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Ellen Churchill Semple's Political Economy: Slavery, Frontier, Imperium

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Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932), the first woman president of the Association of American Geographers, was a pivotal figure in the formation of twentieth century human geography and geopolitics. Her oeuvre, however, is often situated exclusively within the tradition of Friedrich Ratzel's *Anthropogeographie*. Crucially, an equally important source of inspiration predated Semple's encounter with the German geographer and remains largely unaccounted for: Anglophone liberal political economy. This article argues that from her 1891 dissertation on slavery until her 1931 book on the geography of the ancient Mediterranean, Semple mobilized a framework of liberal political economy to reconcile tensions she imagined between her country's legacy of slavery and her support for its growing empire. This strand of her thought highlights the political versatility of anthropogeography and sheds new light on the interplay of geopolitics and liberalism that haunts U.S. security, trade, and migration policy to this day. *Key Words: anthropogeography, Ellen Churchill Semple, empire, frontier, liberalism, slavery.*

> The surest base for ethical progress is economic. … Stronger than political bonds, stronger even than religious bonds, are the countless economic bonds that hold humanity together. … [N]o weapon so adapted for victory as those of commerce; no peace so jealously guarded as that which is guaranteed by industrial interests; no sympathy has so sure a foundation as that which rests upon reciprocal economic dependence and the mutual knowledge resulting from a constant exchange of products.
>
> —Semple (1896, 424–25)

So proclaimed Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932) at the 1896 Third Biennial of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in Louisville, Kentucky, in an address entitled "Civilization Is at Bottom an Economic Fact." Although Semple is primarily known today for her provocative thesis on the geographical determinants of societal development, underpinning and shaping her geographical approach was a liberal political economy intimately tied to the United States as an expanding empire that would come to dominate the twentieth century. Indeed, in responding to the Spanish-American War of 1898, Semple proclaimed that the U.S. defeat of Spain made Washington a "Caribbean power." She enthusiastically endorsed construction of the Panama Canal to bolster U.S. commercial interests and "naval supremacy" in the Americas (Semple [1903] 1933, 409, 412; see also Frenkel 1992). Underpinning her enthusiasm was the belief that "[t]he leading commercial people are the chief colonizing people, and hence the most powerful agents in the spread of civilization" (Semple 1896, 422).

Scant attention has been paid, however, to how these ideas were grounded first and foremost in Semple's preoccupation with slavery and its role in U.S. social and political development (Adams 2011). From her MA thesis (1891) to her final book (1931b), Semple's intellectual career was shaped by her attempt to reconcile and justify the role slavery had played in the development of U.S. commerce and its colonizing project. She found explanations and meanings for both the existence and formal abolition of U.S. slavery through her combination of geographical determinism, liberal political economy, and U.S. exceptionalism—a potent combination that took shape through her depiction of the "frontier" as a space of supreme settler-colonial agency. These forces defined Semple's moral compass, which relied on the economic as its guiding star. As Semple maintained, the "right" to the

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frontier was "decided by the ability to make the best use of it. Here the economic determines the moral principal [sic]" (Semple 1896, 423). Such economic determinism formed her response to any political cause, be it the suffrage movement or Black empowerment. She argued:

> Movements set on foot to further the ends of civilization will spread or die out according to the amount of economic truth which they embody, and their harmony with the existing economic conditions. They are to be tested from the standpoint of economic wisdom rather than from that of abstract right. (Semple 1896, 426)

For many years, histories of the discipline of geography treated the first woman president of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) as a marginal figure. If discussed at all, she was reduced either to an esteemed educator or a mere disciple of the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Indeed, Semple had studied with Ratzel at Leipzig in the 1890s, translated his writings into English, and made frequent reference to his ideas in her own works. Like the German geographer, she had a penchant for provocative overstatement, for which she was accused of environmental determinism by her contemporaries. Recently, however, a growing number of studies have begun to explore Semple as a thinker in her own right and the degree to which she shaped a generation of scholars both inside and outside her field (Keighren 2010; Adams 2011; Cresswell 2013; Klinke 2022). Concurrently, Semple has also been written back into the entangled intellectual histories of international relations and geopolitics (Ashworth 2014; Dittmer and Sharp 2014; Owens 2018; Hutchings and Owens 2021). As Hutchings and Owens (2021) concluded, Semple's ideas "were a crucial element of the international thinking that shaped the theory and practice of early-twentieth-century world politics" (352). Semple had a passionate concern with her nation's destiny. Indeed, she was so committed to U.S. expansionism that she is sometimes counted in a small circle of U.S. imperial theorists who shaped public discourses of the early twentieth century (Peet 1985; Frenkel 1992). Although she explicitly discarded race as an explanatory factor, it is now widely acknowledged that her writings are shot through with an unquestioned racism (Cresswell 2013, 50; Kobayashi 2014, 1104; Hutchings and Owens 2021, 350).

Born into a family of wealthy Kentucky entrepreneurs during the U.S. Civil War, Semple received a privileged education, graduating from Vassar College with an undergraduate degree in 1882 and again with an MA in sociology and political economy and a dissertation on slavery in 1891. Having educated herself in economics, history, and languages, she decided in the same year to move to Leipzig to study with Ratzel (Baugh n.d., 2). By the 1900s, she had begun to publish her own work, which soon attracted attention from leading geographers and the wider public. In 1917, she interrupted her work as a lecturer at the University of Chicago to serve on the Inquiry, a research consortium founded by President Woodrow Wilson to set out the conditions for a peace agreement following the end of World War I. Although as a woman she was not permitted to attend the Paris Peace Conference (Bushong 1984, 89), her reports on boundary settlements in Europe and the Middle East were read by Wilson himself, as she proudly recounted years later (Semple 1931a).

In 1921, Semple was appointed Professor of Anthropogeography at Clark University. Although she was more distinguished than many of her male colleagues, her salary at Clark remained significantly lower than that of her male peers (Berman 1974, 8). She did occasionally speak at women's rights events, such as the convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association in 1919, but these were platforms that denounced "militant suffragettes" and advocated moderation in achieving equality ("Women denounce wild antics" 1919). Semple's most notable works were *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* (Semple [1903] 1933), *Influences of Geographic Environment* (Semple 1911), and *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region* (Semple 1931b). She died in 1932, having left her imprint on a generation of Anglo-American geographers (James, Bladen, and Karan 1983). Although her influence declined after her death, traces of her thinking survived and can still be found in works of popular science in the late twentieth century (e.g., Diamond 1997, 431).

Semple's often crude determinism makes her an unpalatable thinker for the present. Indeed, some geographers "would prefer to forget" her books entirely (Castree 2011, 229). Yet, although the language of geographical determinism is overwhelming in much of her writing, there are other sources from which she drew. A simple rejection of Semple's

anthropogeography has meant that the tensions and complexities that run through her thought have not always received the attention that they merit. So far unexplored in sufficient detail are how Semple's liberal political economy shaped her interpretation and application of anthropogeography—and vice versa—and how these, in turn, were derived from her engagement with questions of slavery and her support for U.S. empire. As scholars have devoted heightened attention to reevaluating the role between race and capitalism and the centrality of racial capitalism to U.S. empire and modernity (Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Saldanha 2020; Bledsoe, McCreary, and Wright 2022), an examination of the role of slavery in Semple's liberal political economy helps to illuminate how geographers shaped and were shaped by such questions in a crucial period in the U.S.'s imperial project and the development of geography as an academic discipline.

In the following, we offer a rereading of Semple's most notable writings to shed light on the political economist Ellen Churchill Semple. We begin with her 1891 thesis, written before her turn to academic geography, where she argued that slavery was a necessary stage in the development of the state. We then examine how she brought together the ideas of Ratzel with Anglophone political economy in her 1903 book on U.S. history, before exploring how she framed the relationship between market and state in her imperial vision outlined, in part, in her 1931 book on the ancient Mediterranean. In doing so, we pinpoint how both slavery and the frontier recur throughout Semple's writings, fusing her liberal political economy with anthropogeography to promote imperial expansion. We conclude by reflecting on Semple's political compass.

Reconciling Evolution and Abolition

Little is known about the circumstances that prompted Semple to embark on an MA dissertation, submitted to Vassar in 1891, on the subject of slavery. Slavery, of course, had remained a politicized topic in late-nineteenth-century America. As Adams (2011, 47) noted, Southern women in Northern universities often felt the need to defend the South to some of their Northern classmates. Semple, however, used her dissertation not so much to defend slavery *in toto* but to explain the existence and eventual abolition of slavery in the United States within a neat teleological framework. Melding evolutionary theory and ethnology with insights from antislavery and abolitionist texts, "Slavery: A Study in Sociology" (Semple 1891) argued that the institution of slavery had to be understood as a foundational stage in the historical development of the state. Semple argued both for the natural development of slavery in the United States and the naturalness of its demise as U.S. industry developed alongside territorial expansion. She framed her ultimate verdict on slavery through the lessons of liberal political economy: "Though absolutely [slavery] was bad, relatively it was good, and this element of fitness must be its justification, as its subsequent unfitness in later times when conditions had changed proved its condemnation" (Semple 1891, 20–21, 5). In other words, the prospects of free enterprise, commerce, and trade had eventually made slavery obsolete. Semple had thus turned a moral question into an entirely economic one.

Semple neither chose to publish her thesis in later years nor did she reference it in her major writings. Yet the 25,000-word dissertation laid the intellectual foundations for much of what was to come. Semple divided her thesis into three parts. In the first, she argued for the universality of slavery throughout history and world regions, providing wide-ranging examples to claim that territorial conflict and enslavement universally underpinned human civilization. Semple devoted the second part of the dissertation to an explanation of slavery's role within the early stages of societal development as well as its eventual demise and inferiority to free labor. In the third part, she expanded on the economic, intellectual, and moral deficiencies of slavery, with heightened attention to the case of North America. Although Semple often directed her analysis toward the United States, particularly in the latter half of the dissertation, her focus broadly attempted to establish universal patterns in the adoption and abandonment of slavery, from ancient Greece to Imperial Russia.

As Adams (2011) noted, Semple's argument drew on classic works of political economy, citing Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill among others, but she relied especially on the British sociologist and biologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Semple also invoked a number of antislavery and abolitionist authors. At the foundation of her argument, Semple established commerce, reliant on economic and

territorial expansion, as the basis of civilization. She developed this argument from Spencer's (1876) influential text, *The Principles of Sociology*, in which he had presented society as a social organism that grew increasingly complex, with differentiated economic and social structures, as it expanded. Specifically, she turned to the text's chapter "Social Structures" to present the development of slavery as a recurring factor throughout human history. As clans of people became more numerous, they sought to expand their territorial claims, coming into conflict with one another. The result was war, and those who prevailed in war gained control over conquered territories and peoples. As Semple (1891) put it bluntly, "[t]he function of war is incorporation" (21). In earlier stages of human development, the victorious had eaten the conquered. Having acquired an excess of territory requiring additional labor, though, the conquered were put to work, becoming a laboring class for the victorious warrior class. The latter could dedicate themselves to continued territorial expansion, furthering the cycle. A result of this class division and attendant "surplus production" provided by enslaved labor was trade and commerce (Semple 1891, 19–20).

For Semple, trade and commerce led to civilization, characterized, in part, by a growing gender parity resulting from the cultivation of an elite domestic sphere. Drawing on Spencer, who had likewise been a major influence on Ratzel, Semple stated that prior to the advent of slavery, women had been primarily responsible for agricultural and domestic labor—"drudges who perform the less skilled parts of the process of sustentation," in Spencer's (1876, 460–61) words. As groups claimed larger tracts of territory and enslavement provided additional labor, free women acquired the facility to devote themselves to more refined past times and study. "The agricultural industry of the community has grown so that perhaps the women are hardly adequate for the task," Semple (1891, 20) wrote. "Now there is work for the captives to do, so they are enslaved. A step forward has been taken in humanity, economics and the elevation of women" (20). Semple augmented her engagement with evolutionary sociology by turning to the works of British ethnologists, such as Ferguson's (1865) *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* and Lubbock's (1870) *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages*, to reflect on what she understood as the concomitant transformation of humans from states of primitive barbarism to civilization as trade and commerce developed.

As a foundational stage in the development of a civilizing political economy, Semple believed slavery provided the appropriate division of labor and means for the development of a robust economy and territorial expansion. She thus maintained slavery as "the training school of barbarians for civilization" and "a mill through which humanity at large has been compelled to pass in order that the coarse savage nature might be refined to meet the high destiny of man" (Semple 1891, 20–21). Nevertheless, when territorial incorporation was achieved, industrialization became a function of peace, and the institution of slavery, along with the division between slave and free labor, became a hindrance to industrial advancement. As Semple (1891) noted, Spencerian in tone,

> Slavery as an industrial system and the industrial organization of society which succeeds militantism are fundamentally opposed. The conflict must come and it is safe to predict that the fittest will survive. The question remains—which is the fittest. (25)

Semple drew on a suite of U.S., British, and Irish antislavery and abolitionist writers to argue for the merits of free over slave labor. She devoted more than thirty paragraphs in her dissertation to parsing through the economic advantages of free labor, drawing heavily on Irish economist John Elliot Cairnes's ([1863] 2010) book *Slave Power: Its Character, Career, & Probable Designs*, which had emerged from a series of lectures he had given at the University of Dublin. His objective in addressing U.S. slavery was "to show that the course of history is largely determined by the action of economic causes" (Cairnes 1863 [2010], vii). Drawing on the works of British and U.S. abolitionist writers, including African American author George Washington Williams's (1883) *The History of the Negro Race in America, 1619–1880*, Semple concluded her dissertation thus, "Slavery gnawed like a worm at the root of our national life, and the evil was made manifest in a weakening of the moral nature—a drooping of the highest efflorescence of the national mind" (Semple 1891, 49).

Although her dissertation is shot through with racist language, Semple tried to avoid direct discussions of racial politics in the United States. She made an exception when she claimed that the

differences in slave labor between ancient Greece and Rome and the United States, dependent in part on the sort of labor each society required, could also be traced to "the character of the race enslaved" (Semple 1891, 14). The enslaved in ancient Greece and Rome were "equal, oftentimes the superior, of his master," whereas the enslaved in the United States were "savage, with a minimum of intelligence and characterized only by an imitative power and docility." Drawing on settler-colonial imagery, Semple referred to Indigenous peoples as "hunters and gatherers" who did not have the economic sophistication to hold captives as slaves, writing, "[s]o the savage adds one more feather to his headdress, hangs one more scalp at his waist or one more jawbone on his arm, and if [he and his wife] have not yet lost their relish for human food, the victim becomes as important a feature of the family larder as our Thanksgiving turkey" (Semple 1891, 19). Although racist, Semple did not attempt to use race as an explanatory frame of analysis to either justify or condemn slavery—instead, she engaged slavery through the prism of political economy.

From Cairnes, Semple took the view that slave labor was inferior, at foundation, because it was coerced and therefore reluctantly given, lacking in the enterprising spirit, skill, and versatility that characterized free labor. The point to which she repeatedly returned in the latter half of her dissertation, drawing on Cairnes, was that slavery dulls the capacity for labor, regardless of the racial character of the enslaved, because it dampens the spirit of enterprise and limits the extent of free labor, including that which would entice immigration (Semple 1891, 43–44). Semple wrote,

> As neither manufacture nor invention, so commerce has never flourished in a slave-holding community. The spirit of a commercial people is enterprise, whereas slavery fosters in master and man a spirit of inaction. (38)

Although she clearly saw Black Americans as "savages," she also concluded that slavery had prevented them from becoming skilled laborers, reckoning that

> … the negro in this country proved to be unsuited to all forms of work which required dexterity or care and could be trusted only with the rudest implements and these he injured constantly. This characteristic is not to be attributed wholly to a natural deficiency of the negro intellect, for the native tribes of Africa in a state of freedom have since showed themselves expert in the use of firearms and other such delicate implements. The natural inference, therefore, is that which has been drawn above—namely, that the negro was unskillful from the lack of interest which a condition of slavery generates. (26)

Instead, Semple maintained that slavery was the most efficient system only in times of war or where there was no unemployed free labor available. She concluded her point by quoting Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* to underscore the importance of free trade (38) and later reproached "the incompatibility of slavery with immigration" (43), emphasizing that the former prevented flows of free labor.

Semple (1891) argued that slave labor was incompatible with manufacture and commerce and therefore best suited to agricultural work, although even in agriculture slave labor tended to remain inferior to free labor (36). In the U.S. South, this condition of slavery leant itself to the creation of large agricultural estates reliant on monopoly power. The development of slavery in the United States depended, in part, on geographical conditions, but only in as much as those geographical conditions responded to outstanding economic ones. Strikingly, she did not engage at this stage with the work of geographers. In addition to some discussion of "fresh," "poor," "fertile," and "virgin" soil, however, she began to draw connections between topography, natural conditions, and economy. For instance, in discussing New England's relationship to abolition, she argued that the condition of enslaved labor necessitated constant employment and therefore leant itself to the production of

> raw products as tobacco, sugar, rice and coffee, which require attention from season to season without intermission and allow of immense concentration of labor. … It was for this reason that the slave industrial system flourished in the south and not in the north. New England tried slavery but soon found that it was not suited to the natural conditions of the country. Her [New England's] position on the subject of abolition, therefore, shows the development of a moral scruple out of an economic one, thereby affording a luminous example illustrating the utilitarian theory of ethics. (27–28)

New England had abandoned slavery because its "natural conditions" did not suit the mono-agricultural farming that Semple understood to necessitate slave labor. This was another point she took from Cairnes and that she would further develop in accordance with her engagement with anthropogeography.

Ultimately, the development of monopoly power had produced an attendant, corrupting class system in the South. As Semple concluded, the South's agricultural system produced "three classes of society—the capitalist, the slave, and between these two the freeman made a pauper by the monopoly privileges of the rich and deprived of his right to labor by the presence of the slave" (40). Again, she returned to Spencer, condemning a society "characterized by status" and "subordination" (41). She dedicated the final pages of her manuscript to detailing the intellectual and moral degradation that slavery produced on every class of society (46–49).

Semple ended her contemplation of slavery with its formal abolition in the United States. She did not discuss convict leasing, the Black codes, or any other of the other ways in which slavery had persisted in the postwar period. Rather, she used her dissertation to neatly situate slavery and U.S. slavery within larger historical processes, grappling with and clarifying the same point repeatedly throughout the manuscript, namely that slavery had been absolutely bad but relatively good and that its moral condemnation was ultimately one made on economic terms. While drawing on evolutionary sociology and ethnology to defend the presence of slavery throughout history, she drew on antislavery and abolitionist texts to question its development and persistence within the United States. Undergirding this reconciliation of evolution and abolition was an expansionary political economy intimately tied to Semple's understanding of the development of the United States and territorialization. With her subsequent discovery of Ratzel's anthropogeography, she would find an analytical framework to merge these elements into a cohesive and productive whole. As she absorbed anthropogeography, the urgency with which she had attended to slavery waned although the theme remained present throughout her life's works. In applying anthropogeography to the United States, she developed a new and more abstract interpretation of the problem of U.S. slavery, presented in her 1903 interpretation of the U.S. Civil War.

Merging Liberal Political Economy with Anthropogeography

As she noted in a 1912 letter to the British geographer John Keltie, Semple had first felt the need to ground herself in the subject of geography when researching her dissertation (Semple 1912a). In the years that followed, she certainly immersed herself in academic geography, or more precisely, in the brand of anthropogeography developed by Ratzel, with whom she would soon develop a close professional and personal relationship. Indeed, Semple served her former professor as a translator, interlocutor, and research assistant on matters of recent U.S. history. Ratzel, who is known today primarily for his influence on the formation of national socialism in interwar Germany (W. D. Smith 1986; Jureit 2012), had traveled the United States extensively in the 1870s and had become a leading expert on North American geography, history, and society (Ratzel 1878, 1880). His firsthand knowledge of North America was now dated, however. Semple was all too keen to supply him with answers to his most burning questions, particularly on the matter of race (Klinke 2022).

At Ratzel's request, Semple wrote to him to recommend observers of U.S. politics whose verdict she trusted (Semple 1893). Rather than pointing him to the abolitionist authors she had drawn on in her dissertation, though, she recommended Henry Woodfin Grady, a White supremacist newspaper editor and orator from Georgia who was closely involved in the convict labor regime and whose newspapers endorsed the lynching of Black Americans (Roberts Forde 2019). She also commended her friend Thomas Underwood Dudley who had risen to the rank of major in the Confederate Army and now served as the Bishop of Kentucky ("Bishop T. U. Dudly dies" 1904). Semple would later enlist her cousin Joseph Clay Stiles Blackburn in the effort to supply Ratzel with further government documents and bulletins. Blackburn was a Democratic Senator who had served in the Confederate Army and was later appointed Civil Governor of the Panama Canal Zone (Semple 1902; "Jos. C. S. Blackburn, ex-senator, is dead" 1918). It is not entirely clear whether she was simply trying to help Ratzel harden views that he had already formed on his journey to the U.S. South in 1873 (Ratzel 1876 [1988]) or whether these recommendations point to views that she had not felt it necessary or indeed appropriate to explore in her dissertation.

Grady was one of a number of White Southern leaders whose vision of future race relations both reflected existing racial ideology and subtly sought to move Southern society beyond the political divides of the Civil War. The "New South" was, as he put it, "simply the old South under new conditions."

Like Semple, Grady (1890) "rejoice[d] that the American Union was saved from the storm of war" but also believed that there were "no braver soldiers in war than the men who twenty-five years ago wore the gray and followed the Confederate flag" (Grady 1890, 147–48; compare to Semple 1903, 288). Although there were nuances between Grady and other White Southern leaders, they also shared a "basic ideological unity" that distinguished between *docility* and *defiance* to draw the color line, rather than privilege either the principle of integration or of segregation (Friedman 1970, 319). Black Americans who accepted the principle of White supremacy in the public realm and kept out of politics were welcomed into the New South. Others were not.

Semple returned to Leipzig in 1895, this time to discuss with Ratzel various smaller translations, which she published in the late 1890s, as well as a larger project, the prospective translation of his two-volume *Anthropogeographie* (Ratzel 1882, 1891). Ratzel and Semple eventually agreed not on a translation but on a reinterpretation of his work better suited to "the Anglo-American mind" (Ratzel 1903). Semple's book appeared in 1911 as *Influences of Geographic Environment*, seventeen years after she had first pitched the idea to Ratzel and seven years after his death (Ratzel 1894). The reason for the delay was that Semple had meanwhile embarked on a different book project. Published in 1903, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* offered less a universal theory of environmental influence than an application of such a theory to U.S. history. Semple's argument could hardly have been more sweeping. Geography had played a steady influence not just on commercial development, migration, and war—but on mentality itself. The westward movement of White settlers had been a continuation of early European colonization. Both had been triggered by geographical opportunities and shaped by geographical forces. Populations moved westward via a law of least resistance, eventually overcoming mountain ranges and pouring out into fertile lowlands where abundant space triggered commercial initiative. She gave special attention to the episodes of the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the U.S. Civil War. There was, in Semple's view, a direct line of descent from the maritime history of European colonization to the rise of U.S. sea power in the early twentieth century.

Semple was clearly under the influence of her former professor. Many of her arguments, including those about the benefits of migration, the role of geographical barriers, and the creative energies of wide space, were taken from the Leipzig geographer's writings. Although Ratzel was cited throughout, there were other key influences, including the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, the environmental historian Frederick Jackson Turner, and the paleontologist and racial theorist Nathaniel Shaler, the latter a polygenist, euphemist of U.S. slavery, and advocate for segregation (Shaler 1884; Livingstone 1984). Reviewed widely in the North American press, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* was a great personal success for Semple. The *New York Times* found it a "prophecy into the future," and the *Washington Post* described it as "abundantly explained," featuring "timely" interventions and "crisp sentences" on colonization ("American history and its geographic conditions" 1903c). In 1904, the book was already in its second edition. A decade later, it was said to have become "the standard textbook by the Government and Navy of the United States" (Geographical Circle n.d.; see also Keighren 2010, 33).

Crucially, many reviews emphasized not just Semple's scholarly contribution but its lessons for U.S. foreign policy. As one academic reviewer observed, "the entire book is an argument for expansion" (R.S.T. 1903, 567; see also Adams 2011, 114). Indeed, Semple was enamored by a narrative of U.S. history in which "the man of backwoods and plain" had shaped "the national dream of empire into the sturdy stuff of trading-post and ranch and farm" (Semple [1903] 1933, 178). A number of reviews singled out Semple's chapter on the Civil War as particularly insightful ("American history and its geographic conditions" 1903a, 1903b). Although there were only fleeting references to the Civil War in her other writings (see, e.g., Semple 1904, 297), *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* featured a comprehensive discussion of the war from the perspective of military geography. Semple wrote about the strategic opportunities that particular valleys had offered and, conversely, the obstacles that mountain ranges had presented to the two armies. She discussed the role of amphibious warfare and noted that the Northern armies had been named after rivers—the "Army of the Potomac," the "Army of the Tennessee," and so on

(Semple [1903] 1933, 300). Seeking to interpret the actions of individual states during the war as the outcome of geographical conditioning, she wrote that her own state of Kentucky had presented a strategic asset to both armies because of the bridgeless and almost fordless Ohio River, a natural line of defense for the South. She thus recast a political question—Kentucky's status as one of four slave states that had not seceded from the Union—into a geographical one. Although it had perhaps been politically logical for Kentucky to remain neutral, it had been geographically futile.

> The question of slavery in the United States was primarily a question of climate and soil, a question of rich alluvial valley and fertile coastland plain, with a warm, moist, enervating climate, versus rough mountain upland and glaciated prairie or coast, with a colder, harsher, but more bracing climate. The morale of the institution, like the right of secession, was long a mooted question, until New England, having discovered the economic unfitness of slave industry for her boulder-strewn soil, took the lead in the crusade against it. The South, by the same token of geographical conditions, but conditions favorable to the plantation system which alone made slave labor profitable, upheld the institution both on economic and moral grounds. (Semple [1903] 1933, 280)

Despite declaring sympathy for those who had joined the Confederate army, she concluded that "the disruption of the Union would have been a retrograde step" because it threatened the preservation of a "large political territory" (Semple [1903] 1933, 288, 308). In the Semple of 1903, it was thus geography that cracked the whip of historical change. She had not abandoned her teleological model of history but rather found in anthropogeography a higher level of abstraction with which to interpret slavery's prevalence in North America. Although she was no longer drawing explicitly on her heroes of 1891 (Spencer, Smith, etc.), Semple had not discarded their ideas. Indeed, she began her discussion of slavery by noting the following:

> "Civilization is at bottom an economic fact," at top an ethical fact. Beneath the economic lie the geographical conditions, and these in the last analysis are factors in the formation of ethical standards. (Semple [1903] 1933, 280)

Here, Semple repeated that phrase from the 1896 lecture she had given to the Third Biennial General Federation of Women's Clubs in Louisville. In that lecture, Semple outlined her understanding of the centrality of economy to civilizational development. Although she foregrounded for the first time the "the bed-rock of geographic influences as the ultimate ever-present factors at work in making the history of man," she was still interested in constructing a gradient of civilization according to forms of economic liberty. Although medieval towns had served as "the nurseries of liberty," democratic institutions and revolutions owed their origins to "financial power of the people and the right which they claimed to hold" (Semple 1896, 421, 422). Unsurprisingly, the "distinctly commercial countries" of the Anglo-Saxon world prevailed for Semple, while France and Germany were "retarded" by large standing armies and the taxation needed to the sustain the latter (422).

Large parts of *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* were concerned with economic questions. Semple discussed maritime trade and regional markets for raw materials and livestock as well as larger flows of commodities. She examined profit margins and paid close attention to questions of labor supply (agricultural and industrial, skilled and unskilled) and wrote about the importance of infrastructural investment in driving settlement westward. Her book dealt with urban development, the limitations of particular energy sources (e.g., water) and the way in which the introduction of coke into blast furnaces had reshaped the geography of the iron and steel industry. It offered detailed discussion of such processes, always with an eye on how they took place on a larger bedrock of environmental opportunities, particularly those offered by the seas. "Reading the early commercial history of New England," she noted, "one seems never to get away from the sound of the shipbuilder's hammer and the rush of the launching vessel as she 'schoons' on the waves" (Semple [1903] 1933, 122). Underpinning these discussions was the fantasy of settler-colonial abundance along with its "necessity of some indubitable allurement, like the prospect of wealth, … to tempt settlers to make the long voyage from their native land and face the hardships of the wilderness" (25–26).

When Semple finally published her *Influences of Geographic Environment on the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropo-geography* in 1911, she briefly returned to the question of the Civil War, reiterating that the ethics of slavery had been "obscured where conditions of soil and topography made the institution profitable" (Semple 1911, 23). Slavery was not just

one of Semple's lifelong interests—it also served her, occasionally at least, as a metaphorical language. Climate, she argued in 1911, "like a slave-driver, scourges on the fur-clad Eskimo to reap the harvest of the deep" (608). It was "not only the enervating heat and moisture of the Southern States, but also the large extent of their fertile area which *necessitated* slave labor, introduced the plantation system, and resulted in the whole aristocratic organization of society in the South" (622, italics added). Whether it was the "westward expansion of Southern slave power in search of unexhausted land" or "the withdrawal thither of the declining Indian tribes before the protruding line of white settlement," all were no more than the epiphenomena of a Copernican "world in motion" as it encountered the forces of nature (79–80). By fusing German anthropogeography with Anglophone liberal political economy, she had arrived at a theory of world order that was both environmentalist and teleological. Semple found an expression for this theory in the figure of the frontier.

Expanding Imperial Frontiers

Semple used the frontier to illuminate the geographical influences and economic imperatives that shaped her approach to anthropogeography. For her, the frontier was the space through which territorial and commercial expansion achieved vital potency and, in the case of the United States, provided the unique opportunity for harnessing Anglo-Saxon ingenuity, assisted by relatively unhindered migration. Semple also mobilized this depiction of the frontier as the rationale for her advocacy of imperial expansion, especially widening U.S. participation throughout the Americas, as well as state-led colonizing efforts elsewhere, such as Japanese incursions into China and Korea. She would ultimately apply this imperial vision to rationalize and promote the ascendent commercial imperium of the United States.

For Semple [1903] 1933, "[a] frontier is never a line but always a shifting zone of assimilation, where an amalgamation of races, manners, institutions, and morals, more or less complete, takes place" (81). This shifting zone of assimilation was a space through which territorial growth and its consolidating and civilizing effects occurred. In the case of the United States, the westward-moving frontier provided necessary "[s]eparation from old-world traditions, a return to close contact with nature, the stripping off of non-essentials, growth under conditions of uncramped development and untried possibilities—these made the sturdy, youthful American of the western wilds" (78). N. Smith (2003) noted that, in a similar fashion, the geographer Isaiah Bowman (1878–1950), an acquaintance and champion of Semple, "Americanized [Ratzel's] vision" of an "expanding national population [which] inevitably implied colonization of the land and pursuit of agriculture," fusing Ratzelian colonialism "with an American exceptionalism bound up in Frederick Jackson Turner's lost frontier thesis" (38).

Although not merely a line, in Semple's imagination, the frontier's zone of assimilation was nevertheless a boundary. The English colonists "settled in more or less strongly compacted groups, which were further consolidated locally and politically by the danger of the all-surrounding savage; and thus retained an inner environment which was civilized. The line between them and the savage was therefore strictly drawn" (Semple [1903] 1933, 81). The "native" within this configuration was not only a "natural foe of the settler" but also a part of the natural surroundings—as much a part of his environment as the fertile soil and the far-reaching wilderness"—which the settler must subdue (80). It is this combination of territorial expansion and civilizing livelihood through which the political economy of Semple's anthropogeography becomes apparent. As she had declared in her 1896 lecture, "[t]he right to such land is therefore decided by the ability to make the best use of it." In the frontier, too, "the economic determines the moral principal [sic]" (Semple 1896, 423).

Semple emphasized that territorial expansion itself was insufficient—it had to be combined with free labor. The expansion of slavery, rather than solely its existence, had been the defining political issue leading to the Civil War. Echoing that debate, Semple [1903] 1933 argued that

> rapid territorial expansion of the slave power, due to rapid exhaustion of the soil by the extensive agriculture characteristic of slave industry and the consequent need of taking up new lands, stimulated also by the increased demand for cotton which followed the invention of the spinning-jenny, maintained a sparsity of white population, which, being unrelieved by new accessions from without, reduced the competition of the whites among

> themselves, kept down the beneficent struggle for existence tending to produce a white laboring class, and thus barred the experiment of free labor on the cotton and sugar plantations. (281)

Emphasizing the necessity of migration to the production of the frontier, Semple prioritized White, European immigration—the "vigorous, moral Teutonic stock of Europe" (334). She described European Whites, particularly Anglo-Saxons, who passed successfully through the mill of settlement and assimilation in the United States, as

> these crude foreign elements [who] have served their purpose well, have contributed to the economic growth of the country … while every advance of the frontier of settlement or expansion of our political boundary has subjected them more and more to the most American of American conditions, abundant land, and accelerated their evolution from European peasants to *self-reliant, enterprising American citizens*. (311–12, italics added)

Nevertheless, Semple remained politic in her measured support for immigration from Asia, specifically Japan and China, to the United States. In the second edition of *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, reworked directly before Semple's death and published in 1933, she expanded her discussion of Chinese and Japanese immigration, drawing a gentle critique of exclusionary immigration policies, such as the Immigration Act of 1924, enacted since the book's original publication thirty years earlier. The Immigration Act of 1924 represented the culmination of nativist sentiment following the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and parts of Asia during the final two decades of the nineteenth and nearly first quarter of the twentieth centuries (Yang 2020, 7–32). Nativist sentiment was compounded by a push toward isolationism following the end of World War I as well as economic depression and heightened unemployment that provoked backlash toward immigrants. The 1920s was also "a decade of escalating racial paranoia and violence" (Yang 2020, 22), enflamed by Jim Crow laws and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan and entrenched via racial sciences like eugenics. The Act strengthened restrictions on immigration that Congress had first legislated in 1917 and that had barred peoples from most areas of Asia (Japan and the Philippines were excluded; immigration from China had previously been curtailed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and instituted "ethnic quotas" based on national origin for peoples migrating from southern and eastern Europe. The 1924 Act further restricted migration by eliminating immigration from Japan and by adjusting the quota system to increase limitations on immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Although the Act remained intact until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 increased the percentage of quotas for peoples from southern and eastern Europe and introduced quotas for peoples from Asia, including Japan and China, the system of "ethnic quotas" persisted until its elimination with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

In one of the few significantly expanded sections of the 1933 edition of *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, Semple chided "the anti-Asiatics" for both a lack of probity and geopolitical short-sightedness, concluding, "Interference with the principle of dissemination of peoples about the shores of a great sea not only has focused world attention upon the community of interests facing a common ocean but has accelerated the rise to world significance of the Pacific area." She likewise noted that "[t]he efficiency and ambitions of the Japanese immigrants added coals to the fire of racial prejudice" (Semple [1903] 1933, 321–22). Indeed, her views would have aligned with the likes of former president Theodore Roosevelt who, during his presidency, was a staunch advocate for immigration from Japan to the United States, believing that the Japanese were racially superior to people from other Asian countries and keen to navigate growing Japanese and U.S. colonial power in the Pacific through partnership rather than antagonism (Yang 2020, 49–50). Semple's approach stands in marked contrast to some of her interlocutors and predecessors in U.S. geography, such as the aforementioned Shaler (Livingstone 1984). Indeed, Shaler's scholarship and active participation in the Immigration Restriction League of Boston helped lay the groundwork for the "ethnic quotas" of the 1924 Act. In contrast, Semple's unique brand of Ratzelian anthropogeography and liberal political economy favored immigration and cast doubt on the desirability of the emergent immigration restrictions. Consistent with her approach throughout her career, however, Semple made only subtle references to contemporary legislation and policy, instead privileging a more social scientific discussion of anthropogeographic "facts." As N. Smith (2003) noted in relation to

Bowman's hesitancy to advance policy prior to meticulous empirical data gathering and analysis, "[r]igid as that might appear, empiricism and liberalism were for Bowman the same thing" (135). Something similar could be said for Semple.

Interwoven into Semple's anthropogeography and her discussions of immigration and slavery was a dedication to the maintenance of law and economic order conditioned on a strong state power that is directed outward to regulate international relations and establish the open thoroughfares of a functioning liberal economy. In her final book, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: Its Relation to Ancient History* (Semple 1931b), published a year before her death, Semple repeatedly highlighted the dangers of piracy and its capacity to subvert and disrupt economic order. Employing her brand of anthropogeography, Semple maintained that the conditions through which piracy developed and persisted in the ancient Mediterranean were inextricably shaped by geographical factors. Due to the Mediterranean basin's configuration of islands and peninsulas, "trade was compressed into certain narrow trade routes" and "traffic was restricted to fixed lines in a way impossible on the open ocean" (Semple 1931b, 639). Islands were especially prone to piracy due to their limited territory and capacity for agricultural and local industry. These same geographic conditions—limited territory and opportunity for territorial expansion as well as narrow trade routes—likewise produced conditions for robbery when evidenced in mountain or desert environments (642). Geographical habitats produced mental habits of piracy. Thus, people migrating from inland places with geographical conditions prone to robbery would "bring with them the mind of robbers and only alter their raiding method. … The mental habit of the previous habitat harmonizes with the economic conditions of the new one" (643). To counteract these conditions, Semple advocated strong state institutions that could maintain an "open ocean" of commerce and "order on the sea" (644) lest "the balance" between peace and piracy be "easily disturbed and tipped from trade to freebooting at any jar to the social base" (645). Whenever Semple wrote about antiquity, she seemed to be referring equally to her understanding of the expanding nature of U.S. imperial hegemony in the twentieth century.

Indeed, as grand geopolitical theory and popular sentiment began to conclude that the finite space of the earth had been carved up and claimed, the frontier gradually became less a space of active territorial conquest and more one of commercial development—an assessment essential to Semple's own perspective. Following World War I, as the United States became a more dominant world power, it would no longer prioritize territorial expansion as a means of imperial expansion but instead the creation of an international order premised on U.S. economic dominance, which would become fully entrenched following World War II. Domosh (2013) showed how this shift went hand-in-hand with the development of commercial and economic geographies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These new geographies relied on a "geoeconomic imagination" that conflated "civilization" with "economic spatial strategies" through which the United States expanded overseas markets (see also Schulten 2001). In this geopolitical rendering, the civilizational discourses of the nineteenth century, on which Semple had relied in her MA dissertation, for instance, were

> retooled to fit particular political and economic circumstances. Within the context of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the discourse took on a particularly economic bent: "savage" and "barbaric" peoples could be civilized by purchasing and using American-made products. (Domosh 2013, 947)

Indeed, as Adams (2011, 253–54) noted, Semple used her position at Clark to promote commercial geography by attempting to establish partnerships between the school and various businesses, "cultivating contacts with bankers and manufacturers in an effort to persuade them that geographers could be of value to their companies" (Adams, 95–101, 253–72). Moreover, Semple's writings captured the geoeconomic imaginary of the new geographies that she further tied to U.S. military strength. If, for Semple, slavery provided a transitional phase through which barbarism and war had given way to the capacity for commercial development and peace, state institutions—contingent on law and order—would be necessary to enforce this peace, prevent backsliding toward "barbarism," and enforce economic development. Such a stance mirrored Semple's depiction of state power and piracy in the ancient Mediterranean.

It is therefore telling that Semple chose to title the penultimate chapter of *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* "The United States in Relation to the American Mediterranean." The

chapter compared perceived geographic similarities between the "Gulf-Caribbean basin" and the European Mediterranean, a springboard from which Semple claimed that the "rapidly growing importance of the Gulf seaboard" would be a space of U.S. economic supremacy, just as the European Mediterranean had been to the ancient world (Semple [1903] 1933, 418). This should be understood in the context of the Spanish-American War of 1898, around which Semple shaped the chapter. Following Spanish expulsion from the Americas, the United States gained the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico as colonies and debates over its future colonization of Cuba gained increased traction (Immerwahr 2020). Semple commented that

> Cuba lay just at our doors, and everything which influenced it fundamentally touched our commercial interests, which had been growing steadily since 1850. The peace and prosperity of this market of purchase and sale were of moment to our country. Moreover, the proximity of our shores made the United States a natural base for filibustering expeditions, which, in spite of deeply aroused sympathies, the government was bound to prevent. Our ports became the refuge for Cuban exiles, the home of the Cuban Junta. (Semple [1903] 1933, 406)

The conclusion of the war cemented U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere and initiated a new and contentious phase of imperial expansion, igniting intense debate within the United States over the possession of extracontinental colonies. Semple, ever the objective empiricist, avoided mentioning these political debates. Instead, she focused her discussion on the geographical conditions that shaped the region's economic potential, landing firmly on the side of unimpeded expansion undergirded by a strengthened U.S. military presence. As she exulted, "[t]here is now every promise that the southern seaboard will come into its own, and that the geographical location of the United States in the American Mediterranean will be exploited to the full limit of its possibilities" (Semple [1903] 1933, 418–19).

For Semple [1903] 1933, the crown jewel and pivot of U.S. dominance in the region would be the Panama Canal due to its role in providing a commercial and military thoroughfare between the Pacific and Atlantic. As she noted,

> The supreme interest of the United States in an Isthmian Canal, the strength of her geographic location in relation to the same, her natural office as guarantor of the neutrality of the channel and the political stability of the country through which it passes, finally the abundant wealth, the resources of the Anglo-Saxon republic, and the steadily developed aptitude of its citizens for vast enterprises, all combine to lay the task of its construction upon the United States. (412)

This economic dominance was premised on "naval supremacy in the American Mediterranean" (412). As Semple [1903] 1933 emphasized, "the construction of the Isthmian Canal, which will constitute in effect a bit of American seaboard, must call forth a navy whose strength shall be commensurate with the importance of our extra-continental interests. Such a navy will insure our command of the Caribbean Sea" (412–13). Just as in the European Mediterranean of the ancient world, so, too, here, "a strong hand" was needed to "[keep] order on the sea" (Semple 1931b, 644).

In *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, Semple not only provided an anthropogeographic analysis of U.S. history but, in advocating the development of U.S. commercial and military interests in Latin America, firmly contextualized and promoted the country's imperial project in the present. Interwoven into and energizing her analysis was the figure of the frontier as a "zone of assimilation" through which geography and commerce gain potency. Central to Semple's vision was the liberal notion of law and economic order that could protect and promote commercial expansion and that has come to define global governance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Concluding Remarks

Although Ellen Churchill Semple attained recognition as a scholar and intellectual both within and beyond the academy, she did not aspire to political commentary and largely avoided diagnoses of current events in the press. Semple did, however, make a rare exception in January 1932, shortly before her death. "In my opinion from twenty years of observation and two years of study in this particular area," she was quoted in the *Palm Beach Post*, "the Chinese have no idea of political organization." The Japanese, on the other hand, "would educate the Chinese in the fundamentals of civilization" (Hawks 1932). Semple was endorsing the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

Two decades earlier, the Kentucky geographer's journey to Japan and China, too, had aroused interest in the local press of her hometown. The

Louisville Herald reported in June 1912 that Semple had climbed mountain passes and dined with princesses and foreign dignitaries, while her slender luggage was "carried by a coolie" ("After an absence of eighteen months" 1912). She had presented her findings to the Royal Geographical Society in London in the presence of Lord Curzon and Leonard Darwin, son of Charles Darwin, and subsequently gone on to publish papers on the geographical underpinnings of Japanese agriculture and on Japanese colonial policy (Semple 1912b, 1913). Unsurprisingly, given the findings of our discussion, Semple justified the Japanese invasion in 1932 not by reference to immutable geographical conditions but instead by highlighting the civilizing force of a market economy under imperial control. Once Japanese rule had been established, she explained, "an orderly and economic program could be worked out and production encouraged by the establishment of a permanent market. The Chinese," she concluded, would "accept a low wage for their labor which will still be about 50 per cent above what they can get in China" (Hawks 1932).

This episode highlights the way in which Semple overlaid Ratzel's anthropogeography on top of her earlier paradigm of liberal political economy without ever entirely displacing the latter. Semple fused the two by treating geography as operating at a deeper explanatory level than the economy; whereas the former was ultimately oblivious to human intervention, the latter could be harnessed and ordered. At times, however, tensions between her anthropogeography and her liberalism emerged. Although conscripted to a Wilsonian paradigm at the Inquiry, her reports were criticized by some of her peers for privileging the interest of colonial powers over those of the colonized, a consequence of her anthropogeographic assumption that larger and more powerful states were more evolutionarily advanced than smaller ones (Munro 1918; Semple 1918; see also Adams 2011, 245). Yet, Semple found a compromise in her belief that the economy, shaped by the environment, supersedes morality. The evolution of European peasants into self-reliant, enterprising Americans had been enabled by the continent's "abundant land," a transformation and civilizational rise made possible by transatlantic migration. This explains both her views on the U.S. immigration debate and her advocacy for U.S. empire.

Although Semple never again made slavery the central object of analysis as she had in 1891, the issue remained on her mind. In *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*, her last piece of academic writing, she romanticized slavery in her depiction of antiquity. "[O]ne smells the fragrance of flower beds when the slave moves about with his watering pot in the fading twilight," she wrote, and elsewhere, "[s]houts of Olympian laughter go up, drowning the splash of the nearby fountain, while barefoot slaves move noiselessly about, serving the guests" (Semple 1931b, 484–85, 498). Indeed, in the final paragraphs of the book, she noted that "[d]espite distinctions due to differences of race and character in the peoples of the Mediterranean Basin, a common type of cultural development finally prevailed among them" (704). "The high-water mark of Mediterranean civilization," she continued, "is to be found in the polished manners which characterized these ancient peoples. … When faultless manners descend from kings to slaves, the social polish is perfect and culture has attained its utmost" (705–06). Although this was clearly in tension with her thesis, which had posited that such a degree of commercial sophistication could only have arrived following the demise of slavery, there is no indication that she had revised her teleological interpretation. Rather, underlying her thesis, there had always been a sublimation of the institution of slavery, an attempt to accommodate its place in her country's history and make that history relevant to the country's ongoing imperial efforts—to make sure, in her words, that relative "good" would continue to arise from the absolute "bad."

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