Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*
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AMERICAN LEBENSRAUM

War is famously good for geography and during two world wars Isaiah Bowman, protagonist of Neil Smith's *American Empire*, was the professional geographer closest to the heart of Washington's postwar reconstruction. In 1917, on the eve of the US entry into World War One, the ambitious young director of the American Geographic Society was recruited by Edward House as a central member of Woodrow Wilson's Inquiry, the group charged with preparing US positions for the peace settlement. Bowman was Wilson's chief territorial adviser at the Paris Conference and, in 1921, a founding director of the Council on Foreign Relations with Elihu Root. His geopolitical survey, *The New World*, published the same year, became 'a handbook for the budding American Century'. Bowman was attached to the State Department under Roosevelt's administration, before and during World War Two, and sat on the Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy from 1942. A visceral anti-communist—and President of Johns Hopkins—he died of a massive heart attack in 1950.

Smith's intriguing contribution to the history of US expansionism is not, as its title might suggest, yet another contribution to theories of imperialism; nor does it cover the postwar period as its subtitle, 'prelude to globalization', might indicate. Instead, Smith focuses upon how the American liberal internationalists of the first half of the twentieth century actually thought about their imperial-expansionist project, and the language that they constructed to legitimate it. In doing so, he reveals the extraordinary continuity of the American expansionist impulse over the past century, and the equally enduring nature of its ideologies, from Wilson to Bush. The 'attempt to apply the principles of the Monroe Doctrine to the world at large' is as apt a summary

of Bush's National Security Strategy of September 2002 as it was of Wilson's efforts to build the League of Nations.

Smith demonstrates how the ideologies of American expansionism constantly dissolve the critical geographical relationships that underlie the enlargement and sustenance of the Empire, into empty universalizing notions which serve to obliterate space—phrases such as Luce's 'American century', for example, or 'globalization' itself. To the extent that the 'geography of the American century' remains obscure, he argues:

> the origins, outlines, possibilities, and limits of what today is called globalization will also remain obscure. There is no way to understand where the global shifts of the last 20 years came from or where they will lead without understanding how, throughout the 20th century, US corporate, political and military power mapped an emerging empire. If this book is primarily historical, its main purpose is to provide a missing perspective on the geography of contemporary global power.

Smith's last sentence here may be misleading. Rather than the geography of contemporary global power, Smith offers us Isaiah Bowman's view of the geography of power during the decades of US ascension. An exhaustive exploration of Bowman's archives yields an illuminating portrait of Bowman and his colleagues, the world they confronted and the requirements of the drive for American expansion. Indeed, Smith's fascination with Bowman leads him to explore every facet of his public life and opinions, well beyond the field of foreign relations. The result is a many-sided portrait of the outlook and prejudices of a central figure of the American internationalist elite.

Bowman was born in 1878, a descendant of Swiss Mennonites, and grew up in a poor farming community in rural Michigan, some sixty miles north of Detroit. Strong-willed and pugnacious—there is a passing resemblence to James Cagney—at the age of 22 he seized the chance to break free from village school-teaching and go to college. His geography teacher at Michigan State, Mark Jefferson, helped him on to work with William Morris Davis at Harvard, where the young Bowman fuelled furnaces and shovelled snow to pay his way, but found the work 'encouragingly difficult'. Geography was still in its infancy as an academic discipline in the US. Smith describes the coexistence of German influences—Leipzig-based Friedrich Ratzel's *Die Erde und das Leben*, and his 1898 *Politische Geographie*, for instance—with more pragmatic native traditions of state-sponsored exploration and mapping dating back to Jeffersonian days. Bowman worked for the US Geological Survey in Charleston and Dallas, then moved to Yale where he helped forge the new curriculum, teaching an encyclopædic range of courses from geology and physiography to commercial and political geography, and pioneering important regional studies.

Smith evokes very well the US 'imperative of expansion' as it was expressed in the early 1900s—citing, for example, Senator Albert Beveridge: 'American factories are making more than the American people can use. American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us. The trade of the world must and shall be ours.' The surplus-capital theory of imperialism had first been articulated by the Wall Street journalist Charles Conant in the 1880s. Conant explained the depression of that decade as being caused by the absence of new domestic outlets for America's surplus capital, and urged imperial expansion to open up profitable new fields for investment. Conant's theory was later taken up not only by enthusiasts like Elihu Root and others, but by critics of imperialism like John Hobson in England, and indeed by classical Marxist theory. Smith himself does not dwell on the origins of the expansionist impulse, but seems to accept that it is the tendencies towards domestic overproduction and surplus capital within powerful capitalisms that lead their states to attempt to open other zones for capital accumulation.

Bowman's perspective was not dissimilar. As a 19-year-old in 1898 he had been seized by patriotic 'war frenzy', training his own 100-strong volunteer militia in backwoods Michigan as the Stars and Stripes was planted in Cuba and the Philippines. Ratzel's *Politische Geographie*—adapting organicist notions from the natural sciences to argue that nations needed to grow in order to survive, and hence that territorial expansion, the acquisition of 'lebensraum', was an inherent feature of strong states and peoples—tallied well with Bowman's own inclinations.

In 1907, Bowman set off on the first of three Yale South America Expeditions to the Andes, sailing to Panama—he was impressed by the work on the canal—and then on down the Pacific coast to Peru. Ashore, he attempted to assess the applicability of Davis's 'cycle' of uplift and erosion, with its geomorphology of young, mature and old landscape forms, to the Peruvian Andes; he covered some 10,000 miles by mule, canoe, train and stagecoach. On a later trip (the one on which Hiram Bingham 'discovered' Machu Picchu), Bowman mapped the rapids of the Urubamba River as it raged between sheer canyon walls. Emerging from the Andes onto the edge of a rolling forest-clad region, he found the break from the mountainous realm to Amazonia 'almost as sharp as a shoreline'. Bowman was dismissive of Alexander von Humboldt's early nineteenth-century vision of Amazon forests replaced by teeming cities—the geography was too unforgiving, and labour too scarce. Instead, he saw a rigidly determined landscape—pioneering planters, forest Indians, noble Aymara shepherds, 'devious' Quechua—'a veritable stratification of society corresponding to the superimposed strata of climate and land'. Bowman understood the task before him in more qualified terms than Humboldt had. With prospectors and rubber planters well

established in the Amazon, the Andean barrier to trade with the Pacific coast had become the Americas' last frontier. The period of the *conquistadores* had been one of 'sheer human conquest', Bowman wrote—uncharted territory opened up by the barrel of a musket. But in the age of commerce and capital, conquest was now 'conditional', dependent on the returns to be had on laying railroads across mountains, draining swamps and irrigating deserts; dependent, in other words, on the will and resources of 'the sterner races'.

In 1914, with the Yale South America Expeditions under his belt, Bowman was offered the directorship of the then-languishing American Geographical Society, whose Manhattan headquarters (at Broadway and 155th Street) housed three storeys of maps, survey materials and other crucial resources. Bowman would make the AGS his institutional base for the next twenty years, before his final move to Johns Hopkins. He proved adept at the vicious infighting and incessant jockeying for power which, then as now, characterized the US policy elite, updating and dynamizing the AGS and actively seeking links with US Military Intelligence. When approached by House to join Wilson's Inquiry in 1917, Bowman moved swiftly to ensure that the project would be installed on the top floor of the AGS building, where it would be well insulated from the vocal anti-war movement.

By December 1917 the Inquiry had drafted the basis of what would become Wilson's Fourteen Points—'remaking the map of the world, as we would have it', boasted House. The US delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 was equipped with a Black Book, produced by Bowman, containing territorial solutions for twenty-seven disputed areas of Europe, large-scale maps, complete with ethnic and linguistic as well as physical and political data, and a detailed economic and labour report. With civil war still raging in Russia, Bowman fought hard to extend the Polish borders, and was hailed as a national hero in Warsaw after the War. *American Empire* shows how formative the experience of Paris was for Bowman himself. It not only made his name as a public figure but educated him in international politics and initiated him, a staunch Republican nationalist, into the jargon of Wilsonian expansionism. Smith underlines a simple but important truth: that the efforts of the American liberal internationalist elite to construct a new global order, replacing the world of the European empires, were themselves an exercise in empire-building rather than a naïve attempt at re-educating the world around Wilsonian ideals. Or, to put it another way: the ideals were the banner of a group engaged in a bid for global power.

Bowman and his colleagues deployed Ratzel's concept of lebensraum as an essentially economic idea: American growth demanded expansion on a global scale. What rightly fascinates Smith is the way this layer came to grasp that they could organize a new type of world order, one that could both anchor American global dominance and structure the entire capitalist world

to ensure that all the main centres could acquire adequate lebensraum for themselves within it. Underlying their vision was the widespread perception that the world was closing politically as, by the early years of the twentieth century, its territory became incorporated into more-or-less modern states or empires. This sense of closure was particularly strong among geographers, whose work up till then had been closely tied to explorations of uncharted parts of the globe; the Yale Expeditions were among the final flickers of that age. As Smith notes, Rosa Luxembourg believed the closure of global frontiers would lead to a collapse of capitalism. For Lenin, in contrast, the consequence of closure was that international politics among capitalisms would now be about redividing the spoils. In 'The Geographical Pivot of History', published in the London *Geographical Journal* in 1904, Halford Mackinder argued that closure would produce a new kind of social and political interdependence:

> From the present time forth . . . we shall have to deal with a closed political system, and none the less that it will be one of world-wide scope. Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence . . . Probably some half-consciousness of this fact is at last diverting much of the attention of statesmen in all parts of the world from territorial expansion to the struggle for relative efficiency.

It was within this context that American leaders pondered the ways in which they might exploit the resources of their industrial capitalism to provide both a 'redivision of the spoils' and a new framework for world order, under their leadership. The breakthrough of the US internationalists of the Wilson period lay in their insight that the linkage between the economics and the political geography that undergirded European capital accumulation could be uncoupled. Economic expansion could be divorced from territorial aggrandisement and the result would be perfectly in tune with US national interests. This idea formed the real programmatic basis for Wilson's moralistic global liberalism. As Smith puts it:

> US internationalism pioneered an historic unhinging of economic expansion from direct political and military control over the new markets . . . [anticipating] a world economy in which territorial differences among states were of diminished *economic* significance and in which political squabbles could be regulated to prevent the disruption of trade.

Bowman was by no means the originator of these American solutions to the conundrum of global political closure, but his 1921 work *The New World* played an important role in educating US business and political elites about

the realities of global political geography—both the possibilities that lay before them in world politics and the obstacles to their global leadership. The book helped to shape the public language of US expansionism, marrying its power-political and economic vision with the discourse of American liberalism. Together with his work at the Council on Foreign Relations, it established Bowman's ascendancy in the field.

'Whether we wish to do so or not', *The New World* begins, 'we are obliged to take hold of the present world situation in one way or another', for the US was now too powerfully engaged to do otherwise. And since 'the world has now been parcelled out nearly to the limit of vacant "political space"', the necessary economic expansion of individual nation-states could no longer be accomplished by expanding control in purely political terms, but must take place within 'economic space'. Territorial expansion would be 'succeeded by economic expansion'. But, claims Smith, Bowman grasped that this new world was not to be reached instantaneously and that, during the transition, political geography remained the fulcrum of world power. Bowman's discursive dissociation of economic from territorial expansion is seen as 'expedient', a protection against the accusation that American expansionism was just imperialism in sheep's clothing.

Yet Smith is himself remarkably reticent on the real relationship between geopolitics and US military power, on the one hand, and the reorganization of the world economy for American lebensraum on the other. At times he almost seems to be taking Bowman's discourse about dissolving geopolitics into liberal international economics as good coin. In reality, restructuring the world economy to make room for American expansion was always going to be a matter of power politics and geopolitical strategy. The notion that this was just a matter of the *transition* from the old to the new order was ideological evasion. The chief question facing the United States in the first half of the 20th century was how to replace the European powers as the political centre of the world—supremely a question of power politics. But the main question *after* the transition would be about the power politics of American ascendancy, one in which geopolitics would still retain a pre-eminent place.

Smith does not address this issue head on. Nor does he explore the grand strategy debates about it within inter-war American elites. To do so would involve breaking down the usual political and ideological gulf that historians have established between the 'isolationists' and the liberal internationalists. Isolationism is a label concealing a number of radically different currents. Smith argues that there was a radical antagonism between isolationists who really did want to turn their back on the world and the leaders of the Council on Foreign Relations. But we should not forget that the CFE itself contained leading figures from the so-called isolationist Republican administrations of the 1920s. There was no great gulf between such people and a figure like

Bowman (a Michigan Republican himself, though he did cast an 'unprecedented' Democratic vote for Wilson in 1920). The wartime Roosevelt coalition brought both groups together in an amicable partnership. Both were committed, after all, to the drive for American global dominance. And whether by accident or design, the efforts of the 1920s Republican administrations, and of the rather more isolationist Roosevelt administration during most of the 1930s, could be seen, from the angle of grand strategy, as preparing the ground for what followed: the collapse of the Eurasian powers into the Second World War and Washington's rather easy assumption of world leadership as a result.

Elite isolationism in the inter-war period was not an American retreat from world politics at all. It was a refusal to act as the guarantor and support for the existing world order. On this issue, Bowman was scarcely distinguishable from a Republican like Stimson. *The New World* was not a defence of the status quo, but a statement that the world centred on the European empires is historically over. Yet these empires were still actually at the centre of world politics and the task of the inter-war US was to find and pursue a geopolitics that would overturn this reality. This was the great political theme that Bowman's Wilsonian liberal economism made ideologically taboo.

Smith's discussion of the 1930s, and of Bowman's extraordinary silence in the face of polemics against him emanating from Germany on the question of geopolitics, provides interesting material on this taboo zone. The *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, founded in 1924 by the Munich-based geographer and World War One general Karl Haushofer, became a focus for strategizing Germany's demands for lebensraum, drawing on the work of Ratzel, Mackinder and the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén. *The New World* was read—quite rightly—as a victor's view of the Great War's settlement; nor was Bowman's role in drawing up Poland's boundaries in Paris forgotten. The group's *Macht und Erde*, edited by Otto Maull, described itself as 'a German counterweight to I. Bowman's *The New World*'.

As Smith notes, Bowman's silence in the face of these polemics was very uncharacteristic. His own thought had been shaped by Ratzel. Not only did he follow German geographical debates avidly throughout the interwar period, intervening to defend the geomorphology of Davis's 'cycle', he also visited Berlin in 1934 and had regular dealings with German geographers at international conferences. Yet, never one to avoid a polemic when his reputation or opinions were questioned to the smallest degree, Bowman left the task of spelling out an American response to Haushofer to the Dutch émigré, Nicholas Spykman, whose *American Strategy in World Politics* did not appear until 1942 when the wars at each end of Eurasia were already under way. Only then did Bowman go into print, praising Spykman's work as a much-needed warning to the American people and accepting the necessity of war

to defend the American way of life. And indeed, Spykman's strategy—for America to focus on conquering and holding the two Eurasian rimlands, Western Europe and Japan—was the one the US followed in the 1940s. But Bowman himself stuck doggedly to the myth that America did not do geopolitics and empire-building—only peace, justice and economics.

This leaves a gap in *American Empire*'s story of the inter-war period. Smith does not penetrate the official myth of isolation and drift. Nor does he consider whether Bowman and others were actually pursuing a fairly coherent strategy of encouraging tensions and rivalries among the European powers, through the politics of war debt and indemnities. At the same time, the Anglo-Japanese link was broken and British naval ascendancy ended at the Washington conference of 1922, thereby ensuring the strategic vulnerability of Britain's Eastern Empire. Smith could not be expected to deal with everything in an already large book, yet the absence of any treatment of the extent to which Bowman's circles guided an interwar US grand strategy remains an important omission.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution that Smith makes to our understanding of US expansionism is his extensive treatment of Washington debates on how to open up the European colonial empires to American capital. This was a pre-occupation of Bowman's throughout his career, from his early days at the AGS right through to his last activities for the Truman administration before his death. The Wilson administration had addressed the question from the very start of the First World War. The Inquiry focused on efforts to secure 'freedom of economic intercourse among self-governing nations'; 'fit' colonies should move towards self-government, while the 'unfit' should be governed by 'international commissions for backward areas'. The historian of Africa, George Louis Beer, seconded to the Inquiry, argued that the notion of international commissions governing colonies was not feasible. Instead, he offered the concept of colonial powers acting under 'international mandates', as trustees, 'primarily for the nations and secondarily for the outside world as a whole'. The interests of the latter would be 'to secure "the open-door" in the fullest possible sense'.

During the Second World War Bowman was again at the centre of discussions about opening up the European colonies. Now in his sixties, he was a leading figure in the Stettinius delegation to Britain in 1944 to discuss post-war plans, with a special brief for colonial issues. Bowman's diplomatic efforts were largely unsuccessful, but by this time he was no longer in favour of dismantling the British empire, preferring its absorption within the new American lebensraum. Smith shows that, as early as this, Washington was already repackaging its drive for penetration of the colonial empires under the heading of a programme for economic development in the South, rather than a politics of anti-colonialism. This was a major theme of Truman's 1949

inaugural address. His 'Point IV' called for the Marshall Plan to be followed up with a programme devoted to investment and 'development' in the European colonies and other parts of the Third World. Bowman was persuaded to take charge of this project, though it delivered little of substance in its first years.

Indeed, one of the striking features of US economic strategy during Roosevelt's war-time administration had been the great weight it placed upon opening the European colonies for American business. As Smith points out, the reason for this may lie in the fact that, when the war started, some 60 per cent of its foreign investment was in the southern hemisphere. Yet in the US, industrial capitalism was already being transformed into a mass-consumption capitalism, which would inevitably focus upon capturing other advanced capitalist markets, the only ones capable of supplying a mass-consumer market for American products. But Bowman showed remarkable acuity and insight in grasping that ultimately, the economic significance of the South for American capitalism would lie not just in its role as a source of raw materials and strategic minerals, but as a vast supplier of cheap labour.

At the same time, Bowman also saw the importance for the US of reviving Germany as the industrial hub of Western Europe, not only as a bulwark against the Soviet Union but also to strengthen European markets as outlets for American capitalism. Seconded to the State Department at the onset of the Second World War, Bowman became a leading advocate for a unified and economically strong post-war Germany. War Secretary Stimson, responsible for shifting US policy in this direction against the line of Roosevelt and Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, drew heavily on Bowman's advice. This may, indeed, have been Bowman's principle policy contribution to the postwar order.

One of the mysteries of the United States for many students of American foreign policy is how that policy is actually made. And although Smith does not make this point, his book is a splendid case study of one of the central social mechanisms of American policy-making: the selection and education of an elite of policy intellectuals, who double up as state managers and leaders within the nexus of private, business-funded institutions and universities that form such a central part of the American state. Smith provides us with an extremely detailed and comprehensive account of how Bowman was selected and formed for this role. Though he came from a very poor background, he had all the essential qualities. First, his ethnic background was right—absolutely essential in the early decades of the twentieth century. Second, he was bright and immensely hard-working, self-disciplined and ambitious. Third, he was ready and eager to accept the ruling ideological framework of American society. And finally, he proved adept enough at the vital skills of networking and infighting to rise up through the dangerous world of American elite politics.

Smith provides a vivid portrait of Bowman's culture and mode of operation, replete with accounts of his ferocious ethnicism, anti-Semitism and racism, not least as President of Johns Hopkins; of his political manoeuvres and factional tactics; of his sordid betrayals of friends and colleagues—among them Owen Lattimore, thrown to McCarthy's wolves; of the tarnishing of his own ideals for geography as an academic discipline, in his efforts to survive during the turbulent years of the Truman administration. In a chapter on 'The Kantian University' Smith shows how the ideology of positivism, of which Bowman was an avid promoter, served to place elite universities and their research firmly in the service of the state.

Administrations come and go, electoral coalitions rise and fall, but figures like Bowman can be relied upon for decades of uninterrupted service, maintaining the cohesion of the state apparatus and its strategic lines of advance. Smith has given us a first-class account of the mechanisms of state cadre selection at the beginning of the American century. In their structural essentials, they have changed little since then. That their products are capable of real insight is apparent from this portrait of Bowman. One illustration is worth quoting at length, from *The New World*:

> United States expansion has in recent years evoked a certain hostility among the Latin-American states, a hostility based on the assumption that their economic and political liberties were at stake; and the United States is therefore confronted with direct and powerful political opposition for the first time since it embarked upon its policy of expansion overseas. Here we have a problem of the first rank. For the people of the United States are as unknown to themselves as they are to the rest of the world. They do not know how they will take interference in their policy of expansion, for in that expansion they have not had, so far, a single misadventure. While such an experience has left them in an amiable attitude toward others and has given them a generous appreciation of the point of view of others, there is danger in that they do not know what fires of passion may be lighted by active opposition.

These reflections, written in 1921, seem as fresh as ever today.