Chapter 9

The US Empire’s Cultural Industries, at War: Selling and Subverting the Ideology of Militarism

Tanner Mirrlees

1 Introduction: The US Empire, to be Continued?

For readers immersed in the annals of Empire, it is well known that the United States (US) is no ordinary State in the world system. The US is an Empire, but a unique post-colonial Empire whose national security strategy since 1945 has strove to build, integrate and police a world system of sovereign clients that share its model: capitalism, the liberal State form, and the consumerist “way of life.” The US Empire combines tools of coercion and persuasion to achieve its goals. In the former “hard power” strategy, it uses threats, bribes, punishments and outright warfare to deter, contain, and directly dominate opponents. With the latter “soft power” strategy, it aims to elicit the consent of others to its leadership, to attract and co-opt them (Bacevich 2004, 2010, 2013; Blum 2004; Cox and Stokes 2012; de Grazia 2005; Dower 2017; Cull 2008; Harvey 2003; Klein 2007; Mirrlees 2016; Mooers 2016; Perkins 2009; Panitch and Gindin 2012; Snow 2003).

As of late, though, the US Empire is said to be in relative decline, perhaps even headed toward a full-fledged collapse. For proponents of decline, the 20th “American Century” is over and the prospect of the 21st century being American-centric is thwarted by a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors. Internally, the US faces numerous economic problems (a permanent account deficit due to borrowing more money from the world than it makes by selling to it) and geopolitical troubles (overstretch as result of trying to make the world in its image with permanent and boundless wars). Externally, the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), which together account for about 30 percent of world GDP and about 45 percent of the planet’s population, heralds a massive shift in concentrations of global economic, military, and cultural power away from a American-centric unipolar world order to post-American multi-polar global disorder (Chomsky 2012; Desai 2013; Escobar 2014; Harris 2016; Zakaria 2008).
The idea that the US Empire is in decline is not novel, as hopes and fears of American decline have come and gone since the mid-1970s and been a recurring theme in elite foreign policy discourse. In the early months of the Donald Trump presidency, a January 2017 National Intelligence Council (2017: 6) report noted that the “post–Cold War, unipolar moment [for the US] has passed.” Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee, former CIA official John E. McLaughlin (2017) claimed that “the world will be without a hegemonic power—that is, without a country so powerful as to exert dominant influence and advance policy with little reference to others.” General David H. Petraeus (2017) concurred with McLaughlin, saying that the post–Cold War era of “US domination of the world” is ending. Yet, other elite geopolitical thinkers are not convinced. Former Secretary of State James Baker (2016) and head of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations claims that even though “much of the rest of the world” is beginning to catch up with the US, the US will “remain the world's preeminent leader for the foreseeable future.” Thomas Donilon (2016), a former US National Security Advisor, says declinism is “myth” that fails to address the US’s “strategic assets and liabilities” and is confident that the US “will continue to be the world's leading and most powerful nation for a long time to come.” Whether or not the US Empire is in decline is uncertain, and predictions about a coming post-American and perhaps new Chinese century proliferate.

The world system is undoubtedly undergoing significant changes. But for the short term, the US remains the world system’s only Empire, as America’s economic might, military preponderance, and cultural industries are without rival. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the persistence of the US Empire’s power and show how this power is structurally and ideologically reinforced by a nexus of the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the US-based cultural industries, when the US is at war. The first section presents an up-to-date overview of the US Empire’s structural power. The second section demonstrates the centrality of war to the growth of the US Empire, and then focuses on the symbiotic links and connections that bind the DoD to the cultural industries and support the production of media and cultural goods that prop up the ideology of militarism. The conclusion highlights some mediatized and cultural “sites of struggle” over the US Empire, war and militarism.

By demonstrating the continuity of US Empire and showing how the DoD and the US-based globalizing cultural industries support the production and circulation of media commodities that communicate the ideology of militarism to the world, this chapter supports critical political economy of