


## INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

# “Power and Connection:” A “post-colonial” response

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*As the comparative view of US history gradually develops, it is safe to predict that the history of the American Indian will rise markedly in importance... [O]nce we get outside of the national fragment the very fact that the Indian was eliminated, could thus be neglected by the European logics of the culture, becomes a matter of very great importance. Louis Hartz (1964)<sup>1</sup>*

*One of the historical results to flow from the confrontation between East and West should be a new and revised view of world history. The ethno-centric, or Europocentric, view that has been held for so long a time in the West can hardly be expected to survive the sweeping change in East-West relationships. The “new confrontation” of which the Hindu historian [K.M. Panikkar] writes is another event of the present that necessitates many reinterpretations of the past. C. Vann Woodward (1960)<sup>2</sup>*

In 2011, Paul Kramer published a review essay titled “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the US in the World.” Thick with conceptual language and historiographical references, the piece is clearly pointed toward a professional audience. Yet beneath its heavy academic garb lay an urgent practical matter. Americanists, Kramer contended, needed to get outside of their innocent nationalistic space and take up the burden of the “imperial” category. And they needed to do so consistently – not conveniently, as a political cry against the declining virtue of the republic.

Writing in a moment when transnational, global, and international history had become the rage, Kramer worried that even as the profession increasingly acknowledged the nation’s entanglement with peoples across the globe, his colleagues somehow managed to end up alone, centering their Americanist selves. As an antidote to this endemic solipsism, he prescribed the “imperial.” This analytic was no panacea, he conceded, and came with “limits” and “problems.” Still, for historians serious about reckoning with the power of the United States in the world (a constituency that should include the majority of historians in the world, Kramer wisely reminds), the “imperial” provided as an “indispensable” category (1350).

Over a decade later, Kramer’s argument has lost little of its tenability, and one of my goals is to elucidate his procedure in a piece that is perhaps too rich and layered for its own good. “Power and Connection” spoke to multiple audiences and offered plenty to ruminate with regard to the subject of empire. Reflecting an awesome range of reading, the essay offered such extensive claims about history and historiography that it frequently relied on enumeration. Insofar as this article has been under-appreciated, part of the reason might be that its richness defies easy digestion.

For my own wayward intellectual purposes, Kramer’s review essay has played a dual role. As with his larger body of writing on empire, the piece proved affirmative for the approach I had

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia* (Boston, 1964), 54.

<sup>2</sup>C. Vann Woodward, “The Age of Reinterpretation,” *American Historical Review* 66 1 (1960): 1–19.

taken in a dissertation on the U.S. military occupation of Trinidad during World War II. Published a few years after my eventual book on the subject, “Power and Connection” brilliantly illuminated how a work conceived primarily as a Caribbeanist contribution mattered within the Americanist field.<sup>3</sup> Truth be told, my book would have benefited greatly had Kramer’s essay appeared a decade earlier. At the same time, the article also sits in a generative tension with my current project about postwar U.S. history-writing. Kramer’s rendition of the historiography on the United States in the World strikes me as manufacturing its own absences—his language. In accepting the conventional view that the period between the late 1930s and the late fifties produced little valuable scholarship on “imperialism,” Kramer effectively silences significant Americanist interventions, especially those associated with the “consensus school.”

The orthodoxy that scholars like Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin promoted U.S. nationalism, as I have argued elsewhere, is actually a perverse anti-Semitic product of Cold War patriotism.<sup>4</sup> Far from championing the republic’s exceptionalism, these historians crafted histories that subverted patriotic conceits about the place of the United States in the world. My other goal in this essay, therefore, is to provoke Kramer to consider that the apparent “periodicity” problem he finds within the historical scholarship might be partially an illusion, the product of a larger and profound misunderstanding of the politics of Americanist history-writing in the early Cold War years (1357).

First, to summarize how “Power and Connection” proceeds. Making the case for the “imperial,” the essay begins prudently on a definitional note. The imperial, Kramer states, is “a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation” (1349). Deliberately pragmatic, this definition conceives of the “imperial” in terms of effects and consequences, as opposed to pursuing “empire” as an objective thing, a practice that often leads, he explains, to unproductive debates about whether the United States qualifies.

Kramer then goes on to elaborate his vision of the benefits of thinking with “the imperial.” Stressing a triad, he writes that “the imperial facilitates inquiries about three key historical themes: the way that power resides in and operates through long-distance connections; the mutual and uneven transformation of societies through these connections; and comparisons between large-scale systems of powers and their histories” (1350). Kramer goes on to identify further benefits of the category, but his promotion of the imperial is by no means naïve. This analytic, he admits, does not “hold a monopoly” on analytic virtue (1350).

Moreover, far more than a straight championship of the imperial category, Kramer’s essay is also a meditation, an exploration of issues that are “central in accounting for the existing uses, prospects and problems of the imperial in US historiography” (1357). Primary among these issues is “American exceptionalism,” and Kramer promotes imperial analysis as a means for overcoming this legendary patriotic menace by relating the United States to polities with “comparable pasts.” One inspiring example of this “post-exceptionalist” approach can be found, he shows, under the banner of “settler colonialism.” Still, his analysis is too sober to pretend that the imperial analytic guarantees post-exceptionalist histories. And here, Kramer underlines how “methodological nationalism” (an adopted term) has contained the critical reach of Americanist scholarship even when its authors explicitly set out to challenge U.S. exceptionalism (Amy Kaplan and Thomas Bender appear as examples). Against this tendency to center the United States, which Kramer persuasively diagnoses as an effect of professional academic structures, the essay urges historians to “risk” writing work that is “unrecognizable” to others in the

<sup>3</sup>Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and The Yankees: Trinidad and the US Occupation* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Harvey Neptune, “A Note on the Strange Career of Consensus History,” *The Panorama*, June 8, 2023. <https://the panorama.shear.org/2023/06/08/a-note-on-the-strange-career-of-consensus-history/>

field (1365). I read this call with particular interest, having risked an opportunity a few years later to publish in the *American Historical Review* an essay asking Americanist colleagues to broaden their historical conception by assuming a “postcolonial” perspective.<sup>5</sup> The value of this perspective remains unrecognizable in the field, I suspect, essentially because it raises doubts about the civilizational power of the United States in the world, doubts that citizens and historians have refused to entertain since the early Cold War—but more on that later.

Another set of problems in the use of the imperial category, according to Kramer, results from a set of binaries that often abet U.S. exceptionalism. For one, the premise that empire and nation-state are antithetical has made it difficult to discern that, in fact, “the intersections of empire, nation, and state were and are intensely complex and variable” (1366). Among the various conjugations named in the essay, “international empire” stands out as the preferable mode for maintaining the U.S. imperial order since WWII. Defined by working with and through independent nations, “international empire” has appealed to policy makers for (among other things) its relatively “low overhead cost,” Kramer explains (1368). The “seductive” categorical distinction between “formal” and “informal” also comes in for scrutiny in his discussion. Having gained currency among New Left historians especially, this binary, too, has enabled exceptionalizing of the United States in the world, Kramer observes. He thus stresses the need to undo this “dichotomy,” while also acknowledging that this work has begun and ought to culminate in efforts to tell an ‘imperial political history of capitalism, in which capitalist relations and state powers are inseparable’ (p. 1378).

Yet another dyad that has hampered historians’ uses of the “imperial category,” Kramer explains, is that of “structure versus agency.” Given the traditional understanding of the imperial as synonymous with commanding power, students of empire often have denied the vulnerability of the imperial order and downplayed the agential capacities of intended subjects. As he eloquently puts it, “Reading empire from its blueprints rather than its wreckages, historians derive a vision of power that empire-builders could only have dreamed of” (1380). One unfortunate consequence of this alignment of imperial histories with “structure,” according to him, is that the other part of the dyad, “agency,” has been left to transnational studies, lending that field work an uncritical emancipatory optimism. Another is that studies of U.S. imperialism tend to proliferate only when coercion and violence appear to define the nation’s operation in the world.

This historiographical claim leads to Kramer’s final and crucial point, the one that most critically engaged me. History-writing about U.S. imperialism, he contends, has been characterized by a certain periodicity, an “oscillating” pattern of “surfacing and submerging.” In his survey, scholars felt compelled to take on the subject mainly when it was forcefully on show, when there were “boots on the ground.” Kramer contrasts this presentist quality of the literature on U.S. imperialism with the scholarship on two adjacent and intersecting fields: international history and global history. Unlike the “consistent advance” in these two, “punctuated progress” marks the imperial historiography on the United States (1387). Two moments, he claims, stand out for the production of intense and substantive scholarship: the period from the late 1950s to the 1970s and, later, the period from the 1990s until present. Both were shaped by U.S. imperial war and protest, Kramer notes.

It is this telling of the history of historical scholarship on the “U.S. in the World” that gives me critical pause. Kramer’s account rushes over the writing produced during the forties and fifties (save for the exceptional figure William Appleman Williams, the lone Americanist hero). This somewhat conventional historiographical move requires reconsideration for it effectively silences critically important contributions to the historiography on the United States in the World. The silenced historians that I have in mind have been located around

<sup>5</sup>H. Reuben Neptune, “The Irony of Un-American Historiography: Daniel J. Boorstin and the Rediscovery of a U.S. Archive of Decolonization,” *American Historical Review*, 120, 3 (2015): 935–950.

the notorious “consensus school.” They include not only Hofstadter, who is miscast in Kramer’s essay, but also unmentioned others like William Leuchtenburg, C. Vann Woodward, Daniel Boorstin, and, in particular, Louis Hartz.<sup>6</sup> Wrestling with the scholarship of these authors is consequential because their work offers a radically subversive take on the central themes in Kramer’s essay.<sup>7</sup>

Hofstadter, Hartz and the others told historically contingent stories about the global power of the United States. Coming of intellectual age in the early Cold War years, they accepted that the nation had become a superpower. At the same time, however, these scholars reminded readers that the North American republic began in the world as a former European colony. In their view, U.S. history was deeply connected to the pasts of other Third World nations—not only (settler) colonies led by nominally “white people.” The nation’s past was fundamentally comparable with less powerful (famously “shithole”) countries like Mexico and Haiti—which, it should be noted, also named themselves literally as empires in the 19th century. Born before the republic had been branded “First World,” authors like Boorstin and Hartz (and C.L.R. James, it should be noted) conceived of the United States as part of the ex-colonial New World.<sup>8</sup> For them, the nation could be seen as an empire of the kind that we today would label “postcolonial.”

The purpose of their ex-colonial framing, it must be emphasized, was not some convenient geopolitical ploy to win hearts and minds in the Third World. Rather, a big part of their point was to humble and, at times, ridicule a dominant U.S. nationalist imagination that tended to presume “greatness” (If, as Kramer points out, the word “imperial” provokes images of raw power, then “postcolonial” triggers images of deep vulnerability). At the center of consensus history-writing sat a set of doubtfully nationalist, even subversive, sorts of question. Was the republic actually qualified for the new kind of global leadership it claimed in the wake of World War II? Wasn’t the U.S. political tradition toward “foreigners” too simple and moralistic? Did the United States truly possess ideas worth exporting to the rest of the world? Or would such ideological weaponry turn out to be just a “dud,” as Boorstin joked in his slyly satirical anti-imperial text, *The Genius of American Politics*.<sup>9</sup> Far from an exponent of “American exceptionalism,” Boorstin frequently mocked the idea. In his irreverent view, the United States was, by European standards, exceptionally unthinking—and here he was on common ground with Hofstadter, Hartz and, again, C.L.R. James.

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<sup>6</sup>Kramer cites “Cuba, the Philippines and Manifest Destiny,” published in Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), as evidence of the exceptionalist depiction of 1898 and its aftermath as an imperialist “aberration” for the United States. This judgement ignores a few important things about the essay. For one, Hofstadter was commissioned to deal specifically with the events around 1898 as an instance of a “crisis” in U.S. history. Second, his piece did indeed point back to “Indian wars” and the Mexican-American War as part of a longer and racist history of Manifest Destiny. Finally, far from nationalist, Hofstadter’s essay was part of a larger effort to criticize the unreflective moralism that marked the nation’s dominant cultural politics. His approach in the essay actually shares plenty with the post-Cold War “imperial turn” in American studies—arguably even more than the work of William Appleman Williams. The celebrated study by Kristin L. Hoganson, for example, can be read as a gendered iteration of Hofstadter’s argument, an argument that, in Hoganson’s words, “the ‘psychic crisis’ was, in many respects, a crisis of manhood.” Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting For American Manhood; how gender politics provoked the Spanish American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, 1998), 12.

<sup>7</sup>For relevant writing, see, for example, William Leuchtenburg, “Progressivism and Imperialism: The Progressive Movement and American Foreign Policy, 1892-1916,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 39 3 (1952): 483–504. Woodward, “The Age of Reinterpretation;” Daniel J. Boorstin, *America and The Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought* (New York, 1960); and Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies*.

<sup>8</sup>See C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, edited and introduced by Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart with an afterword by Robert A. Hill (Cambridge, 1993). This manuscript was completed in 1950 and its analysis resembles in critical ways the consensus history of Louis Hartz.

<sup>9</sup>One contemporary review of the book noted that Boorstin “flinched nobly from imperial responsibilities.” Peter Marshall, “How Many Worlds One,” *Antioch Review* 14 4 (1954), 512.

It is the work of Louis Hartz, though, that is perhaps the most consequential casualty of Kramer's historiographical account. For insofar as he advocates the framework of "settler colonialism," Kramer was squarely in territory where Hartz should be recognized as a pioneer. In the years following the publication of *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Hartz pursued a comparative perspective that culminated in the multi-authored volume titled *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the history of The United States, Latin America, Canada, South Africa and Australia* (1964). Convinced that the dynamics of U.S. history were not exceptional, he offered in this publication a "larger view" that conceptualized European colonialism as a global problem, a "general theory" in which the persistent power of Eurocentric political culture posed a challenge common to these "new societies."<sup>10</sup> From America to Africa to Australia, Europe had produced polities burdened and often immobilized by their "partial embodiment of the European ideological complex." "These colonies, "fragments," in Hartz's terms," shared an historic fate. What was true for English liberalism in North America was more or less true for other ideologies like radicalism and conservatism in other colonial situations, he argued. Explicitly rejecting Turner, Hartz trained his comparative attention not on land and the "frontier" but on ideology and political economy, including, it must be stressed, the grave issues of eliminationist violence, capitalist development and racial slavery.

In fact, though commentators have repressed the dissident political views Hartz expressed in *The Founding*, his contribution to this volume warrants reconsideration as part of a worldly anti-colonial tradition. His chapters contained a vision of what many contemporaries (especially in the "Third World") had begun to call "decolonization." Hardly an easy optimist, he nevertheless believed that such a civilizational change in consciousness had become historically inevitable, that the formerly colonized societies across the globe were poised to transcend the traditional Eurocentric ideological consensus. "From Peru to South Africa to North America, a generation intolerant of the old "reactionary" nationalism" had begun to emerge in "fragment" societies, Hartz explained. Young people now insisted on imagining a different kind of ideological future; they stood ready, he observed, to "announce outright that the fragment is a fragment." U.S. citizens, too, would join this decolonized new world to "reject the proposition that 'Americanism' is the instinctive emotion of all humanity." Cheering on this future, Hartz closed his introductory essay with the observation that "The generations that are shattering the confines of the fragment today, from Cape Town to Lima to Montreal, will find a richer life in the larger world than the life they have lost."<sup>11</sup>

This voice of Louis Hartz, something of a postcolonial critic sounding a prophetic, Fanonian-like note, will be no doubt be unrecognizable to most Americanists. As Kramer himself insisted, however, defamiliarizing historical accounts of the United States in the world are exactly what the field might need most. I thus close with a call for Kramer and the rest of the field to reconsider condemned historians like Hartz, to actually read what they wrote and not what others have written of their work. In doing so, Americanists might recognize in "consensus history" an alternative to the nationalistic arrogance that has shaped the field. They might also glimpse guides to a future history where Americans can achieve what Hofstadter described as a properly "diminished" sense of themselves in the world.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz essentially argued that English "Liberalism," as articulated by Locke, had dominated the political tradition in British North America and the subsequent republic. His hypothesis in *The Founding* was that in other colonies different European ideologies played a similar role. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955).

<sup>11</sup>*The Founding*.

<sup>12</sup>"The Age of Rubbish," *Newsweek*, July 6, 1970, 22.