

## Into New Territory: American Historians and the Concept of US Imperialism

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Is the United States an empire? Scholars of United States foreign relations will be well familiar with the debates that provide the background to James G. Morgan's stimulating new monograph on foreign policy revisionism. Until the late 1950s, most mainstream historians presented the rise of the United States to global power as a reluctant departure from an older tradition of continental isolationism and hostility to foreign entanglements. The internationalism of the twentieth century, it was believed, was born of humanitarian and security concerns imposed upon the United States by imperialist, fascist and communist regimes elsewhere in the world. The United States' own imperial moment, at the turn of the 20th century, was usually seen as a brief and hastily-corrected aberration in an otherwise restrained and largely anti-imperialist foreign policy.

From the middle years of the Cold War, however, scholars began challenging this view, presenting the United States as more aggressive and less reactive in its foreign policymaking. To these revisionists, the history of United States revealed a consistent pattern of expansion running from the early republic through the war of 1898, the world wars and, ultimately, on to Vietnam – the latter conflict increasingly framing their analyses as the 1960s progressed. Intimately linked to this restless outward motion, they argued, was a longstanding commitment to a Gallagher and Robinson-style imperialism of free trade: a desire to open foreign markets to United States investment, businesses and goods, to break down international barriers to commerce, and to assume control over raw materials located overseas but required by domestic industry. In this view, the only thing that was unusual about the early 20th-century flirtation with empire was the temporary adoption of the European colonial model, since the United States typically sought to promote its imperial objectives by less formal means. While colonialism was received with disquiet at home and discarded relatively quickly in favour of more subtle and innovative approaches to power projection, the basic imperial thrust of United States foreign policy continued with little interruption for the rest of the century.

Although the revisionists were attacked from many directions – mostly for being too sweeping and monochromatic – several of their key arguments were subsequently incorporated into post-revisionist writing in the 1970s and 1980s, and using the language of empire to describe the structures of American

global power has become a relatively common feature of international history scholarship today. Even a cursory glimpse at the David Foster Wallace-sized footnotes in Paul Kramer's historiographical essay on the subject, published in the *American Historical Review* in 2011, shows quite how widespread, and complex, if still uneven and contested, the practice of 'thinking with the imperial' has become.<sup>(1)</sup>

Amid this constellation of texts, James G. Morgan's *Into New Territory: American Historians and the Concept of US Imperialism* offers a tightly focused historiographical examination of mid-century revisionism. In particular, the author seeks to differentiate between two groups often lumped together: the progressive historians who studied or worked at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison; and a more diffuse group of Marxist intellectuals associated with the New Left, operating both inside and outside the academy. Although the label has often been loosely applied to both groups, Morgan rejects the argument that the Wisconsin School should be seen as New Leftists. Despite sharing many basic beliefs about United States power, the New Left was more concerned with extending the Leninist interpretation of American imperialism as the natural extension of the United States' capitalist order, whereas Wisconsinites were more textured and less rigidly economic – some might say less intellectually coherent – finding explanatory power both in economic factors and mistaken ideological assumptions about the potential of overseas markets to solve domestic problems and the possibility of spreading United States-style constitutional democracy around the world. This made Wisconsinites less deterministic and more alive to nuance, irony, and contradiction than some of their more doctrinaire peers to the left.

These interpretive differences had significant implications, Morgan argues. For radical Marxists, seeing American overseas expansion as the highest stage of capitalism meant that the only way to put a halt to American imperialism was to end both the market system and the bourgeois constitutional order in which it was embedded; for Wisconsinites, education and enlightenment through rational intellectual exchange offered the possibility that the great experiment could be diverted from its militant tendencies into more productive channels of domestic reform without the need for full-fledged social revolution. In the language of its most famous member, William Appleman Williams, the Wisconsin School saw the turn toward empire as a 'tragedy' rather than a crime, a case of good intentions gone awry, and therefore a political course that might be challenged or even reversed.

In a series of well-organized and accessible chapters, Morgan traces the roots of Wisconsinite revisionism in the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner (who was himself based at Wisconsin between 1890 and 1910, before moving to Harvard) and Charles A. Beard (of Columbia); explores the way in which the distinctive culture of Madison supported a non-traditional approach to the study of United States foreign relations; and digests the key arguments of several of the major texts of the Wisconsin School, especially the writings of Williams, Thomas McCormick and Walter LaFeber. (For some reason the other significant figure of the early Wisconsin School, Lloyd Gardner, gets somewhat shorter shrift. Most of the analysis is based on the printed primary record, although the author has also exchanged emails with LaFeber and interviewed McCormick.) Morgan is not inattentive to the more schematic elements of the Wisconsin interpretation, especially in its early incarnations, but his main goal is to show its increasing sophistication over time, an upward path that ultimately allowed these scholars to push thinking about United States imperialism into new intellectual territory (hence the title of the book). Later chapters contrast this progressive arc with New Left scholarship, especially the work of Harry Magdoff, Gabriel Kolko and David Horowitz, and various essays found in the pages of Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy's *Monthly Review* and the Wisconsin-based *Studies on the Left*. While the Wisconsinites refined and improved their arguments in the 1960s and 1970s, Morgan argues, the New Left subordinated the search for truth to more dogmatic political objectives, and ultimately moved away from scholarship altogether in order to take their struggle to the streets. In Madison at least, this put student radicals in direct conflict with the older progressive historians who had by now become guardians of campus order. Activism was all very well, Williams explained in an article in 1970, but it was also important to write 'damned important books' (p. 167).

By abandoning the war of ideas for a short-sighted and ultimately futile effort to assault the power structure of the United States, Morgan believes that 'the New Left squandered the opportunity Vietnam gave them to

change perceptions of America's global role' (p. 212). But whereas 'the New Left imploded and failed to achieve its goals, the Wisconsin scholars actually achieved something tangible', namely 'significant elements of the Wisconsin critique of American empire found their way into post-revisionist interpretations of the Cold War' (p. 10).

As one might guess from this summary, Morgan is not afraid to show his Wisconsinite leanings, and the result is a passionate, often persuasive, and occasionally polemic piece of writing. Sometimes the argument feels a little like apples are being held up against oranges. When the screeds of student activists and revolutionary propagandists are contrasted with high scholarship and the former found wanting, one feels that perhaps the differing purposes and contexts are being downplayed, while the broader political legacy of the New Left has arguably been too easily written off. And although it might be fair to criticize New Leftists for being too eager to raise the barricades and for being naïve about their chances of challenging the state, New Leftists would presumably respond by suggesting that the Wisconsin School leaned too far in the other direction, especially in their relative unwillingness to explore the ways in which the university system that housed them was itself implicated in the broader structures of American power.

There's certainly plenty of fish to shoot in the New Left barrel. But as Morgan himself notes, the best of their work was subtle and provocative, making the difference in quality between the two schools less clear-cut than his core thesis might imply. 'Magdoff and Kolko were serious scholars who went to great lengths to demonstrate the validity of their works', Morgan admits (p. 189). And they remain important to leftist historians to this day. Indeed, it was to Gabriel Kolko, not William Appleman Williams, that Perry Anderson offered his most enthusiastic praise in his notable article on United States imperialism published recently in the *New Left Review*, a journal that represents a serious (admittedly also London-based) intellectual repository for New Left thought in academia to the present. Kolko's 'magisterial sweep remains unequalled in the literature [on US imperialism]', Anderson argued.<sup>(2)</sup>

One can debate the relative merits of the scholarship according to one's politics and preference. But Morgan's bigger point – about the often-ignored differences between the two schools – is useful and important whatever political leanings one may have. Indeed, with the New Left label jettisoned, perhaps we might better understand the Wisconsin School as a form of radical *republican* scholarship, part of a tradition which in certain ways paralleled, but owed surprisingly little, to Marxism. We can see this in Morgan's discussion of the roots of Wisconsin School in Beard and Turner; indeed, perhaps we might look even further back into the 19th century for progenitors (though it is beyond the scope of this volume and certainly unfair to request it). This same characterisation is revealed more directly in the contents of the Wisconsin School's output, especially what David S. Brown has elsewhere called the 'Midwestern voice in American historical writing'.<sup>(3)</sup> Typically Wisconsinite themes include the revolving door of business groups and political elites shaping foreign policy, the way in which expansion abroad served to divert attention away from inequalities at home and centralised power away from local communities toward a distant and unresponsive Washington, and the need for a vigilant democratic struggle against creeping oligarchy – all of which scholars will recognize are essentially 20th-century variants of older republican concerns over corruption, tyranny, and virtue. Even the strong economic thread running through many of the Wisconsinites' accounts of the relationship between business, finance and expansionism can be traced to the writings of the president who gave his name to their much-loved home town. In Wisconsin, rather more is owed to Madison than to Marx.

Morgan's work thus alerts us to the way deeper historical continuities can be obscured when the Wisconsin School is simply merged with the New Left. Rather than seeing them as inheritors of foundational themes in American political thought, Williams and his successors become intellectual arrivistes, subject to 'un-American' influences such as Marcuse and Adorno. In such a manner, what was in many ways a conservative vision of America's place in the world could be repainted by Cold War critics as something dangerously radical, a shifting of political registers that was characteristic of US politics more generally mid-century, when down often meant up and left, right.

Few historians of American foreign affairs can boast the lasting impact of any one of the major Wisconsin scholars, let alone of the school as a whole, and Morgan's book does a great job of showing both how and why their legacy has been so substantial. But will the future of international history scholarship in the United States continue to have a Wisconsinite tinge? Although the influence of Williams, McCormick, Gardner and LaFaber remains immense, many others have since added their voices to the discussion, producing a richer and more diverse debate. Cultural historians have appropriated Williams' early arguments about the role of ideology in the shaping of foreign policy and given them greater clarity and detail, as well as taking them in directions unanticipated by the Wisconsinites. As elsewhere, historians of race and gender have been among the most innovative thinkers of recent decades in uncovering formerly unexplored drivers of American expansion, and their intellectual genealogy is arguably more New Leftist than Wisconsinite, leaning on Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Fanon and Foucault, rather than Williams, Beard and Turner. Moreover, historical work on American global power today is required to engage with multiple, overlapping subfields of transnational, regional and world history that shift the frame of analysis away from the nation-state as the sole explanatory unit of history. Although it was valuable in the 1960s to challenge the tendency to see American expansion in terms of a reaction to overseas dangers, one of the most enduring criticisms that can be made of the Wisconsin School was its habit of reversing the orthodox stance and looking almost exclusively to domestic factors to explain foreign policy. An awkward inheritance of Charles Beard's one-man war on Franklin Roosevelt, to put it unkindly this sometimes turned into an inverted exceptionalism that saw Americans as providentially endowed with a special dispensation to cause global havoc. At its best, the Marxist tradition, by contrast, has been more cosmopolitan, and more attentive to the ways in which global forces contributed to inter-state competition and by extension conflict, conquest and dependency. As contemporary globalization has seen cultural and capital flows intensify and sometimes become decoupled from the nation-state system altogether, it may be that this analysis will continue to grow in salience in historical discussions on the left. A more international orientation certainly does not mean a return to the older orthodoxy, since the aim of deploying broader scholarly resources is in large part to show how the foreign and domestic spheres were mutually constitutive. But it does require a larger frame of reference than that expressed in the Wisconsin School's work. As Morgan has persuasively shown, international historians of the United States will be wise to continue to keep their thumbled copies of *Tragedy* to hand. But, as always, there is plenty more elsewhere to be read.

## Notes

1. Paul Kramer, 'Power and connection: imperial histories of the United States in the world', *American Historical Review*, 116, 5 (2011), 1348–91.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Perry Anderson, 'Imperium', *New Left Review*, 83 (Sep-Oct 2013), fn 24.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago, IL, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/111109>