



Observation: The USS New York

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The USS NEW YORK (LPD 21) (...) was commissioned in New York City on Nov. 7, 2009. At approximately 8:00 a.m., on November 2, the USS NEW YORK came to a standstill across from the World Trade Center site, dipped her flag, and delivered a 21-gun salute. Members of the Fire Department of New York, the New York Police Department, Port Authority Police, members of the families of 9/11 victims and veterans gathered on the shore at the North Cove in the World Financial Center to return the salute. (USS New York LPD 21, 2009a)



The *USS New York* will soon be defending freedom and combating terrorism around the globe, while also ensuring that the world never forgets the evil attacks of Sept. 11 (...) (New York Gov. George Pataki quoted in *USS New York LPD 21*, 2009b)

The following is about a ship, more precisely a war-ship, the *USS New York* (see figure 1). We claim that the *USS New York* is being used to popularise an ideology (Chomsky, 2001) that exploits the tragedies of the terror attacks for advancing a militaristic agenda. However, although the ship is a good example for this militarised discourse, we see it in a line of events and reports that communicate what Gregory (2004) has called the colonial present². It is therefore that the *USS New York* is not only an extraordinary example as it might first appear, but that through a constant reproduction of the discourse, of which the *USS New York* is part, we now face what James Sidaway (2001, 2003, 2008) has termed banal geopolitics:

War and a plethora of new strategies, military technologies and security procedures have become everyday and ordinary. War is more or less taken for granted as the norm, fed (especially in the United States) by a daily media coverage about “terrorism”. (Sidaway, 2008: 2)

Drawing on Sidaway’s work, Merje Kuus describes processes of banal militarisation and banal imperialism in her work on NATO’s eastern enlargement (Kuus, 2007, 2008). Describing the processes of imperial subject-making in Central Europe (i.e. only through subscribing to NATO’s agenda do Central European states become recognised and accepted “Western” states), Kuus (2007: 269) illuminates “the practices through which military force and military solutions are associated with moral good. These practices are central to the militarization of social life today”. The processes of militarisation lead, according to Kuus (2007), to the production of a “normative space of imperial right” through which an imperial agenda is sought to be morally legitimated and advanced. In this context, Kuus (2008: 627) argues elsewhere that the

practices of civic militarization are essential for global empire-building. They habituate electorates to the business of the military-industrial complexes and thereby make these complexes appear natural components of world affairs. In so doing, they erode the distinction between wartime and peacetime and legitimize the global state of imperial war.

² By ‘colonial present’ Gregory (2004) describes a situation where Washington, London, and Tel Aviv position the “West” as the victimised target of terror attacks to emphasise *our* (the West’s) difference to *them* (the terrorists in the former colonies). Having established this difference, military actions, occupations, or a continuing colonial present/presence on *their* territory is then legitimised as part of the wider ‘war on terror’.

Fundamental to both Sidaway's and Kuus' arguments (see, in this context, also Gregory and Pred, 2007; in particular the contribution on banal terrorism by Cindi Katz, 2007) is an alarming reminder of the growing (and constructed) normalcy of various forms of militarism. In this observation we use the extraordinary example of the *USS New York*, to remind us as well as the reader to raise awareness to this, by now, ordinary or mundane politics. Precisely *because* we see it every day, this observation highlights the importance of critical reflection upon such mundane practices of the demonstration not only of military force but also the militarisation in everyday life. Through such practices, militarisation often turns into what Cynthia Enloe (2000, p. 3) describes as a 'pervasive process' that is so "hard to uproot, precisely because in its everyday forms it scarcely looks life threatening" and therefore runs danger of being forgotten or becoming 'banal' (Kuus, 2007, 2008; Sidaway, 2001, 2003, 2008).

Figure 1: The USS New York



Source: USS New York LPD 21. 2009a.

The *USS New York* is dedicated to the victims of the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, made from the steel of the World Trade Center (although more symbolically as only 7.5 tons were actually used for the bow, a minuscule fraction of the actual weight), and built near New Orleans by workers who survived hurricane Katharina. The *USS New York* relates directly to two of the biggest catastrophes on US American soil and demonstrates the world that their nation arises from it even stronger. The *USS New York* epitomises resurgence of the United States of America after humiliation through terror as well as a natural and (partially self-inflicted) social catastrophe. It embodies dominance and strength. It rose phoenix-like from the ashes of New York, destined to hunt the ones responsible for the 9/11 attacks but also overplays the direct aftermath of hurricane Katharina when the state's failure in dealing with a natural disaster, that ultimately also unveiled a social disaster, hit the nation with military strength (Katz, 2008). To continue with Katz's thoughts, here the terror, including natural disasters, is being mobilised to "solidify a porous nation" within, as well as to justify the geopolitical agenda outside the homeland (Katz, 2007: 355). As the retired governor George Pataki said: "On September 2001, our nation's enemies

brought their fight to New York (...) The *USS New York* will now bring the fight to our nation's enemies well into the future" (Quoted in *USS New York LPD 21, 2009a*).

In terms of post-9/11 ideology, the *USS New York* is a highly interesting case, not least for the kind of ship chosen to play this prominent symbolic role. In general, for symbolising issues of dominance and power one might expect such a strong symbol to be a big new destroyer. This is, however, not the case; the *USS New York* has only four smaller guns for its self defence. It is an "amphibious transport dock of the *San Antonio* class" (*USS New York LPD 21, 2009b*), a troop carrier for amphibious landing operations (see figure 1). The choice of ascribing such symbolism to this kind of ship indicates a shift in the nature of sable-rattling away from the demonstration of brute firepower to more flexible intervention capabilities. Clausewitz's army-against-army wars appear outdated (Kaldor, 2007, Ó Tuathail, 2000), whilst at the same time the challenges of so called asymmetrical warfare against criminal organisations, insurgents and different terrorist groups loom large. Destroyers are of limited value to this kind of conflict. Instead, highly trained mobile commando units, such as the Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) based onboard the *USS New York*, become of increasing importance. The crew of the ship are only 360 sailors but additional 800 marines from the 'Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force 26' that are stationed on board with their associated gear including heavy Abrams combat tanks, helicopters, and landing crafts. As they advertise themselves, MEUs are flexible multi-purpose units that are supposed to be able to react to all challenges this century might offer (Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force 26, 2009). In other words, the *USS New York* is US America's answer to future challenges. It is a way to reassert the US' ability of global power projection.

However, examining the underlying ideology of war campaigns, there is more to the ship than just its well chosen type. The website of the *USS New York* (yes, the ship has its own website: www.ussnewyork.com) opens with the line: "Out of the ashes of 911 comes a ship forged from the steel of the World Trade Center". The website has a strong focus on the victims of the terror attacks using songs, videos, speeches, and poems. Figure 2 shows the kind of mood and atmosphere that is being evoked; the United State's heraldic animal, the bald eagle, is crying over the burning twin towers (*USS New York LPD 21, 2009c*). More evident is a certain theme of revenge when reflecting on the motto of the ship 'never forget'. Everyone who has lost a loved person knows the idea of never forgetting. Never forget what a great person he or she was; never forget the happy times we had. Onboard a warship that epitomizes an ideology which creates a dichotomy between our victims and the ones who are responsible for it and who attacked us on 'our own' (Western) soil.

Figure 2: The crying eagle



Source USS New York LPD 21. 2009c

New York and New Orleans: two cities representing the “free America” (Wall Street, the Broadway, the ‘Big Apple’ and the French Quarter, Mardi Gras, leisure culture respectively) had come under attack as sites of US vulnerability and failure, but are thus being morphed again into symbols of strength and power. Furthermore, these tragedies are used to justify the use of force and to attain public support by inducing emotional heroism and patriotism; always remember *our* victims. The event was not only covered in a vast media campaign, involving all major US news stations. There are also some 300 videos when searching for *USS New York* on YouTube. The *USS New York* also has its own Facebook site displaying numerous enthusiastic comments. Together with other examples such as the ego-shooter computer game ‘America’s Army’ – developed, constantly updated and offered for free download by the US military (CNN Money, 2002) – or an own department that liaises with Hollywood to represent the armed forces in their interest (The Guardian, 2009), the *USS New York* communicates an ideology that is highly likely to continue well into the future. Therefore it is not only the United States’ army that has adjusted to the 21st century warfare; it is a widely produced ideology in “a time of crisis” and a trial “to mobilize the population for the same course” (Chomsky, 2001) that seek to justify US/western imperial presence (Gregory, 2004).

In such critical terms the ship has received very little attention amongst academics, political commentators and in the wider public. Does this suggest that the case of the *USS New York* is not the extraordinary event as which it has been described above? Contrarily, we argue that it is another (although remarkable) example for what has been termed ‘banal geopolitics’ (Sidaway, 2008) or in this case better ‘banal imperialism’ (Kuus, 2008). Rather than qualifying Gregory’s and Chomsky’s arguments, it builds on and emphasises them. The ship and the ideology it represents simply appear mundane, showing how advanced the ‘colonial presence’ has become. Through a constant reproduction of the discourse it

developed into an omnipresent companion, at least in the Western news-landscape, to a stage of its banality.

In countries such as the US, the UK or Germany pictures of soldiers (such as the mentioned MEUs) in combat, possibly departing from ships like the *USS New York*, kicking in doors in dusty cities or the greenish blurry videos of ‘smart’ bombs hitting their targets have ceased to be horrifying or shocking. They became a daily routine of news coverage - on the ‘war on terror’, the ‘war on drugs’ and all the other wars that are supposedly being fought at the moment and thus serve to popularise a respective agenda.

In 2001, Chomsky pointed to a silent process of mobilising the population for the ‘same course’. In 2011, we are beyond that stage. We have become ‘mobilised’ to an extent where we accept the necessity of combat and war – routinised through daily visualisation – as a component of our globalised lives. In fact, the banality of the ‘colonial present’ reached a stage at which the “normative space of imperial right” (Kuus, 2007) becomes the plot for our entertainment on rainy weekends when we watch movies such as ‘The Hurt Locker’ or ‘Green Zone’ with a supersize container of popcorn. Because we face this banal imperialism, as critical geographers as well as citizens, we need to get the banality out of this kind of geopolitics and all the (constructed) wars currently being fought. Although these ideas are not new, we argue that we must remind ourselves of this “civic militarisation” (Kuus, 2008) and use our privileged position as academics to question these practices (Chomsky, 1967/2011) and offer (freely accessible) thoughts of awareness. We hope that this observation will form part of this process.

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