*Geopiracy: Oaxaca, Militant Empiricism, and Geographical Thought* by Joel Wainwright. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2013).

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After Joel Wainwright’s new book, it is clear that “we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Combining chiselled analysis, etymological scrupulousness, and sometimes seething moral and political indignation, Wainwright’s book undoes, does up and does over any justification for the Bowman Expedition undertaken in Mexico by a group of University of Kansas geographers that began in 2005. The Expedition was to collect information about two indigenous rural areas, and sponsored by the American Geographical Society (AGS). But as it turned out, it was also sponsored by the US Department of Defense (DoD), the State Department, and the Mexican Government. The amount of money involved was not just loose change (although maybe loose change for the DoD). For the period 2005-09, it totalled $2.5m, with a significant chunk coming from the US Army’s Foreign Military Services Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (fn. 6., pp. 16-17). The central issue, the provocation for Wainwright’s book, was that the indigenous people surveyed in Mexico, particularly the Zapotec in Oaxaca, were never told of the project’s military funding, nor were they given access to the information about them after it was collected. It is this that Wainwright dubs “geopiracy.”

Wainwright’s critique is withering. Although he describes himself as a “committed amateur” (p. 19), his critique is exactingly professional. After his criticism, not only is the Bowman Expedition left without an argument, it is left without the grounds to make an argument. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein reportedly said following systematic criticism of his work by the economist Piero Sraffa that he felt like a “a tree from which all branches had been cut” (Malcolm 1958: 15). That’s the Bowman expedition once Wainwright has gotten done, and explaining why “we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

The book is unusual in all kinds of ways. It’s really a novella of an academic text, printed on small sheets of paper, just cracking the hundred page mark. But, and also rare for geographical works, its footnotes are voluminous, occupying in my rough calculation about a quarter of the volume’s text. The footnotes for the Preface – that there are footnotes for the Preface is a tad surprizing – are one-and-a-half times the length of the Preface’s main text. At first I thought it was a misprint, a naff first edition printer’s error. It was right, however. A number of footnotes are about matters etymological, again not typical fodder for present-day geographical works. I learned a lot including several foreign words written in non-Romanic alphabets including Hellenistic Greek, Ancient Greek, and Greek that was even “more ancient” than Ancient Greek (p. 6). It was as if by his etymological plumbing Wainwright was trying to touch rock bottom, to define definitively key words, to use the dictionary as a foundation.

And something else you don’t often see in texts in contemporary geography is Wainwright’s unflinching willingness to name names, and which included those Kanas geographers, Geoff Demarest, Jerry Dobson and Peter Herlihy, and two former Presidents of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), John Agnew and Alex Murphy. I admired Wainwright’s courage and backbone. One last thing, also admirable, also unusual, was Wainwright’s ability to keep a number of different topics in the air within his text at the same time, giving depth and texture. While talking about one thing, Wainwright was also talking about another, and achieved partly by all his footnotes that functioned as a kind of hypertext, and also by looping prose that came with “trailing ands” in William James’ (1912: 321) felicitous phase. Wainwright’s book was about the Bowman expedition, *and* also about the relation of US military to the history of geographical thought, *and* also about epistemology, militant empiricism in his lexicon, *and* also about post-colonialism. In a discussion about his book at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Tampa, FL, from which this set of commentaries is derived, Wainwright implied that the Bowman Expedition was the “trailing and”, and what was central for him were these other concerns. However it is framed, it is with these other concerns that I have some issues.

The first is the military and the history of geographical thought. The two have long been yoked. Yves Lacoste (1976), in fact, reckons that the first involvement of geographers with the military was with the ancient Greek geographer, Strabo, who gave advice on the importance of geographical terrain and position for military advantage two thousand years ago. As Lacoste (1976) puts it, “*La geographie, ça sert d'abord a faire la guerre”* [geography has served firstly to wage war]. It was recognition of the importance of geographical knowledge for the practice of warfare that led to the first flush of university chairs in geography in Western Europe during the late 19th century (following the Franco-Prussian war).

Wainwright provides a five-fold periodization of geography’s relation to the military for the last hundred years or so (p. 58). In his scheme, we are currently in the era of “geography counterinsurgent” defined by a declining US Empire, a fraying American hegemony, and battles with insurgents across numerous regional fronts (p. 58). One of the US’s weapons is its geographical knowledge of insurgents, and represented by maps of human terrain, the product of old-fashioned geographical expeditions now integrated with GIS. It is precisely that end that defined the Bowman expedition. But there is another claim that Wainwright makes about the larger connection between the military and geographical knowledge that is less persuasive. He avers that “the intellectual results of th[e] project are weak … because of the involvement of the military in its creation,” (p. 54). That is, “military interests … seriously hamper … producing original findings” (p. 54). Furthermore, he argues that because “intellectual labour” is “utterly dependent upon sharing and criticizing ideas openly” (p. 54), while the military as an institution can do neither because of its concern with secrecy and command, what is produced by it, and exemplified by the Bowman Expedition, is “barely presentable … scholarly work” (p. 54).

The fingerprints of the military have been all over the discipline of geography from its beginning, however, if not, as Lacoste suggests, before its beginning. Wainwright implies there can be geographical knowledge untainted by military interests; knowledge that is unhampered, original not derivative, strong rather than weak. The history of geography and its entanglements with war, empire and imperial commerce suggests something different, though. I am also sceptical of Wainwright’s seemingly blanket statement about military interests necessarily undermining intellectual labour. Scholars working for the military, even under conditions of extreme secrecy, have produced world-changing knowledge such as the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project (Goueff 1967) or at MIT’s RadLab (Buderi 1996) during the Second World War. Or again for the social sciences, Rebecca Lemov (2005) shows that the project of Behavioural Science originated exactly from military interests during World War II. You might disagree with the knowledge that was created, but it is uncontestable that it was significant knowledge. Wainwright seems to want to believe in a method that can produce an unsullied form of geographical knowledge. It goes to his identification of correct conditions for intellectual labour involving “open, public, fair-but-critical debate” (p. 55). But such conditions as feminist critics such as Mouffe (1993) argue can never exist; the odds are stacked right from the beginning. There is no such thing as unsullied geographical knowledge, but sullied knowledge might still be knowledge.

Wainwright’s second “trailing and” is epistemology, and represented by his term “militant empiricism.” It is a clever phrase, punning the aggressiveness of both the empiricist position that is held, as well as the particular institutional client that is so keen to practice it, the military. It’s true that the military in waging war, as well as imperial ventures, has drawn on the field tradition of geography to satisfy its strategic end of knowing facts about a place, or a terrain, or a region. The military has relied on the discipline’s tradition of field work to collect, catalogue, marshal, and present empirical data; that is, data based on sense experience, thus satisfying the requirements of empiricism. That is what the Bowman expedition seemingly was all about. Going to the field, in this case, Mexico, gathering data, recording it, integrating the information through GIS to allow a global analysis.

That said, “militant empiricism” oversimplifies the relation among the military, the discipline of geography and epistemology, making it flat and one-dimensional. For example, historically even regional geography was never about only collecting raw empirical facts from the field. It was also about integrating them, synthesizing, telling a story whether that was couched in terms of A. J. Herbertson’s (1916: 153) “spirit of a place,” or Vidal de la Blache’s (1924) “personality of place,” or even Richard Hartshorne’s (1939) clinically defined “element complex.” Moreover, human geography has never been defined by its field methods. Compared, say, to those of anthropology and even sociology, geography’s field methods are scattered, unsystematic, and frequently practised with little rigour. From my work on the history of US military intelligence during World War II and the Cold War, the contribution of American geographers was never going out into the field to collect field data. They used maps and secondary sources, later deploying analytical techniques and spatial theory (Barnes 2008). To meet his definition of “militant empiricism” Wainwright makes geography too narrow, neglecting the variegated forms it has taken, and the uses to which it has been put, even by the US military. My suspicion is that given his training as a geographer even Jerry Dobson in his work in Bowman Expedition did more than “militant empiricism.” He couldn’t help himself given the undisciplined discipline in which he was trained and became a member.

The last “trailing and” is postcolonialism. Wainwright draws here especially on Gayatri Spivak and Qadri Ismail in order to confront explicitly “militant empiricism.” The latter represents a colonial impulse. It uses the expeditionary experience of fieldwork, that is, going to Other places, taking facts from them, and returning, to represent the world. It is imperial knowledge, and consequently requiring post-colonial critique. That is what Spivak and Ismail provide. “Spivak,” Wainwright writes, “offers a powerful corrective to militant empiricism” (p. 69). She does so by her emphasis on “planetarity” as opposed to globalization. Planetarity, says Wainwright (p. 70) is “an aporetical ethics: a guide to practical being and doing *as if* one could be ethical towards the other, all the while knowing this is impossible.” From Ismail Wainwright takes “postempiricism” and “Abiding.” Postempiricsm offers the possibility of creating alternative objects, including geographical objects, untainted by colonial premises (p. 73). While “Abiding” holds out the prospect of dissolving the very distinction between “here” and “there” fundamental to all imperial projects (p. 79).

I find this last “trailing and” the least satisfactory. It is the equivalent to “and they all lived happily ever after.” I feel it represents a utopian longing, a belief that it will work out in the end. I wish I could be as sanguine. Even on their own terms I am unclear how the objectives of Spivak (“planetarity”) and Ismail (“Abiding”) would be realised; that is, the kinds of practices that would make them come about. Spivak seems to suggest that a different kind of field work might lead to planetarity involving, for example, hanging-out, being playful, and “suspending previous training to train yourself” (p. 75). But those kinds of descriptors seem to be what a lot of geographers do now anyway, but I have little sense that Spivak’s larger end is being achieved. Whereas for Ismail there is not even fieldwork. Only the text is important, and seemingly for him that can be researched and written anywhere, not requiring that we physically abide when Abiding. My fear is that planetarity and Abiding are empty aspirations, catchwords, means, as Stuart Hall (1997: 290) once put it, to “make you sleep well at night,” but which do not change anything.

Joel Wainwright has written a terrific book. His critique of the Bowman expedition is unanswerable. However, and to return to the point I raised earlier, he said at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers where his book was discussed that “the book is not about the Bowman expedition,” but rather about what I’ve called the “trailing ands.” I think him putting it like this is a mistake. The strength of, and continuing interest in his important book comes precisely from the details of what he has written about the Bowman Expedition, and its relation to military funding, the AGS and the AAG. That will endure and be an exemplar, whereas I strongly suspect that the “trailing ands” will trail away.

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