Troubled Leviathan: The Contemporary U.S. versus Brian Berry’s U.S.

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Brian Berry’s (1970) summary of the geography of the United States in the year 2000 is testimony to his forward-looking and insightful ability to summarize trends and project them through time and space. Berry has long been one of the discipline’s most gifted and prolific authors, and his article reflected a willingness to map the future in a manner few would have dared then or now. Prognostications are always difficult, and the fact that an article written more than three decades ago imprecisely sketched the reality of the present is forgivable. The world has changed enormously since Berry’s analysis appeared: the end of the post-WWII boom, accelerated globalization, the microelectronics revolution, the rise of services and telecommunications, the end of the Cold War—all have dramatically reshaped the nation’s society, economy, and spaces. Ironically, given the emphasis on prediction that Berry placed in his article, the mismatch between the outcomes he foretold and the reality of the present is testimony to the complexity and contingency of social life, issues important to poststructuralist geomographers who do not hold the same regard for predictive capacity.

Retrospective perspectives always enjoy the luxury of hindsight, and like the world it examines, the discipline of geography has changed mightily since Berry’s article appeared. Two features of his work are particularly interesting: its silence about the global context and relations of the United States; and its lack of attention to matters social, cultural, and political, which gives it an uncritical, empiricist flavor. These voids are not surprising, for geography has matured along these fronts since 1970. It is increasingly impossible to separate the domestic from the international, given the widespread prevalence of globalization. Moreover, most geographers today would insist that economic trends—the heart of Berry’s subject—cannot be divorced from “noneconomic” ones, particularly those concerned with power, ideology, and social reproduction, a reflection of what is commonly called the “cultural turn” in the social sciences (Thrift and Olds 1996). In brief, the present moment differs markedly from that portrayed in Berry’s essay because capitalism has changed ontologically—it has become more flexible and globalized—and because our way of understanding it has changed as social science has become epistemologically more self-conscious. Indeed, the omissions in Berry’s article do not simply reflect how much the world has changed; they indicate that his worldview—the archetype of 1960s positivism—foregrounds some phenomena and backgrounds others.

At the commencement du siècle, it is patently obvious to observers around the world that the United States stands as the world’s only superpower, a political, economic, and cultural entity of unprecedented wealth and strength. It is rare for the world-system to exhibit such a highly monopolar structure, for typically hegemons are balanced by one or more competing powers (Shannon 1996; Chase-Dunn 1998). Even British rule during the Pax Britannica does not come close to matching the dominance of the U.S. today. Despite these assets, however, grounds exist for arguing that the U.S. is a highly troubled superpower, one that suffers from a “hollow core” of multiple domestic problems, including a large underclass, massive inequality, and—for many—inadequate public services. The central contention of this essay is that the external strengths of the U.S. and its internal weaknesses are simultaneously determinate: that is, the former forms the basis for the purchase of the latter.
Unrepentant Hegemon

One important feature that distinguishes contemporary perspectives in geography from that which Berry offered in 1970 is the issue of globalization. Few geographers today would attempt analyses of domestic issues without at least a cursory reference to the manner in which they are embedded in the world system. Accordingly, a few brief comments on this issue are necessary to shed light on how the U.S. has been changed since 1970 by its global position, particularly over the last decade.

By now, it is established wisdom that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War ushered in a period of unprecedented American hegemony internationally (Hirst and Thompson 1999). Indeed, never in world history has one power exerted as much relative and absolute economic, political, military, and diplomatic leverage as does the United States. By constituting itself at the core of a planetary division of labor that centralizes high-wage, high-value-added functions and decentralizes low-wage, low-value-added ones, the American economy has generated one of the highest standards of living in the world. Its annual gross national product (GNP) of U.S.$10 trillion—roughly one-quarter of the entire planet’s output—dwarfs that of Japan ($6 trillion), the world’s second largest. The U.S. GNP per capita—roughly $30,000 per year—is not the world’s highest, but it is within the top ten. More than one-quarter of the U.S. GNP consists of imports and exports—twice as high a proportion as during the period when Berry wrote his piece (Gilpin and Gilpin 2001). Buoyed by productivity gains from the microelectronics revolution and deregulation, the U.S. economy since 1980 climbed out of the abyss of Fordism and has witnessed new levels of formidability, contrary to the dreary pessimism of Marxists about its imminent demise (Porter 1990). These comments should not be taken as an uncritical celebration of the U.S., but as a realistic portrait of its ability to retain and enhance its competitive position internationally, a view that has gotten remarkably little attention from geographers.

In agriculture, for example, the U.S. stands in a category by itself. Long a major producer of grains, the U.S. exports one-third of all traded agricultural products in the world. American farmers are twice as productive as their European counterparts and ten times more so than those in Russia (Ballet et al. 2002). In manufacturing, which has shrunk to 14 percent of the labor force, the American automobile industry has reestablished itself as the world’s leader, while the country continues to dominate markets such as aerospace, electronics, and pharmaceuticals. In services—fully 85 percent of GNP and jobs—the U.S. is a powerhouse in commercial banking, securities, advertising, engineering, legal services, construction, and computer software. International service exports, which comprise one-quarter of the world economy, now generate one-third of American foreign revenues (Yarbrough and Yarbrough 1997). The Internet, icon of the “space of flows” (Castells 1996), remains primarily an American innovation, to which more than one-half of the public is connected (Warf 2001). American multinational corporations still form the largest pool of foreign direct investment (FDI) funds in the world (Dicken 1998). The country continues to enjoy virtually unchallenged domination over the western hemisphere, where the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is gradually being expanded from Prudhoe Bay to Tierra del Fuego, and maintains a string of alliances throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Many of the benefits of these activities are concentrated in global cities such as New York and Los Angeles (Sassen 1991), swollen with immigrants from the developing world, although a secondary tier of cities such as Seattle, Atlanta, Miami, Houston, and Boston are also important in their own right. The global dimensions of American cities are evident in Berry’s article mostly by their absence.

Energy, the lifeblood of the U.S. economy, is also its Achilles heel. With 4 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. consumes 25 percent of its energy, a large share of which feeds its voracious appetite for automobiles (World Resources Institute 2001). Indeed, the very structure of American urban form—spawling, low-density suburban—is deeply rooted in cheap gasoline, which is taxed at rates well below those of most countries. Petroleum imports comprise one-half of total oil consumed in the U.S. Nonetheless, the American economy is far more energy-efficient per capita—and per unit of GNP—than it was in 1970, largely due to the shift to services and the off-shoring of
manufacturing. Further, the country has secured additional domestic and foreign supplies—including, when necessary, by war.

Politically, because the U.S. is the world’s sole hegemon, its military and diplomatic powers are also unchallenged. With an annual defense budget of roughly $400 billion, the U.S. spends more on the military than the rest of the world combined, and five times more than its major potential rivals combined (Brauer and Gissy 1997). The nation is by far the world’s leading exporter of weapons. Military technology has changed greatly since the quicksand of Vietnam: as the Gulf Wars of 1990 and 2003 and the Afghan War of 2002 demonstrate, the U.S. possesses the power to decimate smaller countries with minimal casualties to itself. The American model of governance, neoliberalism, which was just on the verge of coming into being when Berry penned his article, is characterized by deregulation and an uncritical faith in the rationality of markets, and was successfully exported under the Reagan Administration throughout the world, threatening the welfare state even in its bastions, such as Scandinavia, and imposed on many developing countries through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (MacEwan 1999).

American culture—its attractions and repulsions criticized and analyzed by writers ranging from Toqueville to Adorno to Daniel Bell—represents the epitome of the penetration of commodification into consciousness, the triumph of the bourgeois spirit. Widespread prosperity within the U.S., manifested in a technologically sophisticated but intellectually infantilized population (Fussell 1992), has entrenched this culture within the values of the enormous middle class. In the late twentieth century, this form of culture has been exported worldwide: for much of the world, globalization essentially equals American pop culture, imperialism dressed in kitsch, the worldwide opiate of consumerism. As numerous observers have pointed out, American icons ranging from blue jeans to McDonald’s to Hollywood movies and television shows to rock and sports stars command the love of billions worldwide (Appadurai 1996; Friedman 1999). Understandably, this “McWorld” has generated resentment on the part of many, particularly in the Muslim world, who see it—legitimately—as a secular, nihilistic threat to long-established traditions, many rooted in religion (Barber 1996). As the tragedy of September 11, 2001, reveals, the U.S. is not immune from the global reach of its culture and foreign policies. Yet despite the contempt that many may have for American culture, for its crass commercialism and boorishness and anti-intellectualism, for billions of people throughout the world it constitutes an ardently sought-after ideal.

A Hollow Core?

In addition to its focus on technological and demographic change, another notable feature of Berry’s article is its antiseptic quality: the degree to which it uncritically overlooks the profound problems confronting the U.S. Its external strengths notwithstanding, the United States suffers domestically from grave difficulties and obstacles, which stem from its relatively large degree of inequality and its inadequate, piecemeal system of public services. While these issues may not have been as evident in 1970 as they are today, neither were they invisible, and their omission reflects the particular ideological view that shaped Berry’s article—a perspective that represents itself as objective science.

Income inequality in the U.S. ranks the highest among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries: one-fifth of the population owns 60 percent of total assets (Wilkinson 1997), a share certain to rise with the increasingly regressive federal tax cuts now being implemented. Within labor markets, these inequalities are manifested in overpaid executives, media figures, and sports stars, and underpaid workers confined to the bottom rungs of the service economy (Ehrenreich 2001). Moreover, inequality has been growing, in large part due to the increasingly regressive federal tax structure, the rise of unearned income (e.g., dividends, royalties), and the bipolar distribution of incomes associated with a service-based economy. Although the U.S. has a very large middle class comfortably ensconced in the suburbs, it also has a significant underclass disproportionately populated by minorities (Wilson 1987). While only 14 percent of the population lives below the officially designated poverty level (roughly $20,000 annually for a family of four), one-quarter of American children—including one-third of African-American children—
live in poverty (Huston 1994). Poverty is geographically concentrated, primarily in inner cities, the rural South, and Native American reservations (Kodras 1997). Roughly one million Americans are homeless, most of them minorities (Jencks 1995). Thus, class and racial inequality in the U.S. are inextricably fused. This division is mirrored in gendered terms, in which women earn, on average, only 70 percent of male incomes and comprise a large segment of the increasingly feminized poor. The safety net for the socially disadvantaged, which has been torn wide open by the onslaught of neoliberalism over the last three decades, has made the U.S. an increasingly difficult place in which to be poor.

These predicaments are evident with particular poignancy in education, health care, and the penal system. The American educational system, underfinanced for a century, has produced a poorly informed, gullible public (Fussell 1992) as well as persistent shortages of scientific labor. In inner cities, school systems beleaguered by inadequate funding, low teacher salaries, and overcrowded classrooms have seen high-school dropout rates often in excess of 50 percent, a phenomenon that serves as a major vehicle for the reproduction of the inner-city underclass. Local control of schools thus reproduces the very inequality that public education is ostensibly designed to overcome (Kozol 1991). A democratized university system is threatened by a tidal wave of mediocrity, sustaining an anti-intellectualism with deep roots in the nation’s history (Merrow and Kozol 2001). Among industrialized countries, only the U.S. lacks a national health care system or even socialized financing of health care. As a result, one-quarter of the population lacks health insurance and thus access to reliable medical care, often flooding hospital emergency rooms as a last resort. The inability or unwillingness of a country that boasts of being among the world’s richest to provide health care for its most vulnerable segments stands as a lasting monument to the nation’s injustices. Finally, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and in absolute terms, has more people behind bars than the rest of the world combined (Tonry and Petersilia 2000). Flooded by victims of a failed “war on drugs,” the prison population has tripled since 1980 to more than two million, two-thirds of whom are incarcerated for drug-related offenses. Not surprisingly, the prison population is disproportionately African American: one out of ten black American adults is in prison or on probation.

The fault for many of these dilemmas—or at least the responsibility for their aggravation—can be placed squarely on the shoulders of a conservative electorate increasingly devoid of empathy for the poor and disenfranchised. Indeed, the privatized culture of modern America has largely confined the field of social responsibilities to the self. The extreme individualism and conservatism have fueled, and in turn been fueled by, the most reactionary wings of the Republican party, often in league with the religious right, which has led a class war against the poor (Moore 2002; Brock 2002). At the level of governance, the GOP has aggressively launched an intertwined set of policies revolving around monetarism, military Keynesianism, and regressive tax cuts designed to starve the state of its capacity to provide social services. The end of the Cold War witnessed a new jihad against immigrants, the impoverished, the sick and elderly, and the unskilled. Attempts to understand the geography of the nation today should take these issues under consideration.

Concluding Thoughts

Berry’s (1970) article thoughtfully portrays the geography of the U.S. at a specific historical moment: the postwar boom was starting to draw to a close; the microelectronics revolution had yet to erupt; Fordism was at its peak; the Keynesian state was still in operation; Bretton Woods had not yet collapsed; and the Cold War was in full swing. Spatially, this set of circumstances was manifested in geographies dominated by manufacturing, relatively low degrees of poverty and inequality, and a political commitment—however tentative—to the alleviation of injustice (e.g., the War on Poverty). Since the widespread sea change in capitalism that has occurred since then, the relations between capital and space have changed markedly, the social contract between capital and labor has been revoiced, and new geographies of exclusion and inclusion, centrality and marginality, have been inscribed on the American landscape (Dear and Flusty 1998).
This brief essay has attempted to point to the irony of American economic, political, military, and cultural dominance worldwide coupled with the perpetuation and deepening of severe domestic dilemmas and social contradictions. It is critical for geographers to view these trends as intertwined, as the boundaries between the national and international become increasingly porous and permeable (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Massey and Jess 1995; Cox 1997; Herod, Ó Tuathail, and Roberts 1997; Giddens 2000; Dicken et al. 2001; Waters 2000). Blurring the differences between domestic and global, economic and noneconomic, allows these artificial and analytically misleading dichotomies to be overcome in creative and critical ways.

In part, these comments reflect the enormous paradigmatic differences that separate Berry from much of contemporary geography. Throughout his long and enormously productive career, Berry has stood as a brave, unrepentant defender of the scientific method, but one increasingly surrounded by a sea of postpositivists, a Custer of positivism at the Little Big Horn of social theory. In this respect, his work and perspective comprise a useful antidote to the armchair theorizing that plagues much of contemporary human geography, and it needs to be taken seriously. If the discipline is to move forward in ways that are simultaneously theoretically sophisticated and empirically substantive, it will require a sustained engagement in which “scientific” geographers and postpositivists explore their differences in mutually respectful ways that illuminate their contrasting assumptions and lines of reasoning.

### Literature Cited


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