

Analysis of political cartoons essay



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Critical Geopolitics seeks to “ reveal the hidden politics of geographical knowledge” (Tuithail et al, 1998: 3). Geopolitics is a discourse, a culturally and politically varied way of describing, representing and writing about geography and international politics. This paper will attempt to analyse how political cartoons and stamps are geopolitical representations that impart geopolitical knowledge. The images are embedded with, culture, and political meanings, which as Dodds and Sidaway (1994) suggest makes them part of politics itself and not a neutral, detached description of reality. As “ the production of political knowledge is an essentially contested political activity” (Tuithail et al, 1998: 3) this papers writings will be a subjective interpretation of the geopolitical knowledge being portrayed.

Figure 1. 1TitleSept. 11, three years afterArtistPatrick

ChappatteAttributionPatrick Chappatte, The International Herald

TribuneFigure 1. 1 portrays the changing attitude towards America from the world’s population. Chappatte has placed a number of people in a variety of cultural dress, on top of a globe to symbolize the world’s population. These figures are holding a banner, which has had a plaque added to change the sentence from, “ We Are All Americans” to “ We Are All Anti Americans”.

Chappatte is illustrating how the global consensus towards what Falk (2004: 241) sees as USA’s “ emergent global empire”, has rapidly changed in the years after the September 11th attacks. Chappatte is of Swiss nationality, so the cartoon is portraying a European vision of public opinion on America and one that is politically neutral. Thus this vision is from a relative ally, making the concept portrayed even more intriguing. Agnew (2003) suggests that the events of September 11th signalled an “ increasingly brazen imperial

strategy” (Agnew, 2003: 883) and a change to a “ new ideological commitment to empire rather than to other means of securing hegemony” (Agnew, 2003: 883) from America. This analysis will conceptualise this change, and place it in the context of this cartoon and find why public opinion of America and its ideals has changed. Since the 19th century America has believed in its god given will or “ manifest destiny” (Smith, 2000: 38) to “ spread liberal democracy throughout the world” (Smith, 2000: 38).

Smith (2000) proposes this is an intellectual activity to justify US imperialism. The concept of manifest destiny is important, as it was the ideological basis behind America’s rise to world superpower and hegemony. “ America came to be seen as the model for other countries to emulate” (Slater, 1999: 15) with the American dream and ideals becoming what the world should follow. Figure 1. 1 illustrates this by implying that pre September 11th the banner would have read, “ we are all Americans” highlighting a world conforming to American ideals and following an American path laid out by the concept of manifest destiny. Throughout the cold war and post cold war up to September 11th the USA exercised coercive power “ the capacity to intervene in specific circumstances to effect key political change in another state” (Slater, 1999: 24).

This exercise however was “ always legitimated within the broader context of moral, cultural, economic and political leadership” (Slater, 1999: 24), in other words its manifest destiny. Post 9/11 America has increased its imperial agenda but encountered “ a loss of credibility and legitimacy” (Golub, 2004: 780). The key example is the Iraq war and the war on terror.

Golub (2004) suggests that America lost both the unifying support of the nation behind national security objectives, and legitimacy on a worldwide scale. This loss of legitimacy explains the change of world opinion towards America shown in the cartoon (Figure 1. 1).

The loss of legitimacy and subsequent change in world opinion of America was due to a change from a multilateral to unilateral agenda when America declared its war on terror. America abandoned “ successful forms of hegemonic governance, based on the institutionalization of collective economic and security regimes, in favor of militarism” (Golub, 2004: 763), following a new ideological commitment to empire and global domination through force. The September 11th attacks have regenerated the intensification of a unipolar moment or as Dodds asserts “ an aggressive rearticulation of Americas role in the world” (Dodds, 2005: 224). America has been flexing its power and acting outside of the international organizations that it originally helped form. This paper believes that although America has often contradicted itself, in that its republican ideals state a belief in limited government intervention that is balanced by popular sovereignty (Agnew, 2003), whilst its foreign policy has been marked with many examples of intervention.

This has previously been legitimated through its manifest destiny to spread liberal democracy. Post September 11th the contradiction has been pushed over the limit; America has lost its legitimizing factor, as by acting unilaterally the country is simply seeking revenge. This paper believes that figure 1. 1 is illustrating this loss of legitimization and with it the change in

public opinion, with the rest of the world uniting against America's power to act outside the international multilateral framework that is in place.

As Agnew (2003) suggests this imperial strategy can only lead to a weakening of American Hegemony. Evidence of the change in opinion towards America post 9/11 can be seen in Adams (2004) paper. He shows of public opinion in Quebec towards America plummeted post 9/11. He demonstrates this is “ an important manifestation of the small nation code” (Adams, 2004: 790) with Quebec taking sides with the smaller disadvantaged group. Small is taken to mean “ demographic smallness, political weakness, and economic vulnerability” (Adams, 2004: 790). Adams (2004) shows how the code provides support for other nations through a generalized anti-imperialism.

This example is important as it shows how many nations may feel at odds with American foreign policy through the small nation code, as in relation to America many nations perceive themselves to be small and weak in comparison to the lone superpower. Adams (2004) paper and small nation code reinforces the change in public opinion towards America being portrayed in figure 1. 1 and helps explain the geopolitical knowledge being illustrated in terms of loss of legitimisation in American foreign policy and opinion towards this. Figure 1. 2TitleEmergent powerArtistBest of Latin AmericaAttributionBest of Latin America, Cagle Cartoons, La Prensa, PanamaFigure 1. 2 is suggesting the world is one again bi-polar with the USA and China being the dominant forces in the world system.

The title illustrates how the artist who is from Panama, and thus is showing a South American perspective (which is interesting as most ideas of global power originate from the west), feels China is emerging as a rival to the American supremacy which has been apparent in the uni-polar new world order, post cold war. Arcadio's cartoon visualises Dodds (2000: 12) proclamation that "China must be considered out of kilter with Fukuyama's prediction of the triumph of liberal democracy". Dodds (2000) is disagreeing with Fukuyama's thesis that the end of the cold war saw the end of history, in that there would never again be a threat to liberal democracy, and pointing out that the "political and economic strength of China must be considered a threat" (Dodds, 2000: 12) to liberal democracy, and therefore America. In continuation Figure 1. 2 represents scepticism of the end of history thesis and proposes a geopolitical transition from a uni-polar world, to one once again with competition and tension." Hegemonic orders of geopolitical discourse are fluid, contingent, and perpetually shifting in response to challenge" (Dalby et al, 1998: 20).

Post Cold war there has been a geopolitical discourse of American dominance in the world after the collapse of communism. As stated figure 1. 2 is highlighting a shift and showing China as an equal rival to America, and thus a weakening of American power. However Wallerstein (2003) believes the United States has been fading as a global power since the 1970s and that this decline has recently been accelerated.

He further asserts that China is a great power and that if it "expands the base of its productive enterprise and strengthens its armed forces...the geopolitics of the world will be transformed quite suddenly" (Wallerstein,

2003: 291). Therefore it can be suggested that figure 1. 2 is agreeing with Wallerstein, presenting a view that this fluid, contingent shift has come to a definitive point, with the emergence of China leading to a transformation in geopolitical hegemonic discourse.

This geopolitical view that the West and particularly America (the driving force behind liberal democracy and neo-liberalism) are not culturally and politically dominant is also expressed by Huntington (1993). Huntington argued that the new global order would be characterized by the interaction of seven or eight large civilizations, with the East Asian and Chinese civilizations having an increasing influence on the new world order (Huntington, 1993). Huntington's thesis states that the new global order is based on the exchanges between civilizations rather than ideologies, which for him is a return to the norm. As such he sees the cold war as an out of context moment in international order and would argue bipolarity is unlikely in the future. Therefore although many academics have discourses regarding the emergence of China as a world power the context in which they feel this is occurring is dissimilar. As this essay has shown there are many discourses, which argue against the end of history thesis and state that America will not be an unopposed world power.

However figure 1. 2 is representing a return to bipolarity and thus a move back to a cold war situation of two world super powers. None of the discourses I have presented subscribe to this notion. They universally agree that there is competition to American hegemony (in varying forms and contexts), but not from simply one nation. Thus figure 1. 2 is depicting an

extreme geopolitical view, which is probably based on Chinese economic strength rather than overall world power.

This essay also believes that as figure 1. 2 is from a developing world viewpoint, it is depicting a desired hope for opposition to US hegemony rather than illustrating the geopolitical reality, as the developing world has often felt negative effects from US led institutions and US foreign policy. This view can be backed up as even the prominent Chinese academic Wang Jisi (2005) states “ although American hegemony has become gradually transparent...it is unrealistic for now to drag the US from a position of hegemony and promote others because it is beyond the ability of any nation at the current stage”.

Therefore it can be seen that although opposition to American Hegemony has become key in modern geopolitical discourse, a return to bipolarity is an unrealistic extreme view at the current stage. Figure 1. 3TitleWheels of freedom postage stamp issued by the USA in 1960Figure 1. 3 is a postage stamp issued by the USA at the height of the cold war.

It is one of the only stamps every issued by the USA to have any connotations with the cold war conflict. The two globes show America and the Soviet Union, which suggests a world dominated by two power bases, thus is in keeping with the dominant geopolitical discourse of the era, one of bipolarity. The centre wheel is depicting different modes of transport. This essay feels it is suggesting how America was technologically advanced in this age in terms of transport in relation to the rest of the world and particularly the Soviet Union. However this essay also believes this stamp is

embedded with a deeper political meaning and although at face value it appears to be celebrating advances in transport, in reality it is depicting the dominance of capitalism over socialism as an ideology, in terms of technological advances in all areas, and thus the dominance of the Americans over the Soviets. As by the 1960s both America and the USSR were “ each capable of destroying each other several times over, neither could attack without being sure the enemy would still possess enough undamaged nuclear weapons to retaliate” (Sidaway, 2005: 395).

This led to a balance of terror known as “ mutually assured destruction” (Sidaway, 2005: 395) so instead conflict took the form of continual preparation for war (Sidaway, 2005). This is an important theme that is shown in this stamp, as because the nations were in a geopolitical world order of bipolarity locked in stalemate, due to each other’s nuclear weaponry cancelling out the other sides arsenal, each side was keen to show dominance in other areas. What figure 1. 3 is portraying is a US technological advantage over the Soviets and victory for the capitalist system. Dalby et al (1998) state that there was a US belief that by showing relative strength in relation to the USSR, the Soviet Union could be forced to negotiate into the realm of the acceptable, which is why the US would want to make a show of strength at every available opportunity. Figure 1.

3 is an example of the US imparting geographical knowledge to its people and to the world that it is more technologically advanced than the USSR and that capitalism is the dominant ideological system and will prevail. Figure 1. 3 also imparts the knowledge that territory (as shown by the two globes) is an important geopolitical concept in this period. This is intriguing due to the <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-political-cartoons-essay/>

fact that as Agnew (1998) points out the cold war period has been generally proclaimed as one of ideological geopolitics in which geography was very much a background issue. Figure 1. 3 is showing territory to be a key issue of the times.

This is an important notion for Sidaway (2005) who believes Mackinder's heartland theory on territory formed an important backdrop to the Cold War. Sidaway (2005) feels that the USA's nuclear deterrence policy of placing missiles in adjacent allied countries to the Soviet Union " was justified in part as compensation for the USSR's natural strategic advantage as the heartland power" (Sidaway, 2005: 391). This essay agrees with Sidaway, in believing Mackinder's territorial theory that who controlled the heartland of east central Europe controlled the world, played a role in cold war geopolitics, and explains why the US were so keen to contain the Soviets and not let them expand any further. With the importance of territory to the USA being shown through figure 1. 3 as it was issued at the height of the cold war. In conclusion this essay suggests that Figure 1. 3 is both a propaganda tool and show of strength by America in terms of technological status and is subtly portraying geographical knowledge of the importance of territory in the cold war period.