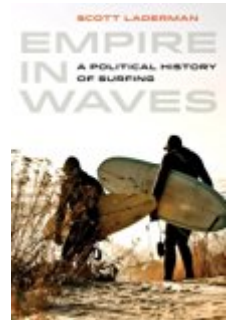


Scott Laderman. *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing.* Sport in World History Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-27911-7.



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Published on H-Diplo (January, 2015)

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For many of us of a certain age, classic television programs evoke surfing and Hawai'i as exotic, yet distinctly American. Story lines such as Greg Brady mastering surfing in a single family vacation to Hawai'i lured our fertile imaginations to a destination, a sport, and a way of life. What most of us little realized at the time was the latent political and cultural messages that were being transmitted to us. While reading Scott Laderman's fascinating book *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing*, I imagined the author at parties or family gatherings patiently describing his research to a skeptical audience that perceived it as a boondoggle. It may be easy to dismiss a volume such as *Empire in Waves* as being narrowly focused or outside the mainstream of academic and popular interests; yet to dismiss the value of this volume would be a great mistake. What Laderman presents is a fascinating account of a sport whose proponents believed it to be apolitical, but facing the politics of a modern world.

Modern surf culture is a curious mix of two resources: it is born of a nineteenth-century con-

quest (hard power), yet its popularization was fed by American soft power in the twentieth century. After the 1898 annexation of Hawai'i, under dubious circumstances, settlers of European descent led efforts to make attractive aspects of Hawaiian culture become American. The first chapter provides an important reminder of how racial attitudes and prejudices shaped and propelled the annexation of Hawai'i and its subsequent settlement of the territory by Americans from the mainland. It lays out how surfing was transformed into a pastime for white Americans as well. Eventually, surfers, primarily young people from Western countries, traveled to remote lesser developed parts of the globe where few tourists would venture, making the sport global. Laderman provides a thought-provoking account of the rise of surfing culture as a result of the American colonization of Hawai'i and American hegemony in the twentieth century, especially in the field of popular culture.

While surfers today can be characterized as frivolous and carefree, even depicted as "air-

heads” in popular culture, it is ironic that the native Hawaiian propensity to engage in the sport was seen as evidence of the superiority of the American missionary culture. The sport takes great skill and an analytic reading of waves. Among the pious Christian missionaries in Hawai’i, as well as the rest of the world, industriousness and hard work were valued; and constant work meant self-improvement. The Hawaiian propensity to engage in leisure activities, mingled with alternative conceptions of dress and gender relations in the nineteenth century, served as a just cause for conquest, colonization, and conversion.

As with many political and economic forces, the Second World War brought many changes to surfing, including new technologies, new adherents, and with the increased availability of transportation, new destinations. The emergence of the United States as a preeminent power gave the country’s media outlets a special role in world politics. Several different forms of media portrayed a benevolent United States bursting with freedom and opportunities. Like many Americans, both media outlets and surfers often had amnesia about the historical foundations of many events and circumstances. The American experience with imperialism and power politics in the nineteenth century is not well known. The incorporation of the Kingdom of Hawai’i into the United States is not a story that most Americans outside of the fiftieth state understand or appreciate. The process of Americanization required work, advertisement, and a certain amount of forgetfulness. As Laderman points out, with several superb examples, just as Hawai’i became American, so too did surfing. This meant that the sport as Hawaiian reflected little of the ethnic and cultural background of the sport.

Surfing as a sport, however, has traditionally been viewed by surfers as free from political problems and ideology. There is a romantic notion that the surfer is blind to social issues and only

wants to interact with nature in a spiritual action that excites and is meaningful. Riding the waves is a transcendent experience, which has become a metaphor for freedom of action. Many surfers believe that the sport should be free from the dirty hands of politics. Particularly in the 1970s, part of the allure of the sport was the myth that surfers were engaged in the discovery of an exotic world—a modern-day exploration of the littoral world. While this romantic view is enticing, *Empire in Waves* is excellent evidence to the contrary. The sport and lifestyle is steeped in political symbolism. Surfers were often blind to how they were used as pawns by politicians and governments, whether this was economic development or internal and external legitimacy for less savory regimes.

The rise of surfer culture created soft-power opportunities for the United States. As fascination with the sport grew, a number of films, both popular and documentary, glamorized the culture and the search for the perfect wave. Many films portrayed frolicking on beaches and dancing to popular music, while others documented surfers exploring the world for unique experiences. In the exploration of the world, surfers engaged with local people in lesser-developed economies in an exchange of culture and information. Films such as *The Endless Summer* (1966) presented young Americans, typically male, roaming the world, surfing and engaging with locals and “highlighted the freedom afforded Americans ... to explore and discover the nations of world” (pp. 49-50). This was, of course, in contrast to young people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who did not have the same opportunities. It was also a different image of young American males in impoverished countries than those engaged in the conflict in Vietnam. While this was a picture of benevolence, most of these films portrayed local people and destinations as little more than exotic backdrops for Americans to observe. Rarely were the stories of local people told or explored.

Nevertheless, it was true that many young people explored the world through surfing. The problem was that many of the impressions that people took away from the visits were misperceptions. Surfers, like other tourists, would report home about the “progress” being made by countries outside the so-called First World. Laderman notes that surfers would conflate the trappings of home with progress being made in littoral countries, little recognizing the authoritarian regimes often engaged in human rights abuses to appeal politically and economically to the West. Surfers represented the first wave of tourists that would harken an age of mass tourism.

The fourth chapter of the book, on surfing and Apartheid-era politics in South Africa, is an excellent case study on the dynamics of politics, sports, racism, and international relations. As someone who attended rallies and was well versed in the politics and arguments of the time, I was reminded of the nuances of arguments and the obfuscation of events by several people in support for the Apartheid government of South Africa. Many students today would have a much better appreciation of international relations, racial politics, and the power of framing by understanding this period of history. Reading this chapter would be an excellent introduction. Laderman captures the conflicting interests and conversations over whether to support a boycott of surfing events in South Africa by athletes. It captures the subtle use of language and framing to justify exclusionary policies and demonstrates the fluidity of race as well. It is an important reminder of a profound era of world politics that was not so long ago.

By the end of the 1970s, surfing exploration was at an end. Instead, surf resorts began appearing in many parts of the world offering predictable comforts and fewer people crowding beaches and waves. Resorts dominated surf tourism in the late twentieth century, much like the rest of the tourism industry. Necessarily, these

resorts exclude those who cannot afford the price. A new type of exclusion, economically based, emerged. Like the fans of many other sports that thrive on traditions, such as baseball, hockey, and soccer, *Empire in Waves* reflects a concern about the growing commodification of a deeply treasured pastime. Rather than a political empire of the twentieth century, increasingly corporations have built an economic empire in the twenty-first century. The tension within the surf community is one that pits traditionalists against newcomers in a battle for the legacy of the sport and the associated generated revenues. The narrative wrestles with the tenuous meaning of authenticity in a modern global culture without resorting to predictable tropes or easy answers.

Although a political history of the sport, *Empire in Waves* has several lessons for today’s scholar and student. A recurrent theme is the idea that there are consequences to actions, even the seemingly minor actions of individuals. In the chapter on the interface between surfing and Indonesian politics, Laderman notes that surf tourism in Indonesia was essentially subsidizing a regime that was engaged in widespread political repression. The same was true about the participation of surfers in events in South Africa.

As with many such titles, the book is constructed in a temporal order, which does allow the reader to have an evolutionary understanding of surfing and its culture. The sources and citations of the text are especially helpful and well done (nearly a third of the book is dedicated to sources and citations). The use of specialty magazines as evidence of cultural conversations and framing, in this case on the topic of surfing, which have all but disappeared in the digital age, greatly enhances this book. Several of the images in the book add to the reader’s understanding of the construction of race and the framing of the sport, and their selection is to be commended. Of special note is the inclusion of political cartoons, which

convey a sense of injustice and a plea of tolerance that could not be matched by words alone.

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Citation: Mark Sachleben. Review of Laderman, Scott. *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

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