



**Scott Laderman.** *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 256 S. ISBN 978-0-520-95804-3; ISBN 978-1-306-29065-4.

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## S. Laderman: Empire in Waves

Helicopters swooped down from the sky, raining fire on the coastal village. In the midst of a hellish artillery barrage, Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) set down his chopper and ordered American soldiers under his command to hit the surf. “Charlie don’t surf,” Kilgore’s character memorably said when conquering the Vietnamese beach break in a surreal scene from the 1979 film “Apocalypse Now”. Kilgore punctuated the violent scene of American (surf) imperialism with the memorable line: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning.” (pp. 56–58)

Scott Laderman critiques surf imperialism and the larger geopolitical and economic impact of wave riding in his important book “Empire in Waves”. A historian and surfer, Laderman brings both academic rigor and a waterman’s perspective to his subject. Based on analysis of surf periodicals, novels, films, government documents, and oral history interviews, “Empire in Waves” covers several cutting edge historical subfields: transnational history, history of tourism, sports history, and the history of global capitalism.

“Empire in Waves” begins in Hawaii, where surfing originated. Laderman corrects several popular misconceptions about the sport’s “discovery” by European and American travelers to the Pacific archipelago. Enjoyed by all segments of traditional Hawaiian culture, surfing struck many missionaries as immodest and sinful. Yet missionaries never actually banned the sport and Hawaiians never fully gave it up.

In the early 20th-century, Americans rediscovered the joys of surfing, and as Laderman argues, the ability

of surfing to boost tourism. White proponents of surfing sought more white visitors and residents for the islands, hoping this would help plant the American flag of empire. As one white surfer/booster explained in 1907, Hawaii needed to “be redeemed from the Oriental, fortified and Americanized as it should be” (p. 21). Yet, white supremacists weren’t the only surf evangelists in Hawaii. Native Hawaiians like Olympic swimming champion Duke Kahanamoku carried wave riding around the globe. As the American empire and influence expanded in the 20th-century, so did surfing and surf tourism.

For Laderman, the urtext of surf imperialism is not the aforementioned “Apocalypse Now”, but the 1966 surf documentary “Endless Summer”. Bruce Brown’s classic film follows two young California surfers chasing waves around the globe. While other scholars have critiqued the racist caricatures of “natives” in Brown’s film, Laderman does an excellent job situating the movie in a Cold War context, by addressing how the film and surfing more generally came to embody the soft power of cultural diplomacy in the ostensible battle between American freedom and communist oppression.

This Cold War analysis sets up two strong case studies of the politics of surfing in Indonesia and South Africa. In the case of Indonesia, home to some of the best waves on the planet, American surf tourists remained blissfully ignorant (sometimes willfully so) of the ways a brutal military dictatorship, propped up by American Cold War support in the 1960s and 1970s, facilitated their surf ex-

ploration. Similarly, professional surfing in the 1970s and 1980s largely turned a blind eye toward the repressive system of Apartheid in South Africa, where important international contests were held at beaches that were often racially restricted. The heroes of “Empire in Waves” are three professional surfers who began individual boycotts of South African contests in 1985. Tom Carroll, Tom Curren, and Martin Potter may not be household names outside of surfing circles, but these three world champions risked their careers to take a principled stand against Apartheid. The Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) cowardly refused to do so. “The case of South Africa,” Laderman argues, “forced surfers, often for the first time, to begin conceiving of themselves as global political actors.” (p. 92)

In one sense, the South Africa boycotts marked the high water mark of political activism and consciousness in “Empire in Waves”. Subsequent decades saw the heavy commercialization of surfing. The sport became a brand vehicle in the expansion of global capitalism at the end of the 20th-century. Laderman’s account of the growing surf industry is instructive for economic historians looking to understand how “authenticity” interacts with branding and corporate profits. *Empire in Waves* shows how marketing the counterculture of surfing helped build companies like Quiksilver and Billabong into global corporate juggernauts. Although authenticity helped build the surf brand, it was fairly easily coopted by

non-surf companies like Target and Hollister (Abercrombie and Fitch) that had few, if any, actual ties to the sport. The biggest paradox Laderman finds in the connection between surf tourism and the global surf industry is the tension between romantic portraits of the “simple lives” of the people in places like Indonesia and the economic exploitation of these same people as low-wage workers in surf apparel sweatshops.

Laderman is undoubtedly correct to assert that surfing is political and that surfers have for too long bought into the myth that their sport is either apolitical recreation or a spiritual pursuit that transcends politics. One place where “Empire in Waves” falters in doggedly pursuing this thesis is in its minimization of the relationship between surfing and environmentalism. The Surfrider Foundation, founded in 1984 with over 50,000 members in 2015, illustrates that when it comes to climate change and conservation, surfers have thought globally and acted locally for decades. Laderman surprisingly brushes off the importance of surfers’ environmental activism, suggesting that it has been simply coopted by the eco-capitalism of companies like Patagonia.

Aside from this one lacuna, however, “Empire in Waves” offers exactly what Laderman points out is too often missing from surf literature, a critical assessment of the ways that riding waves is a political (as well as pleasurable) pursuit.

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