Book Review

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Title: *The Mythology of Imperialism: A Revolutionary Critique of British Literature and Society in the Modern Age*.

Author: Jonah Raskin
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Seminal ideas do not change; contexts do. The expression of a core idea may morph into different linguistic and semantic forms, but an idea continues unchanged. Contexts change, words change, but ideas don't. For example, the racist thinking that enslaved blacks prior to the Emancipation Proclamation is the same racist thinking present within contemporary American society. The contexts are different and the manifestations of *racism* vary, but the idea is fundamentally the same. Ideas shape the way we think about the world. If our understanding of an idea is shallow, then our application or engagement of that idea will tend to be shallow. If our understanding of an idea has depth, then our application and engagement of that idea will tend to reflect the complexities inherent within the issue. The second publication of *The Mythology of Imperialism* introduces us to such depth, while illuminating how various academic, social and political forces have hidden the complexities of imperialism and oppression from our public consciousness.

The second edition is timely for the very reason that the idea of *imperialism* continues to oppress people and environment just as it did when Raskin published his book in 1971. The new edition makes explicit connections between the imperialistic thinking present within British literature and society and the imperialistic thinking present within contemporary American politics and society. Raskin's book is nothing less than a call to arms against any regime or tradition that does not work toward the emancipatory ideals of democracy. The main points of his argument can be broadly summarized as follows:

1. The way literary analysis is taught reinforces and perpetuates ideas and attitudes of empire and does not, by and large, allow for students to develop their own critical analyses and judgments. Education is largely a process of indoctrination instead of intellectual emancipation.
2. Of those famed British authors Raskin analyzes, who are often the focus of instruction in the arenas of higher education, all fall short of their intellectual responsibility to substantively critique the status quo. Rather, these authors merely further the oppressive and racist attitudes that characterize British imperialism.
3. The imperialistic attitudes and practices of the British Empire (19th and early 20th centuries) are and have been replicated in the actions, policies and attitudes of the United States. One oppressive regime has replaced another.
4. It is the responsibility of artists and educators to empower citizens to understand the oppressive nature of their country so as to work toward a more ethically just world.

These four points run throughout Raskin's text. He begins and ends with commentary on the first and third, but the bulk of the book is dedicated to the second.

I believe Raskin's work to communicate two very important lessons to the critical reader. First, it is a poignant literary critique in a polemic style. Secondly, the book is a model of skilled intellectual moves that characterize what it means to think like a scholar. The critically minded student would be wise to read for insights into the content area as well as to figure out the method by which Raskin conducts his exegesis. The critically minded instructor would find the text a useful tool for guiding students into the art of literary critique including the importance of reading and interpreting literature and scholarship from multiple points of view.

Raskin's perspective can be compared with the Frankfurt school of thought and what is often referred to as critical theory or social theory: a firm foundation in Marxist thought and focused on direct action to make the world a more just, ethical and sustainable place to live.[1] Raskin uses British literature as his mode of critique. However, he argues that his exegesis is a necessary reaction to the way British literature is taught and revered. In this way, Raskin presents two narratives. The first is a scathing critique of close-mindedness that he believes marks institutions of higher education. The second is an enlightening critique of selected "hallowed" works of British literature. The two narratives are joined by a common theme: the mythology of imperialism.

Those who we take to be intellectuals fall short of their commission to question the status-quo and search for new ways of thinking that fully expose, acknowledge and explore alternatives to oppressive thinking and actions. More explicitly, Raskin argues that academicians and authors not only fail to question the status-quo, they perpetuate it through a system of indoctrination marked by suppressing rational dissent and free exploration where no idea is to be feared, marginalized, or dismissed. Similarly, the literary subjects of his critique fall short of their artistic responsibility to expose the various oppressive and corrupt power structures within society. This is a general point, but most visibly pertinent to the imperial powers under the former British Empire and the current American Empire.

The primary body of Raskin's analysis is focused on a critique of British authors and the extent to which they are free from imperialist ideology and tradition. His main figures are found in Kipling, Conrad, Forster, and Cary. He includes comments and analyses of other authors including Orwell, Lawrence, and Elliot, but his main exegesis focused on the former four. He posits Kipling against Conrad and Forster against Cary favoring the later in each case in terms of the extent to which imperialistic ideals were confronted. In the cases of Kipling and Forster, he demonstrates how each author unwittingly propagated the imperialistic attitudes characteristic of the British Empire. For Conrad and Cary, Raskin argues that they didn't go far enough to work toward actual revolution. Cary was bound by the abstract and unsuccessful in assessing the actual condition on the ground. In this sense, Raskin's critique of Cary can be summarized in the following statement: "Cary calls it change, but it is really only movement. There is little development…the same things happening" time and time again only in different settings (292). For Conrad, much of his imperialist thinking is found in his racist descriptions of non-whites and in his apparent fear of anarchy which he equated with chaos and evil. Raskin strategically reveals the dominance of imperialistic ideology in each subject he examines pointing out that it is the responsibility of the intellectual to expose thinking for what it is so as to prevent the passive

[1] I do not mean to confuse or over simplify the unique characteristics of these theoretical perspectives. Each is marked by a rich and dynamic history the details of which not only distinguish between them, but within them. My purpose is to merely highlight some of the common themes that they share, or tend to share, so as to illuminate Raskin's analytical perspective since his influences cross multiple schools of thought.

acceptance of oppressive ideology. The problem of imperialistic (oppressive) thinking is clearly communicated throughout the text. Solutions, however, are revealed more in Raskin's analytical method than in his literary, cultural, and political examples, although that is not the driving purpose of the text.

I believe the second edition would have benefited from a chapter on those revolutionary artists that, Raskin claims, embrace the counter-imperialist paradigm. He writes, "the artists who have led men in this century have been cultural revolutionaries, communists, warriors against empire, men imprisoned for describing exploitation and oppression" (Raskin, 292). He names artists and writers like Picasso, Rivera, Siqueiros, Brecht, Neruda, Mayakovsky, Nazim Hikmet, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs to name a few. These figures "stand with the poor against the rich, the colonized against the colonizers, the oppressed against their oppressors" (292). To work toward what it means to be a revolutionary is to identify and know the various oppressive forces, but it is also to have a clear idea of what the alternative looks like. Raskin's concluding paragraph to the first edition argues, "To be a writer and a political and cultural revolutionary, to pursue contradictions to the ends of the earth, to stand fast with the Third World against the powers of imperialism – that is to be the artist-hero in the twentieth century. It is to destroy the old order and build the new" (293). Although this is addition is beyond the book's original scope, it seems fitting that the second edition incorporate a brief survey of what revolutionary artists have done and said and how they did it and said it. Because the current edition explicitly broadens the original focus on British imperialism, Raskin could have taken further steps to emphasize the pervasive and global nature of imperialism and those who have for years worked to destroy it. However, the addition of the Afterward touches on this point of critique and ties together the three argumentative points outlined above.

The Afterword is entitled "Edward Said, Colonialism, and Global Reversibility." Raskin provides a personal narrative that dovetails his critique with that of Said and points to the need to embody "a sense of global kinship and solidarity" (303). Edward Said is Raskin's example. For Raskin, Said is a warrior; a man dedicated to challenging and changing the oppressive paradigm under which the citizens of the world currently reside. Raskin emphasizes the conceptual shift that must take place to help people "distance themselves from the materialism and the narcissism of America" (301). This requires that we search for "alternatives to the imperialist vision and point of view" (301). To do so, we must begin to see the world from various points of view, especially from the perspective of the oppressed peoples in the Third World and from a perspective of indigenous peoples so that we can imagine new ways to live. The message is simple, positive change can happen and is within our reach for those who seek to educate themselves about the horrors of imperialism and the hopes of justice. We all play the part of the colonizer in some way, but to break that process in which we are passively indoctrinated, we must dare to imagine alternatives. Such an intellectual move is a hallmark of what it means to be critically minded.

If not already apparent, my impression of Raskin's work is one of admiration and significance. Although I am not a trained literary critic, I am an educator who focuses on helping students develop critical thinking skills, abilities and dispositions necessary for thriving in a rapidly changing world. I consistently work with my students to help them learn to question their assumptions whether cultural, social, political, economic, or/and those that address how they study and learn. I believe that *The Mythology of Imperialism* is a major contribution to education in that it introduces students to a perspective that is typically outside of their current way of thinking and it is a model for how to critically engage significant ideas.