task of systematically collecting geos-
patial data and conducting routine surveillance around
the world for the US state/military falls to the National
Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, an organization that
has not received the scrutiny given to the NSA. . . .

No less worrying are the myriad military programs
to improve how the US armed forces—particularly the
Army—‘uses’ human geography as a weapon. . . .
These are geographical projects of much greater signif-
icance than the Bowman expeditions and led by people
who are more dangerous than Professor Dobson.

We are witnessing an unprecedented attempt by
one state to collect data—much of it geocoded—from
multiple sources (data mining, satellites, outright spy-
ing, and much more), reaching into the most intimate
spaces of our lives and saturating our very means of
communication. The US government has constructed
an unparalleled platform for geospatial data collection
and analyses, capable of mapping people’s movements
and communications across the entire planet. All of
this has potential military ‘applications’, meaning the
potential to harm people, including US citizens (since
we can have little faith that these tools cannot be used
on civilians through police, FBI, or other agencies).
The capacity of the US state/military to locate, follow,
track, and kill people is without precedent and without
equal, and that is the point. Given the extraordinary
record of violence carried out by the US government
over the past century—from Vietnam to Iraq and
Afghanistan—one would have to have an almost reli-
gious faith in the infallibility of US leadership and the
rightness of their ideology not to look at the government’s military/intelligence capacities and feel enraged at the injustices already committed—and the many more to come.

What are we to do? One way to answer this question, as Professor Dobson reminds us, is to ask how we can ‘reduce international misunderstandings’. His approach is to militarize those misunderstandings by providing maps and data to the Pentagon. There is another way, one elaborated beautifully by Edward Said in a 1991 interview. Allow me to quote at length:

There’s only one way to anchor oneself [as an intellectual], and that is by affiliation with a cause, a political movement. There has to be identification not with the secretary of state or the leading philosopher of the time but with matters involving justice, principle, truth, conviction. Those don’t occur in a laboratory or a library. For the American intellectual, that means, at bottom, that the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world, now based upon profit and power, has to be altered to one of coexistence among human communities that can make and remake their own histories and environments together.

... [Unfortunately, even] inside the university, the prevalence of norms based upon domination and coercion is so strong because the idea of authority is so strong, whether it’s derived from the nation-state, from religion, from the ethnos, from tradition. ... Part of intellectual work is understanding how authority is formed. Authority is not God-given. It’s secular. And if you can understand that, then your work is conducted in such a way as to be able to provide alternatives to the authoritative and coercive norms that dominate so much of our intellectual life, our national and political life, and our international life above all (Said, 1991: 366).

If we are going to criticize the formation of authority and provide alternatives to the norms that dominate intellectual life, we have no choice: we must confront the US military.

Notes
1. In fairness to myself, I think Dobson’s arguments are adequately and accurately summarized in Geopiracy (Wainwright, 2013a, chapter 2 passim).
2. Specifically from the Office of Naval Research (ONR), still active in funding geographical research. See the index entry for ‘ONR’ in Denevan and Mathewson (2009).
3. This is a social network with dense ties whose members defend one another, for example, Gade supervised Peter Herlihy’s Master’s thesis, a cultural ecology of fish poison (Herlihy, 1979).
4. It may be worth noting that many of the geographers who have publically criticized the Bowman expeditions (including Tad Mutersbaugh, Joe Bryan, and myself) are the intellectual descendants of the Berkeley School of Political Ecology. In this and other respects, my response to Gade could be read as another in a line of Marxist political ecologists carrying on our debate with Sauerian cultural ecology. More proximately it reprises the 1997 Sluyter–Braun debate on Sauer in the Annals (Braun, 1997; Sluyter, 1997). I agree with Braun (1997: 703) that ‘Sauer wrote extensively about ... cultural and ecological changes ... but had far less to say about questions of power and politics’, including the politics of his own involvement with power.
5. Also true of Crampton’s review (2013).
6. ‘Oaxaca’ was added to the book’s subtitle at my publisher’s insistence for marketing purposes.
7. Much of Geopiracy was written in southern Mexico, which undoubtedly shaped the book’s tone and argument. Even in Mexican territory, of course, I bear my passport and privileges (see p. 20).
8. Space does not permit me to discuss Spivak’s important distinction between vertreten and darstellen, derived from Marx, or her subsequent revisions of these lines (compare Spivak, 1999: 42).
9. Neither would I deign to say that Oaxacans are ‘waiting for a Hegelian moment’, as Mutersbaugh implies. Hegel is invoked in Geopiracy (p. 86) to clarify my critique of militant empiricism, that is, of the Anglo-American episteme. Compare the text by Kiado Cruz (section 5.2).

References


