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Selling civilization: toward a cultural analysis of America's economic empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Mona Domosh

This essay builds on work that is exploring the convergence of economic and cultural approaches to understanding imperialism through an examination of the particular case of American commercial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Based on my archival research into the promotional and practical strategies of five of the largest American companies that were international in sales, I suggest some of the ways that an analysis of commercial imperial representations of, and knowledges about, race, gender and civilization adds to our understanding of the multiplicity of imperialisms. I argue that examining these multiplicities can help contribute to a critical postcolonial perspective.

key words United States imperialism economic cultural nineteenth century

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Introduction

American imperialism has until recently been understood in terms of its territorial and political claims – commencing with the Spanish–American War, and continuing with increasing vigour through to the late twentieth century as the United States became the dominant global power (see, for example, Kaplan and Pease 1993; Godlewska and Smith 1994; McDougall 1997). Yet as scholars are now showing (Jacobson 2000; Merish 2000; Wexler 2000; Adas 2001; Stoler 2001), there is a complementary but different story of imperialism that needs to be told, one that is as much about ‘civilization’ and consumption as it is about conquest and production. This form of imperialism was perhaps more subtle than what geographers have examined, but no less effective in creating systems of global economic and political dominance. In fact, one could argue that a primary instrument for the spread of American influence in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the selling of its consumer products.

It is no coincidence that the so-called American Century (Luce 1941; Slater and Taylor 1999) is also what Gary Cross calls ‘an all-consuming century’ (2000) – in other words, the United States’ ascendancy throughout the twentieth century into a position of global dominance coincides with, and in fact I will argue is inseparable from, the dominance of an American-style consumer culture and economy over national and international spaces.

Yet until relatively recently very little has been written about the cultural geographical implications of American commercial imperialism. In other words, although there is a long line of scholarship that traces the historical importance of market expansion to imperial pursuits, and a robust body of literature that examines the cultural geographies of colonial imperialism, there is only now a small but growing literature, most of it outside of geography, that is beginning to explore the material and discursive cultural geographies that constituted American commercial imperialism and that in turn were shaped by it. As a result, economic and cultural

understandings of American imperialism have been divorced from each other, despite 'recent calls for a convergence between "the economic" and "the cultural"' that have emanated from both sides of the debate (Jackson 2002, 3; Barnes 2003).

Building on the works of scholars within and outside of geography, what I plan to do here is to suggest what can be learned from applying a *cultural* analysis to American *commercial* imperialism. Given the scope of this proposal, I plan to ground my synthesis and suggestions with empirical examples drawn from my research into the archives of five early international American companies (Singer, McCormick, Heinz, Kodak, New York Life Insurance).¹ In this essay, then, I will move back and forth between conceptual discussions and empirical examples. In this way, I hope to suggest what can be learned *in general* about imperialism from a cultural analysis of American commercial expansion, and to show how that integrative analysis actually works to unravel and understand the complexities and nuances of *one particular* form of imperialism. Through this examination of relevant literatures and grounded examples that illustrate the cultural contours of American commercial imperialism, I also highlight the complexity and multiplicity of imperialisms, contributing to what Ian Cook and Michelle Harrison (2003) have recently argued is one of the primary tasks of a postcolonial geography – 'showing the messy, mixed-up, interconnected nature of histories, geographies and identities' that have been 'neatly compartmentalized and opposed' (2003, 297) in the dominant discourses of empire. My work suggests that a focus on the cultures of commercial imperialism destabilizes some of these 'neat' compartments, thus contributing to our understanding of the 'multiple and complex' (Rosenberg 1998, 510) ways that power systems work. I begin this essay with overviews of the scholarly trajectories that have separated the 'economic' from the 'cultural' work on imperialism within the American context, and those that are now blurring these distinctions, before moving to a more pointed discussion of three particular ways that a cultural analysis of commercial imperialism might proceed, using my case studies to illuminate these points.

Economic and/or cultural geographies of imperialism

The messy and interconnected histories and geographies of colonial and commercial expansion

often have been simplified through recourse to the binary 'economy/culture', with 'economy' the primary lens through which commercial expansion had been viewed, and 'culture' serving that purpose for colonial rule. For example, that there are linkages between finance capitalism and modern imperial expansion has been a long-standing scholarly 'truth'. From Lenin's classic 1917 formulation ('imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism', 1933, 88) to Eric Wolf's (1982) systematic study of how capitalist modes of production reshaped the world's peoples and lands into labourers and resource suppliers, scholars have shown how advanced capitalism in the early decades of the twentieth century created scales of production and investment beyond the nation-state. Examining the exact nature and implications of the relationship between economic spatial expansion and advanced capitalism has characterized scholarly trajectories that range from critiques of American cold war and development policies and practices (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995), to world systems theory (Wallerstein 1989), analyses of uneven development and capitalist expansion (Smith 1984), and debates over the establishment of a new world order of 'empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000). In other words, the long line of thinking that explores the complex relationships between advanced forms of capitalism and economic spatial expansion, stretching from Lenin in 1917 to globalization critics, has in general stressed an understanding of the economic that is divorced from considerations of the cultural.

On the other hand, much of the work that provides a cultural analysis of imperialism has focused only on one form of imperialism – colonialism – ignoring commercial expansion. Informed by a postcolonial perspective, this work has explored how the hierarchies of power implicit in colonialism were experienced, performed, represented and resisted. Scholars have examined, for example, the often inescapable Eurocentrism and racism that discursively and materially shaped the encounters between Europeans and 'others' (Said 1978; Howitt and Sanchet 2002); the complex negotiations of positionality facing women living in the colonies and on their return to the metropole (Blunt 1994 1999; Bell 1995; Morin 1998); the spatiality of imperialism in terms of geopolitical arrangements and localized sites of contact and potential cultural hybridity (Kenny 1995; Mills 1996; Duncan 2002); and the geographical knowledges that both wrought these encounters and were in turn transformed by them

(Livingstone 1992 2002; Kobayashi 2002). This work has established the central importance of cultural representations and relationships to our understanding of the contingent and oftentimes contested nature of imperial power, but an imperial power almost always based on territorial, *not* economic claims.

Yet case studies detailing the imposition of power over peoples and spaces that we call imperialism have alerted us to the inseparability of economic and cultural claims to power; that, in other words, to study one of these aspects of imperial rule necessarily involves examining the other. On the one hand, as Gordon Stewart has shown, even within the context of a 'down-to-earth' activity such as jute manufacturing in colonial India, the cultural discourse of civilization was at play. 'Imperialism', he concludes, 'was much more than the product of its economic aspects' (1998, 233). On the other, that same discourse of civilization that was so fundamental to Americans' ordering of space and time, and relationships with 'others' was, according to Matthew Frye Jacobson, 'at its core . . . an economic concept' (2000, 50). As Jacobson elaborates, production, sales and profits were as fundamental to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century verbal and visual language of difference as were morality, religion and civilization.

Much of this scholarly recognition of the inseparability of the economic and cultural aspects of imperialism stems from studies of the commodity cultures of empire within the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain – studies that range from analyses of World's Exhibitions (Greenhalgh 1988; Auerbach 1999), department store displays (Nava 1998), popular music (Summerfield 1986), clothing styles (Breward 1999) and advertising strategies (Richards 1990; McClintock 1995). This series of works has established how colonial pursuits re-shaped imaginaries, identities and everyday practices through the emerging culture of mass commodification within turn-of-the-century Great Britain. Other studies have examined similar effects of imperial commodity culture within the colonial world, such as Timothy Burke's (1996) fascinating historical analysis of the marketing of hygienic products in Zimbabwe, and the series of essays in David Howes' edited collection *Cross-cultural consumption* (1996).

Each of these studies adds different inflections to our understanding of how colonialism coincided

with, in fact some would argue is inseparable from, commodity capitalism (Dirlik 1994; Cook and Harrison 2003), and they have done so with explicit attention to culture. Shifting that analysis to the case of the United States means shifting the frame of reference away from colonialism *per se*, and more toward a recognition of different forms of empire. Recent work within critical geopolitics has begun to explore in what ways it is important to think of America as an empire, providing historical background and analysis for understanding contemporary American imperial claims (Agnew and Sharp 2002; Smith 2003). Yet while this work has begun to open America to imperial analysis, it maintains its focus on politics and economics, with little attention paid to such 'cultural' matters as gender, race, identity and performance. On the other hand, work that has examined such cultural matters has for the most part limited its geographical and temporal scale of reference to those times and places when the United States undertook what we could call 'formal' imperial actions (Kaplan and Pease 1993; Joseph *et al.* 1998; Wexler 2000) – that is, territorial and political claims to power over peoples outside the United States (e.g. Philippines, Hawaii, Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico, Mexico in the nineteenth century, Panama, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Iraq in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). But if we expand this analysis to include what Mark Crinson has referred to as informal imperialism – a 'form of imperialism by which control was established through the ostensibly peaceful means of free trade and economic integration' (1996, 2) – then studies of the relationships between cultural and economic imperialism within the context of United States can move beyond these parameters. Here, I attempt to suggest three particular ways that an American informal empire, held together by economic transactions, functioned culturally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To do so, I borrow insights gained from similar analyses within the context of the British colonial empire, asking in what ways it matters (or not) that an American empire operated not primarily through territorial but through economic claims to power. I analyse the particular discursive and material ways that American products were sold in parts of the world where commodities, not armies or politicians, did the work of colonization. To do so, however, I must start with a brief historical overview of American commercial imperialism.

American commercial imperialism

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American foreign and economic policy was geared not toward the establishment of formal colonies, but toward the expansion of markets (Wilkins 1970; Rosenberg 1982). For the most part, the United States' political and economic elites were not interested in establishing territorial colonies, nor did they want to be involved in the administration of political subjects. Rather, they sought worldwide markets for American mass-produced goods (see Ackerman 1930; Hidy and Hidy 1955; Hutchinson 1968; Wilkins 1970; Alberts 1973; Davies 1976; Rosenberg 1982). Decades before the Spanish–American war, American businesses were developing international marketing strategies, establishing shipping and transport networks, and reaping the rewards of an expanded consumer market that reached from Canada to Japan.²

This is not to deny, however, that the United States also engaged in formal imperialism, sending large armies into Mexico in 1846, and establishing what can only be called colonies in Cuba, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico through military and political manipulations coincident with the 1898 Spanish–American war. The causal relationships between America's formal and informal imperialism are complex, to say the least, and not always as one would expect. For example, although most American international companies supported the 1898 war for patriotic reasons (it was an incredibly popular war), many of the major players in America's boardrooms, as I have found in this research, did not favour any future military incursions, finding that wars and imperial governance got in the way of trade and marketing.³ On the other hand, America's formal imperialism, particularly in the Philippines, did lead to increased trade and economic integration, but this economic activity was basically inconsequential when compared to America's primary markets in places like Russia, Argentina and Brazil, or if compared to the situation of trade within the British formal imperial world (Constantine 1984 1986 1993).

That American goods competed successfully even with British-made products attests to the formidable strength of American mass production technologies and to the innovative marketing strategies pursued by many entrepreneurs (Rosenberg 1982). In other words, America's economic imperialism was based primarily on the making and

selling of mass-produced commodities. Scientific innovation combined with Taylorist production facilities allowed American manufacturers to produce 'modern', affordable commodities (at least to middle-class families). Fairly well-connected rail and shipping networks, developed throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, made it possible to move these goods over large distances, both within the United States and outside its borders. New marketing and advertising strategies, such as the establishment of overseas retail outlets, literally put the names of American-produced commodities on the streets and in the homes of people from London to Peking to Buenos Aires. And as United States' companies capitalized on their competitive advantages in the mass production of commodities to effectively export and market their products overseas, the United States government pursued a foreign policy that enabled these endeavors (LaFeber 1963).

As a result, in distinction to the imperialism generally recognized by geographers, that is, military and political control over territory, we can see that the United States' extension of power beyond its national borders proceeded through other channels, carried with it and created multiple meanings and knowledges, and fashioned different types of geopolitical and spatial arrangements. In this primarily economic empire, the 'others' that Americans were confronting were considered not political subjects but potential consumers; with the exception of the women missionaries to China and the few women 'explorers', the encounter between American women and 'others' was mediated through advertising images, popular media and material objects that reinforced and challenged ideals of domesticity and notions of 'otherness'; and knowledges of the world were derived as much from a logic of profit and loss as they were from a world view based on a racialized 'family tree of man' (McClintock 1995, 39). Let me explore in more depth these issues, using my examinations of late nineteenth-century American international businesses as empirical evidence to ground the discussion.

Commercial imperial representations of 'race' and 'otherness'

Few would doubt that in the late nineteenth century, white middle-class Americans viewed those unlike themselves through racist, Western images of 'others'. One need look no further than

America's national imaginary that required the elimination of Native-Americans and the naturalization of African-American servitude to understand the depth and breadth of its racism. The view from the boardrooms of American businesses was no less Eurocentric and racist. Yet the material and ideological dictates of an economic system whose goal was to create more consumer demand shaped that Euro-centred worldview in particular ways.

An examination of the promotional strategies of one of the first and largest American international businesses, Singer Sewing Machine Company, helps to make these points more clear. Singer's successful advertising formula aligned its products with notions of American civilization, thus allowing, ideologically at least, consumers of these products to participate in the American 'dream'.⁴ For immigrants to the United States, 'correct' consumption became a symbol of assimilation; for those living outside the United States, owning American products was a sign of Western modernity. The ideological framework that enabled these associations was bound up with Eurocentric notions of civilization/savagery that have a long and complicated history, dating at least to the Enlightenment if not before (Withers and Livingstone 1999). As explored by Kay Anderson (2000), this ideology ordered human history and geography into a hierarchical arrangement, with the civilized peoples (defined as white, Anglo-Saxon, industrialized, patriarchal) at the top, below which were barbaric, agricultural peoples often living in nomadic settings, and at the bottom, savage, war-like peoples. Uniting Christian millennialism with notions of Darwinian evolution, this ideological ordering of cultures assumed a temporal sequencing, i.e. savage and barbaric peoples, through the processes of evolution, died out (or were killed) to be replaced by civilized peoples.

Singer's advertising drew on this discourse of 'civilization' to sell its products. A series of 1892 trade cards depicting different regions of world clarifies this point. The front of each of these cards carried a colour lithograph of people from a particular country or region where Singer machines were sold, with each group wearing 'native' clothes and posed around a Singer machine (Figures 1 and 4). The flip side provided a brief description of the physical and cultural geography of that particular place. Here, for example, is what is printed on the flip side of the Algeria card:

Algeria is a French Province on the North Coast of Africa, bounded North by the Mediterranean Sea, East



Figure 1 Singer trade card of Algeria, 1892

Source: Collection of the author

by Tunis, West by Morocco. The climate is temperate and healthful in the mountains, but hot and unhealthy on the marshy plains. Our picture, taken on the spot, represents the native Algerine in his national costume. The natives are Arabs and Berbers; the latter are descendants of the ancient Numidians. The native religion is Mohammedan. Even on this far off coast of Africa the civilizing influence of our 'Singer' is felt, and our Agent has supplied the native as well as French inhabitants with thousands of Singer Machines.

This reads like a geography lesson, to be sure, but one that combines a hierarchical ordering of the world's peoples with a discourse of development (Escobar 1995; Watts 2002). In other words, implied in the text is a view that less civilized peoples can become more civilized, more modern, more 'developed', with appropriate guidance, in this case,

with the use of American products. The ideological boundaries that separate the French inhabitants from the natives, and both of these groups from the Americans, are not fixed but rather are malleable. Following this logic, 'natives' can become more 'civilized' by using the machines (producing clothing at a much reduced cost in terms of human labour), and French colonizers can become more 'modern' and 'American'. The view from the late nineteenth-century corporate boardroom, then, was of a world inhabited by peoples sorted out by stages, yet all on the path toward 'civilization' and all therefore potential consumers. By aligning consumption with civilization, businessmen could consider the geographic spread of their products as missionary work, and their resultant empires forged together not by conquest but by trade. This peaceful conquest was seen, in turn, as a sign that the United States itself was more 'civilized' than its European rivals.

Gender played a critical role in the discursive construction of civilization. As historians Bederman (1995) and Newman (1999) have elaborated, adherence to the Victorian ideology of separate spheres was a key component of civilization, a critical sign that a culture had attained the highest stage of whiteness. American companies drew on this ideology to promote their products by showing how purchasing and using American products could liberate women from manual labour, and allow men to use their labour more efficiently to support their families. Gender ideology was also crucial to the configuration of culturally acceptable forms of mass consumption. Integral to the ideology of separate spheres was the positioning of women as the consumers of society and men as the producers. This distinction in turn formed a critical piece of the ideological apparatus that supported and maintained the rise of mass consumption in the second half of the nineteenth century, both at home and abroad.

One can argue, for example, that as consumers, foreigners were feminized. In this way, the relationship between the United States and other countries could be considered similar to, and as 'natural' as, the hierarchical relationship between men and women. This feminization of foreign consumers (and by implication the consumer-nation) acted to domesticate them, to bring them into the family of modernity, but in a clearly subordinate and unthreatening position (Mehaffy 1997). This 'feminization' of others was of course not unique to the situation of the United States. As McClintock

(1995) shows, it formed an integral part of British imperial relationships. Yet as consumers, feminized others were potentially important, albeit unequal, members of the commercial, modern world. Just as women wielded some economic power as consumers, so too, foreign consumers held potentially influential positions. Singer Company, for example, found itself in the late nineteenth century reliant on overseas customers for a majority of its sales, and so was forced to try to understand the culture of those customers (Davies 1976). In India, Singer officials made significant changes to its Western-oriented sales and marketing strategies, realizing, for example, that door-to-door canvassing and installment payment plans (part of Singer's overall sales strategies) would not work in a country where women were secluded from non-related men, homes were often inaccessible to strangers, and where credit payments were not familiar (Davies 1976).

This alignment of the feminine, consumption and 'others' also helped to mediate cultural tensions, both within colonial relationships, and within gender/class relationships. As scholars have shown (Halttunen 1982; Lears 1989), one of the primary cultural anxieties of American culture in the second half of the nineteenth century was a fear of overconsumption. But in the late nineteenth century, with American businesses producing at ever-greater rates, the cultural fear shifted from overconsumption to overproduction, as consumption became aligned with 'civilization' and modernity. Women's ideological work as the consumer expanded from mediating between desire and need, to promoting 'correct' consumption, both to immigrants at home, and to others outside American borders (Kaplan 1998; Rosenberg 1999). For example, as scholars such as Hayden (1983) have shown, one of the key aims of the domestic reform efforts of the Progressive era was to make immigrants to the US more American through 'correct' consumption. Similarly, 'correct' consumption by those living outside the US became a marker of the path to 'civilization'. As a result, if one believed that correct consumption could transform culture, then foreigners' consumption of American products would make them, effectively, less foreign.

Singer's set of 'nation' cards is again instructive. Originally issued in 1891 as a set of 12 cards, the set proved so popular that it was increased to 24 in 1892 and 36 in 1893.⁵ Each card was identical in format – all depicted people posed around the Singer machine, with similar colour-schemes and

positioning of image and text (see figures 1 and 4 – including the one depicting the United States. I propose that analyses of Singer's nation cards reveal a far more malleable idea of difference than what McClintock's (1995) and Richards' (1990) analyses of the commodity racism expressed in Victorian advertising suggest. In McClintock's analysis, the presentation of raced bodies in Victorian ads, like the use of white idealized figures of women, was strictly for illustrative and decorative purposes, or as she says, they are 'figured not as historic agents but as frames for the commodity, valued for *exhibition* alone' (1995, 223; emphasis in original). Pieterse, in his far-ranging analysis of images of Africans and Blacks in Western popular culture, sees a similar trend: 'In most product advertising blacks are shown as producers (workers, cooks) or servants, or as decorative elements, but *not* as *consumers* of the product' (1990, 190; emphasis in original). But this does not seem to be the case with the Singer cards, or for that matter with a whole range of advertisements that presented raced bodies as potential consumer-subjects. As a Western, modern commodity, the Singer machine certainly is presented as the active agent of change, doing, in the words of McClintock, the 'civilizing work of empire' (1995, 222), and thereby reinforcing racism based on hierarchical notions of civilization. Yet the people on these cards are individuated, not idealized; they are presented posed and facing the viewer head-on; and instead of the commodity, 'abstracted from social context and human labour' (1995, 222) doing the active work of civilization alone, these cards depict people using the machine, producing clothing, just as white women are presented using sewing machines in a wide range of advertising images that circulated at the time. In other words, these foreigners are presented as historical actors, as agents of their own transformation, not as simply 'frames for the commodity' as McClintock suggests (1995, 223).

What I'm arguing, then, is that relationships between gender, race and consumption within the context of American commercial imperialism reveal a more nuanced form of commodity racism, and suggest new ways of thinking about empire and representations of 'race'. Because American companies set out to 'civilize' through 'consumption' and because those new consumers remained, spatially and discursively, outside the bounds of political citizenship and therefore represented no immediate threat to the metropole, they could be represented as historical agents in their own right.

This assertion of malleable identities and therefore of changing categorizations of difference wasn't new to the late nineteenth century, nor was it particular to the United States. As Roxann Wheeler (2000) argues, visible difference became a dominant way of organizing the world's peoples only in the late eighteenth century, before which other types of classifications – social organization, religion, clothing – co-existed with race as categories of difference. Wheeler stresses that in eighteenth-century Britain, categories of difference included those that afforded people a 'mutability of identity' and often allowed for an 'elasticity' of race (2000, 6). She also argues for an 'awareness of multiplicity' (2000, 39), given that in most historical situations several ways of understanding difference often coexisted. Even within nineteenth-century British thought, therefore, less fixed ideas of difference must have coexisted alongside the increasingly dominant notion of fixed racial identity. What is of interest here is the consistency and dominance of these less fixed ideas of race and difference within the discourses of American late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century corporate advertising. A comparison of these representations of America's informal empire with what generally has been analysed within the broad surveys of the history of racism and difference in American and European advertising (Pieterse 1990; Richards 1990; Lears 1995; McClintock 1995) points to their fairly unusual character.

This is not to say that American companies refrained from presenting fixed racial difference as an advertising tool. Alongside Singer promotional images of 'others' residing outside the United States were advertisements that represented Native-Americans and African-Americans in ways that much more clearly fit McClintock's definition of commodity racism. Native-Americans, considered representatives of a dying race, were useful nation-alistic reminders of America's distinct, yet remote, past, while African-Americans were thought of as anachronistic degenerates. Neither group, therefore, was considered part of modernity, nor were they able to participate in the community of commodities (Domosh 2002). They were certainly present in advertising images, but as gimmicks or ornamental sidekicks, not as potential consumers. In a circa 1897 image from an advertising brochure for Ivory soap (Figure 2), Native-Americans are depicted in cartoon-ish, stereotypical form, with soap presented as the magical, civilizing agent, washing away, along with 'their darkest blots', ignorance and war.



A NEW DEPARTURE.

S AID Uncle Sam: "I will be wise, The grease and dirt no more remain ;
 And thus the Indian civilize: 'Twill change their nature day by day,
 Instead of guns, that kill a mile, And wash their darkest blots away.
 Tobacco, lead, and liquor vile, They'll turn their bows to fishing-rods,
 Instead of serving out a meal, And bury hatchets under sods,
 Or sending Agents out to steal, In wisdom and in worth increase,
 I'll give, domestic arts to teach, And ever smoke the pipe of peace;
 A cake of IVORY SOAP to each, For ignorance can never cope
 Before it flies the guilty stain, With such a foe as IVORY SOAP."

Figure 2 'A new Departure', from advertising pamphlet for Ivory soap/Proctor and Gamble called 'What a cake of soap will do'

Source: Warshaw Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

This form of commodity racism reinforced the fixed differences that were thought to separate white culture in the United States from Native and African-Americans. As we have seen, however, those differences were less fixed in advertising representations of others living outside American borders.

Commercial imperial knowledges

As we have seen, America's international companies presented images of other peoples within a framework that assumed malleable identities, that, in other words, with time foreign peoples would change and become more 'white'. In a similar way, these companies also produced verbal and visual images of malleable cultures and nations. Embedded, again, within the complex discourse of civilization, these representations of other cultures assumed change through time toward some end-point of

industrial sophistication. This type of 'geographical knowledge' coexisted with a more static view of the world's nations, one also derivative of civilizational discourse. For example, most formal geography lessons in the United States, those taught in schools and presented in textbooks, drew on a discourse of civilization that sorted the world's regions into a static hierarchy: those inhabited by white, industrialized peoples at the top, those by non-white, agricultural peoples below (Schwartz 1996; Ryan 1997; Schulten 2001). But other types of knowledges were circulating too, informing and emanating from the boardrooms of American corporations, and from the commodities and advertisements that filled American homes.

Most of these American international companies produced knowledge about other countries in the form of a narrative of progress, of countries being transformed into modern industrial nations. These narratives presented fairly simple and understandable story lines that ignored the various complexities and contradictions inherent in these transformations. The story line went like this: America has 'progressed' swiftly through the various civilizational stages and has now reached the peak of industrial prowess; America's industrial products are what has enabled the nation to reach the highest stage of civilization; those products can also help other nations reach that stage. This narrative runs through all the corporate material that I examined within these five companies. Here's how McCormick Company recited the narrative in its 1885 catalogue:

In the grand march of human progress which distinguishes the present age above all others, agricultural machinery occupies a prominent position, being second to none in its important bearing on the well-being of society. It has released the farmer from the drudgery of life, almost miraculously increased the production of food, and so far reduced its cost that the human family to-day is better fed and better clothed than at any time in all its previous history. Foremost among these agencies, and by general consent stand the McCormick grain and grass cutting machines, the avant couriers of civilization, the indispensable and unsurpassable requisites of modern farming . . . it is the leading machines in all countries throughout the wide world where grain and grass are staple products. In Australia, New Zealand, North and South Africa, in Russia, Italy, France, Spain, Greece and Great Britain, as well as in the republics of South America, the McCormick machines is as well known, highly appreciated and eagerly sought after as on the prairies of Illinois . . . The McCormick is at home in a foreign harvest field, and needs no

introduction or interpreter, for its work speaks in all languages throughout the circuit of the earth.

McCormick harvesting machines (or whatever products one is selling), the 'couriers of civilization' are bringing American-style progress, therefore, to the areas of the world where they are sold. The narrative, in other words, was based on a fluid civilizational hierarchy, with products that speak 'in all languages' facing no barriers as they help countries move inevitably up the ladder toward industrialization, releasing the 'farmer from the drudgery of life' and 'miraculously' increasing the 'production of food'.

This fluidity was evident within the discourses of all five of the companies that I examined. For example, Heinz Company sent out several emissaries to assess the commercial possibilities of countries in Africa and Asia. One of those emissaries, Alexander MacWillie, travelled extensively for the company, and wrote of his trips in the company newsletter. A series of monthly instalments that he authored in 1907 is particularly revealing. Part travelogue, part company boosterism, these essays suggest a merging of ideologies similar to what was relayed in the pages of the *National Geographic* – affirming cultural stereotypes while also expanding the range of knowledges about the world, 'striking a careful balance between the foreign and the familiar' (Schulten 2001, 175). Yet unlike *National Geographic*, Heinz's newsletter was not obliged to promote scientific geography's view of culture as either environmentally or racially determined. MacWillie's characterizations of China are telling: 'nearing the shore we see huge, ungainly looking junks with tattered sails go lumbering by, their dirty pig-tailed crews lounging over the rails from piles of straw matting and highly odoriferous heaps of dried fish' (MacWillie 1907, 4). This stereotype-affirming 'opener' to his essay is then followed with descriptions of the countryside and of the streets and shops of Shanghai. The essay closes with statistics as to the trade potential of China ('from a total of 150 million dollars in 1896 the exports and imports increased to over 500 million dollars in 1906' (1907, 5)) followed by a description of the future of the country, a future brought about by Western commerce:

Railways, which play such an important part in the development of any country are being projected in all directions throughout China, and the shriek of the locomotive whistle is to-day heard in places where only

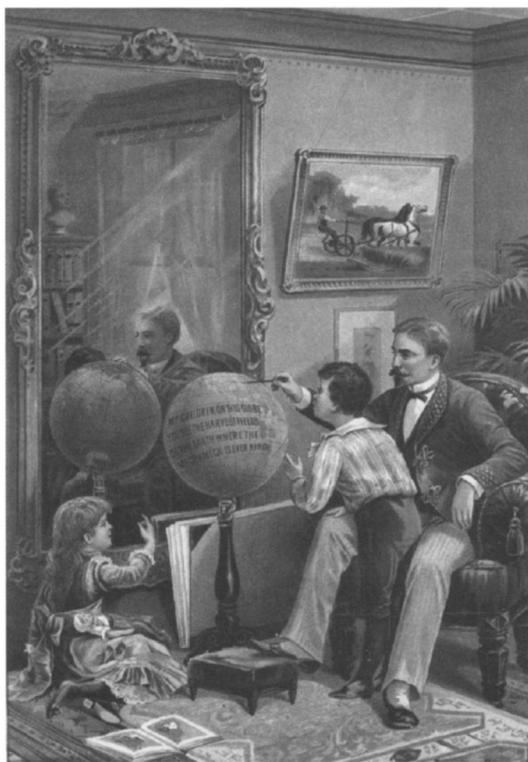


Figure 3 Teaching object lesson

Source: From McCormick 1889 catalogue. Collection of the author

ten years ago an European was hardly heard of and never seen. If you are curious to see the China of opium smokers, dried rats, and women of small feet, you must make haste, for such things will be among the vanished customs and curiosities of the country twenty years hence. (MacWillie 1907, 6)

What is presented here is a foreign that will soon become familiar, with Western help of course. It is a discourse akin to that of modern development, in the sense of promoting the power of Western science and reason to create economic 'development' and 'progress'.

The implicit and explicit geography lessons that flowed from these considerations of economic development took shape in the form of commodities that began to infiltrate many aspects of everyday life. For example, one advertisement for McCormick farm machinery made explicit the links between geographical education and the commercial goals of the company (see Figure 3). Titled 'Teaching object lesson', this advertising image, appearing on

the back of several of its 1880s catalogues, aligns the empire of McCormick (where McCormick is *king*) with a geography lesson about the civilized and soon to be civilized world. Portrayed on a globe, a way of depicting the earth that, as Cosgrove tells us, induces 'desires of ordering and controlling' (2001, 5), the kingdom of McCormick is the known and ordered world, and vice versa. Just as the globe serves as an object lesson for the son in the image, teaching him a commercial geography, so too the image itself is an object lesson to those who see it. The family represents the highest ideals of civilized whiteness. They are depicted in a proper Victorian parlour, complete with potted palms, classical statues, learned books, ornate furniture and lush carpets. The patriarch instructs his son about his business world, while the daughter looks on. The image on the wall gives us a sense of what the purported civilized world looks like outside the parlour walls – the American yeoman farmer tending to his productive fields, atop his McCormick. The advertising message is clear: agricultural machinery has brought civilization and prosperity to the American West, making possible the riches within the home parlour, and presumably about to make that prosperity possible around the globe.

This is just one of many advertising images that circulated, shaping geographical knowledges about the world throughout middle-class America. My analysis here suggests some of the ways that a particularly commercial outlook shaped those knowledges – forming a more fluid hierarchical view of the world based on access to commodities and not simply race, and laying the foundations for a modern discourse of development, for a belief, that is, in the transformative powers of Western reason and technology. Alexander MacWillie's assessment of Japan might well serve to characterize commercial imperial knowledges in general: 'Japan of the Nineteenth Century is rapidly passing away, and Japan of the Twentieth Century is developing to an extent not even surpassed by the growth of our own great republic' (MacWillie 1907, 4). Commercial imperial knowledges, it seems, were all about assessing the growth potential of the world's regions.

Commercial imperialism at home

Like the British colonial empire, which was constituted through and reinforced within, the rela-

tionships between the colonies and metropole, America's informal empire was constituted as much at home as it was overseas. As we can see from an analysis of the McCormick image 'teaching object lesson', an image that appeared in several McCormick catalogues and that was cut out and pasted into scrapbooks,⁶ international commerce came home, as it were, and refashioned domestic spaces. This refashioning took two forms: first, the importation of commodities from countries where the United States had established trade networks – such items as 'foreign' foods that Heinz packaged and sold to American families, and home furnishings imported from Europe and Asia; and second, the circulation throughout homes in the United States of commodities and advertisements that were discursively linked to America's commercial empire. Let me briefly provide examples of each of these types of domestic refashioning through commercial imperialism.

Much of the design of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century middle and upper-class American homes focused on the importations of European styles and materials. In this way, according to historian Kristin Hoganson, American women acted out their desires to 'transcend the nation' and participate in an 'imagined community of consumption' (2002, 77). The international trend in home design was in some ways counter to the nationalistic and traditional rhetoric of home design that spoke of the home as a sanctuary away from the outside world and/or as a site that should reflect national identity. This powerful aesthetic movement, what Hoganson calls 'cosmopolitan domesticity',⁷ spoke to the desire on the part of middle and upper-class women to express status by importing European, high-style objects into the home, and displaying products from 'exotic' regions – carpets from Turkey, curios from Mexico, Egyptian columns. Although this cosmopolitan domesticity was, as Hoganson continues, 'closely intertwined with the hierarchies of its day' (2002, 80), it did mediate imagined relationships with others: 'The appreciation of foreign handiwork helped counter negative stereotypes of other peoples, but not everybody had a casserole and not everybody exported them' (2002, 79).

Although not everyone could afford these imports, middle-class families could participate in this imagined community of commodities in other ways. The Singer sewing machine, for example, was sold mostly on credit arrangements, through monthly instalments, and was therefore affordable

to most working families. As mentioned earlier, part of Singer's advertising strategy was its alignment of its products with its 'civilizing' work around the world, and this international focus permeated most of its promotional materials. A woman sitting down at her Singer in central Iowa knew that she was participating in an activity that linked her to people on other continents half way across the world. So too farmers who paid attention to their McCormick catalogues or sales brochures could feel themselves akin to other farmers in Argentina or Russia while they plowed their fields. A McCormick brochure from 1900, titled *100 Harvest Scenes All Around the World*, included photographs of men using the machines to harvest their fields in such places as Russia, Mexico and Denmark. In order not to exclude recent immigrants from this imagined community of commodities, the writing in this pamphlet was in three languages: French, German and English. The presence of these 'international' commodities in the homes and fields of the middle-classes in the United States, then, worked to deconstruct some of the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, while reinforcing other boundaries. For example, included in the McCormick brochure are images of people using less modern means for harvesting their fields. The image of India depicts men harvesting with knives instead of machines. The implied message that those who use the McCormick are more modern and civilized bound the American farmer with his 'civilized' brothers from Mexico, but separated him from the farmers of India.

The refashioning of domestic spaces through international commerce occurred at an even more mundane, or banal, scale if we consider the advertisements themselves as forms of material culture. Many American companies employed international imagery in their advertising that appeared on labels of goods, on trade cards and in popular magazines. And these pictorial advertisements were used as decorative objects in homes – hung on the walls, displayed on the mantelpiece (Garvey 1996). They were also cut and glued on pages into scrapbooks, forming personal records of past shopping adventures or desires for future ones, or simply providing accessible and affordable colourful images of places and people. Garvey's analysis of these trade cards and scrapbooks suggests that an important element of these collections were references to the exotic and foreign. For middle-class American women, collecting these commercial cards that referred to



Figure 4 Page of turn-of-the-century American scrapbook

Source: Collection of the author

distant lands made explicit the link between 'the world of commerce' and that of 'travel and distance; grouping its images creates an accessible empire, domesticated through its connections to thread and mustard' (1996, 39). For example, Figure 4 is a page from a turn-of-the-century scrapbook, where a Singer trade card of Japan is grouped with a calling card, a birthday greeting and an ad for the Tennessee brewing company. This fairly random grouping situates the image of the Singer in Japan as exotic (the women are wearing traditional, non-Western clothing) yet familiar (the women are after all using a very familiar product – the sewing machine – and their decorative surroundings echo the floral patterns of the two other cards on the page). This particular scrapbook, as you can see from a close look, was a recycled accounting book from the late 1890s,

suggesting it belonged to a middle- or working-class woman, one for whom this collection served as her primary access to the world 'out there'.

McClintock's (1995) analysis of imperial advertising suggests that most of these images reinforced and circulated widely the racist and sexist discourses of imperialism. Yet, as I argued earlier, American international companies created advertising and other materials that deconstructed fixed racial differences. For example, the Japanese women in this particular image are presented as good consumers and proper women, doing domestic work at home in decorative surroundings. Distributed free of charge, and often printed in several languages, these advertisements, newsletters and catalogues were collected and displayed in homes throughout the United States, allowing even working-class women to participate in a form of cosmopolitan domesticity, to feel, that is, part of a world that transcended national boundaries.

Conclusion

A cultural analysis of economic imperialism has allowed me to tease out representational differences between 'civilizing' through colonization, and civilizing through the sale of commodities, and to suggest in what ways these representations shaped American life at home. America's first large international companies saw and represented the world through both the economic 'logic' of profit and loss, and the cultural discourse of civilization. In fact, as we have seen, it is difficult if not impossible to separate the cultural from the economic in discussions of empire – the two discourses complemented and legitimized each other. By combining those two logics within an empire held together by business transactions, America's companies produced a temporally fluid view of culture and place, a narrative of progress, within which all peoples were potential consumers and all nations potentially modern.

The global spread of American-style commercial culture has continued almost unabatedly throughout the twentieth century, and with it cultural geographies of imperialism have been re-shaped and reinforced. My concentration on commodities and markets has precluded analysis of the world of production and labour that is such a major component of America's economic dominance today, but the cultural 'life' of commodities still resonates powerfully in the representational world of the

early twenty-first century. And although the myriad causes and effects of globalization are hotly contested (Hirst and Thompson 1999), and some see its contemporary manifestation as qualitatively distinct from globalizing processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hardt and Negri 2000), I hope my analyses have promoted a recognition of the historical linkages as well as the disjunctures between the early twenty-first century and the early twentieth century. In this way, my work contributes to what Roxanne Wheeler has referred to as an 'awareness of multiplicity' – an awareness that the ideologies and practices of one time and place do not simply disappear but 'coexist with new ways of thinking and living' (2000, 39) and can reappear at much later times in different forms.

As we have seen, the categories of difference that dominated the representations created and reiterated by the five American companies I examined built on discourses that dated from the early eighteenth century, and those categories of difference in turn were revised and retrofitted into narratives of progress that characterized the world view of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American commercial expansion. Different imperial situations, then, reiterated and circulated different categories of difference. The notion that racial identity and stages along the civilizational hierarchy were not fixed but rather were malleable was not particular to America's era of informal imperialism (as we have seen, they have deep historical roots, and were widespread throughout parts of Europe), but it was more consistent, and more dominant within this particular time and space. And the stories that these ideas narrate shed new light on the multiple and complex historical relationships between the United States and its economic empire, highlighting another aspect of the 'messy, mixed-up, interconnected nature of histories, geographies and identities' (Cook and Harrison, 2003, 297) that comprise our imperial and global world.

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Notes

- 1 These five companies were chosen from a list of the largest American international businesses in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, based on the availability of archival material. That list was derived primarily from Wilkins (1970) and Rosenberg (1982).
- 2 The primary markets for American goods during this time period were the countries comprising Western and Eastern Europe (including Russia) and Canada. Depending on the particular commodity, secondary markets included Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, India, Japan, Turkey. Other markets included Thailand, China, South Africa, Chile, Peru. See Wilkins (1970).
- 3 The corporate archives of Singer, McCormick and the New York Life Insurance Company are littered with references to the disruptions of wars, and the loss to business that they cause. In Russia, for example (one of the primary markets for Singer and McCormick), agents and salesmen were directed to continue their work as best they could throughout the Russian–Japanese War of 1904–5.
- 4 Singer's advertising strategies can be seen as fairly typical in its use of the discourse of civilization to promote its products. Many other American companies, particularly those that produced 'new' and 'modern' commodities, used similar strategies. See Bederman (1995), Lears (1995), Strasser (1995), Garvey (1996), Ohmann (1996) and Newman (1999). What makes Singer such a compelling case study is that its early and incredibly extensive international empire of sales and production provided ample 'evidence' of the civilizing effects of its machines on foreigners, evidence that it used in its advertising.
- 5 Singer continued to produce this style of trade card throughout the early twentieth century, adding over 30 more nations and regions. The company considered these cards one of their most effective advertising tools (Davies 1976). They were given out free to customers, one at a time. In the early years of the twentieth century, many of the images on these cards were used in magazine advertising, thus maintaining their circulation within middle-class America.
- 6 I first noted this image in the McCormick archives, as it was situated prominently on the back cover of several of its late 1880s catalogues (printed in several languages). I then purchased the image separately over ebay, and found that it had been cut out and glued to a page of a scrapbook.
- 7 I assume that a similar aesthetic was at work in British homes, though I've not encountered any studies that explicitly address this theme. Hoganson's analysis suggests two important differences. First, Americans desired and imported first and foremost European household items because of the high cultural capital that came with these items. Thus American 'cosmopolitan domesticity' contained both a deferential and imperial impulse. Second, because within America's commercial empire consumption itself was seen as a nationalistic act, even when the purchased item was produced overseas, many of the tensions between the home as patriotic and nationalistic space, and the home as an expression of cosmopolitan interest, were assuaged.

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