

## **“Ambassadors of Good Will”: The Peace Corps in U.S. Capitalist Imperialism**

*Jasmine Shirey*

**W**ill the sun ever set on the U.S. empire? The U.S. might not typically refer to itself as an empire but posing the question through this co-opted phrase illustrates the proximity modern-day U.S. hegemony has to imperial practices. David Harvey articulates this proximity through the concept of ‘capitalist imperialism’ and explains how U.S. capitalist imperialism has unfolded. Using Harvey’s 2003 book, *The New Imperialism*, as a guide to capitalist imperialism, this paper will contextualize the Peace Corps historically and propose three frameworks for future analysis. None of these frameworks are complete or without possible complications. They are fledgling possibilities that could be tools for understanding the Peace Corps’ role in U.S. capitalist imperialism and whether we should view the Peace Corps as a relic of state-mediated capitalism, a precursor to neoliberalism, or neither.

In *The New Imperialism*, Harvey describes capitalist imperialism as the contrasting and intertwining of the two “logics of power” that Italian economist Giovanni Arrighi calls “territorial logic” and “capitalist logic” (Harvey 27). Harvey uses these logics to trace the rise of capitalist imperialism through what he calls the

three 'stages of bourgeois political rule'<sup>1</sup> — 1870-1945, 1945-1970, and 1970 onwards — which align with the capitalist eras of industrial capitalism, state-mediated capitalism, and neoliberalism. Harvey explains that the stages of bourgeois political rule must be understood as a history of expanding hegemonies because the accumulation of capital requires a corresponding accumulation of power (34).<sup>2</sup> Harvey generally refers to hegemony as “political power exercised through leadership and the consent of the governed” (36). However, he qualifies this by explaining that “domination,” particularly through “coercion,” perceptions of “intellectual and moral leadership,” and “emulation” all factor into the power of the hegemon (Harvey 36). Because the U.S. has been the global hegemonic power since the Second World War, Harvey is primarily interested in how the U.S. has engaged in capitalist imperialism. To understand how the Peace Corps might fit into U.S. capitalist imperialism, we must contextualize it within Harvey’s three stages of bourgeois political rule.

### **The Three Stages of Bourgeois Political Rule**

What Harvey calls the first stage of bourgeois political rule ran from 1870 to 1945 and involved European powers turning outwards to solve domestic crises of overaccumulation.<sup>3</sup> This decision to turn outwards resulted “not from absolute economic imperatives but from the political unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to give up any of its class privileges, thus blocking the possibility of absorbing overaccumulation through social reform at home” (Harvey 126). But turning outward came with its own challenges. It required the property-holding class to unify its political power and recreate the image of empire to adhere to capitalist, rather than strictly territorial, logic (Harvey 43). The forms of capitalist logic applied involved extreme levels of what Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ or “accumulation based upon predation, fraud, and violence” (144). This stage stabilized under British hegemony but ultimately erupted into two world wars between capitalist powers. While the U.S. was generally considered isolationist during this period, it had just engaged in massive westward expansion under the guise of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a concept he pulls from Hannah Arendt’s *Imperialism* when she says the imperialism that arose at the end of the nineteenth century was “the first stage in the political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism” (Harvey 42).

<sup>2</sup> Harvey attributes the basis of this idea to *Imperialism* as well (see above).

<sup>3</sup> Harvey explains crises of overaccumulation as deriving from Marx’s theory of the falling rate of profit and creating a situation where there are surpluses in both capital and labor but no way to utilize these surpluses “profitably to accomplish socially useful tasks” (87-88).

'Manifest Destiny' and, as Harvey notes, political rule in the U.S. "had, ever since independence, been bourgeois to the core" (47). Therefore, the U.S. was the ideal hegemon of global bourgeois rule in the post-world-war era.

The second stage of bourgeois political rule is vital for understanding the role of the Peace Corps in U.S. capitalist imperialism. After the Second World War, major capitalist powers set out to expand capitalism through "decolonization" and "developmentalism," with the U.S. at the helm (Harvey 58). Internal growth and reinvestment of profits, rather than accumulation by dispossession, led to development in the capitalist world, and "secondary effects even spilled outwards, though lightly and unevenly, across the non-communist world" (Harvey 57-58). State regulation and spatiotemporal fixes<sup>4</sup> likewise muted the threat of capital overaccumulation (58).

In line with the U.S.'s commitment to 'developmentalism,' President Kennedy declared to the United Nations in 1961 that the 1960s would be the 'Decade of Development' (Kennedy). He signed the Foreign Assistance Act, created the U.S. Agency for International Development, increased foreign aid spending, and, most significantly for this investigation, established the Peace Corps. Between 1961 and 1970, the Ad Council ran a Peace Corps campaign to recruit volunteers for the program. According to journalist and professor Wendy Melillo, this campaign drew heavily on idealist themes of "the hero archetype," "adventure," and "the frontier" (Melillo 156). As television set accessibility boomed in the 1950s and '60s, the U.S. was captivated by 'Wild West' adventures like *The Lone Ranger* and *Rawhide*. The Peace Corps offered Americans a way to help others by embracing this cowboy mentality. The Peace Corps thrived in the 1960s, with more than 15,000 volunteers actively serving in the field by 1966 ("Through the Decades").

President Kennedy first proposed the idea of the Peace Corps to a group of college students, and students continued to be a principal target of advertising (Melillo 155). Tertiary education in the U.S. had grown through the post-war period: the G.I. Bill, the National Defense Education Act, and the Higher Education Act were signed into law, and as the 'Baby Boomers' came of age, college enrollment continued to rise (Snyder 65). Math and science-based educations were especially crucial for the U.S. as the Soviet Union's successful 1957 launch of Sputnik heightened the intensity of the Cold

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<sup>4</sup> The geographical 'fixing' of capital and labor into long-term projects to mediate overaccumulation (Harvey 88).

War (Hatzivassiliou 1137). In the 1960s, Peter Drucker began conceptualizing the idea of a 'knowledge economy'<sup>5</sup> and these notions of intellectual acumen and innovation, in addition to the 'new frontier' of space, aligned with the desirable image of the U.S. hegemony being one of moral and intellectual leadership exercised in adventurous fashion.

According to Harvey, the move from the first stage of bourgeois political rule to the second also required the rejection of the blatant racism that had characterized European Imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (55). The UN "denied the validity of racism [... But] [f]or this to work demanded that the US should depict itself as the pinnacle of civilization and a bastion of individual rights" (Harvey 55). As Harvey goes on to acknowledge, this was not a particularly easy thing for the U.S. to do (58). Racial discrimination built the U.S. and the second stage of bourgeois rule saw this hypocrisy come to a head with the Civil Rights Movement.

Neoliberalism, or Harvey's third stage of bourgeois political rule, began around 1970 after the U.S. moved from a Johnson administration to a Nixon administration. While Harvey's second stage expanded by developing new capitalist markets and investment in internal growth, this third stage increased financialization and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 67). Under President Nixon, Bretton Woods was effectively abandoned, oil prices were inflated, and Wall Street gained influence over the world economy (Harvey 62, 66). Monopoly power grew and the U.S. began to apply its age-old notions of 'rough individualism' to its own institutions: breaking down the power of collective labor and turning economic control primarily over to the private sector.

The Peace Corps faltered in the early 1970s, almost to the point of collapse. The Ad Council recruitment campaign was over, President Nixon folded the program under ACTION, trust in government faltered in the U.S. following both the Vietnam War controversies and Watergate scandal, and interest in the Peace Corps fell with volunteer numbers dropping from the '60s high of 15,500 to just over six thousand (Melillo 145; "Through the Decades"; "Public Trust"; Smith). In 1977, the *New York Times* published the article "Peace Corps Alive but Not So Well," which states, "Remember the Peace Corps? Many Americans today are surprised to hear it still

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<sup>5</sup> An economy that centers 'intellectual' capital and utilizes an educated workforce to develop new technological and scientific advances — Drucker began exploring these ideas in his 1966 books *The Effective Executive* and *The Age of Discontinuity*.

exists” and questions whether it is worth its annual budget (Smith). However, President Carter liked the program, and *The Washington Post* had a brighter outlook in 1977, publishing "A Fresh Start for the Peace Corps," which focused on changing attitudes in the U.S. and how the Peace Corps could “start afresh” under President Carter (Clevel). Carter gave the program full autonomy in 1979, and by 1981 it became an independent federal agency ("Through the Decades"). In 2001 there were 6,643 active volunteers, and after 9/11, President George W. Bush called on Congress to expand the agency, leading to budget and active volunteer increases (*Peace Corps Accomplishments* 20, 2).

### **A Nesting of Façades to Mask Imperial Logics**

The first framework we will consider for understanding the Peace Corps’ role in U.S. capitalist imperialism is as a method for the U.S. to mask its imperial logics. From its inception, the U.S. was versed at masking territorial expansion by emphasizing that expansion was 'destiny' and 'democratic,' dehumanizing the indigenous people who already had societies in the west. Harvey links this masking to later denial of territorial logic when he says this façade obscured U.S. territorial gains “under the mask of a spaceless universalization of its own values” (47). To persuasively make this argument would require additional research into the narratives of Manifest Destiny and other denials of territorial logic. But, for now, we will assume that by the twentieth century the U.S. was relatively adept at masking the territorial logics driving geopolitical influence expansion behind a façade of inevitability and universal values. This would leave the U.S. needing to obscure its utilization of capitalist logics.

Harvey explains that while the U.S. has relied heavily on domination and coercion throughout history, it would have lost its hegemonic position if it did not lead in a way that fostered collective benefits, and in this, the Cold War provided a “glorious opportunity” (39). During the Roosevelt and Truman years, benefits that spilled into the non-communist world from growth in the capitalist world were attributed to U.S. 'benevolence' and were used to undermine claims that the U.S. had a “rogue state image based in coercion” but this benevolence narrative relied as much on “myth-spinning as truth-telling” (Harvey 40). Like the masking of territorial logics,

one main crux of this capitalist ‘myth-spinning’ was to hide capitalist logics that benefited the U.S. behind the façade of universal values embodied in Americans.

Harvey notes that during this period, “communist insurgencies thrived elsewhere as the Soviet model gained traction as a means to bring about rapid modernization without capitalist class rule” (54). Kennedy was undoubtedly aware of this, and while in the Senate, he sent a copy of *The Ugly American* to every senator (Melillo 149). According to Melillo, the novel proposes using average Americans as the “best ambassadors” to triumph over communism by making friends abroad and “rediscovering [the U.S.’s] frontier roots” (Melillo 149). The novel provides a story of friendship and hard development work, in the model of the American West, that could be told without addressing the capitalist logic behind the U.S.’s need to undermine communism. Similarly, while the word ‘communism’ appeared in all the internal communication regarding the Ad Council’s Peace Corps campaign, it “never appeared in the external press releases, advertising copy or published ads” (Melillo 153). In 1964, *National Geographic* also contributed to this idea of friendship envoys, featuring the Peace Corps on the cover with the title “Ambassadors of Good Will” (“Through the Decades”). In speeches defending the Peace Corps and his ‘development’ approach, President Kennedy also emphasized their necessity to national security (Hagan and Ruttan 9). Through the Peace Corps, capitalist logic’s need to liquidate communism could be masked by images of frontier adventure, friendship, good will, developmentalism, and U.S. security, depending on the audience.

President Reagan supported the Peace Corps but gave it a slightly different spin than President Kennedy’s ‘serve your country’ narrative. In the 1980s, he said, “Each one of us is responsible for building the society we want. Peace Corps volunteers do that [...] This is the American way. Once we see a need, we want to serve — even when the neighbor we reach out to help is halfway around the world” (“President’s Day”). President Reagan’s emphasis on individual action and serving thy neighbor paints the Peace Corps more as an individual-based mission service trip than a government-organized development project. However, it still pulls on images of friendship and good will and further obscures the potential capitalistic benefits of exporting American culture by masking it in universal ideals that are conveniently both individually responsible and embodied in ‘the American way.’ President George

W. Bush made this universalizing move even more blatant when he said, "The Peace Corps Volunteers carry the American idea with them. They don't carry our culture; *they carry universal values and principles* that are so incredibly important for all of mankind" (*Peace Corps Accomplishments* epigraph, emphasis added). The Peace Corps has not been the only method of masking U.S. imperial logics since World War II. However, a line of inquiry focused on these types of façades might help us analyze the role of the Peace Corps in U.S. capitalist imperialism.

### **A Surplus of Patriotic Idealism**

Our second potential framework for understanding the Peace Corps' relationship with U.S. capitalist imperialism is as a response to a surplus of patriotic idealism in the American public. Harvey talks about spatiotemporal fixes as solutions to surpluses of both capital and labor that would otherwise result in devaluation. The intangibility of idealism can hardly be linked to devaluation using Marx's theory of the falling rate of profit the way that surpluses in capital can. However, metaphorically speaking, the need to utilize idealism or else it will devalue does make a certain amount of sense. Again, this would require much more research (perhaps in the realms of historical trends and group psychology) to claim outright, but it is a thought-provoking possibility.

If, for the sake of argument, we assume that idealism will devalue if not productively utilized, then post World War II would be an especially treacherous time for the U.S. 'Winning' the war and emerging as a (if not the) world superpower was matched with a decreased need for the most obvious and effective outlet for idealism in the form of patriotism: the military. Early ads for the Peace Corps could easily be mistaken for ads to join the Marine Corps. One read, "now is the time to transform this patriotism from words into actions," while another "featured the Statue of Liberty pointing her right index finger East. The headline read, 'Make America a Better Place. Leave the Country'" (Melillo 155, 159). A surplus of idealism would also help explain Peace Corps growth after 9/11. Kennedy often spoke of the Peace Corps as a way to 'serve one's country' and for people who saw the Second World War as evidence of the U.S.'s moral superiority, spreading the American gospel could have been the ideal way to pay tribute to their 'kingdom'<sup>6</sup> (Melillo 158). A brochure given to television

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy's administration is still sometimes referred to colloquially as 'Camelot.'

and radio broadcasters explained that “Volunteers would ‘stand in the eyes of the world as examples of the moral purpose that established the United States and now guides its course in world affairs’” (Melillo 157). The Peace Corps allowed citizens to showcase U.S. moral purpose, demonstrating to the rest of the world that U.S. idealism was not misplaced.

American college enrollment and space and weaponry advances after the Sputnik scare emphasized American intellect, innovation, and qualifications, further contributing to the idealization of the ‘American way.’ This emphasis on qualifications is visible in the Peace Corps’ first ‘goal’: “To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women” (“About”). The idealism that Peace Corps volunteers embodied was displaced and fixed abroad for two years, but to be a spatiotemporal fix to the metaphorical ‘overaccumulation’ of idealism, it should be productive and maintain its value. Harvey explains that after the Second World War, “Cultural imperialism became an important weapon in the struggle to assert overall hegemony,” and various cultural practices “were mobilized to foster the desire to emulate the American way” (56). From this lens, the Peace Corps utilized surplus idealism to provide ‘trained’ volunteers to help development projects, be a moral example, and promote American culture more broadly, thereby helping the U.S. maintain its ‘overall hegemony.’ More evidence would be needed to determine whether Peace Corps volunteers maintained their idealism, but there may be an argument to be made about exposing young Americans to different living conditions and how, in certain people, that could foster gratitude for their upbringing and an inflated image of the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Harvey emphasizes that the need for a spatiotemporal fix arises out of an unwillingness to redistribute value at home towards social reform. The prime candidate for social reform the U.S. did not want to address through redistributed patriotic idealism comes in our following framework: Racism.

### **A System of Race-Based Dispossession**

Our final framework for relating the Peace Corps to capitalist imperialism is as a contributing factor to race-based dispossession that enables accumulation.

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<sup>7</sup> The story of an early Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria who wrote a postcard that involved offensive representations of the local community might be evidence to support this concept. Anecdotally, in the twenty-first century, I had several Peace Corps volunteers come up to me in Zimbabwe after volunteering in Zambia and say that the Peace Corps had ‘worked’ on them because they now knew how ‘unlucky’ a lot of the world is compared to the U.S. and they could not wait to get home.



Harvey's notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' refers to dispossession that relatively directly results in capital or labor accumulation, but we will be considering processes of dispossession that may not be as direct. The first possibility is the dispossession of attention and activists for the Civil Rights Movement. As Harvey notes, "the formal disavowal of racism internationally posed all manner of difficulties internally for the United States, where racial discrimination was rampant" (58). The Peace Corps, whose most popular region of volunteering is sub-Saharan Africa, could be seen as distracting world onlookers and citizens alike from human rights violations at home. It could also serve as a counterpoint to claims that the U.S. does not care about 'racial minorities' or as a form of reparations. Either way, it draws attention away from the need for racial reform at home. While many in Washington and across the country were lambasting the Free Speech and Civil Rights Movements, the Peace Corps took a different approach — redirecting them. In 1965, Sargent Shriver spoke to a group of Free Speech Movement protestors at UC Berkeley, comparing the Peace Corps to the Free Speech Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. He emphasized that Peace Corps volunteers are "organizers — agitators, if you will," but that "protest and demonstration are not enough [...] the next step is service" (Shriver). Distracting or weakening the Civil Rights Movement even a little bit would aid U.S. capitalism in continuing to exploit Black bodies, both as laborers and social reproducers.<sup>8</sup>

Another potential form of race-based dispossession enabling accumulation was the Peace Corps' frequent implication that other countries needed American volunteers and that Black and Brown people needed white teachers.<sup>9</sup> A 1968 ad featured a presumably white volunteer crouched in a box marked 'fragile.' The ad reads, "There is a man somewhere who has nothing [...] Send him patience [...] Send him understanding [...] Send him kindness [...] Send him you" (Melillo 160). This ad demonstrates a white volunteer's adventurism, altruism, and preciousness and the need for a host country citizen to be 'sent' patience, understanding, and kindness because apparently, he does not already possess these qualities. In his speech to UC

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<sup>8</sup> It is less critical here whether the Peace Corps intentionally tried to get 'agitators' out of the country than if that was an effect of the program. As with all these frameworks, this would need more evidence — potentially in the form of demographic and political data on leaving and returning volunteers in the 60s.

<sup>9</sup> Not all Peace Corps volunteers are white, of course. However, the Peace Corps is still more white than the U.S. at large. Only 7% of Peace Corps volunteers identified as Black in 2015, compared to the 75% who identified as white. One Black Peace Corps volunteer described how his host family wanted "to 'return [him]' and trade [him] for a 'real American' – a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white American" ("To be Young").

Berkeley protestors, Shriver quoted a volunteer as perfectly capturing the spirit of the Peace Corps when he said, “if we as enlightened people ignore the moral and economic poverty of the unenlightened, we really slight the challenges and needs of the modern world” (Shriver). While the Peace Corps no longer refers to citizens in host countries as morally and economically impoverished or unenlightened, it does frequently publicize images of young white volunteers speaking to rooms of Black onlookers, normalizing the narrative that white people ‘teaching’ Black people is the natural order of the world (“Volunteer”). More research on the enforcement of associations between white/teacher and Black/learner and implicit biases regarding employment competence should be done to establish if these types of narratives and images could be contributing to racial pay gaps in the U.S. and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

Depending on the framework, the question of whether we should see the Peace Corps as a remnant of state-mediated capitalism or a precursor to neoliberalism may pan out differently. None of the frameworks above have an explicit answer to this question, and one question for future research could be how the Peace Corps did or did not have to shift under each framework to accommodate the move to neoliberalism. A fourth possible framework that would potentially align the Peace Corps more strongly with neoliberalism would be a framework of increasing volunteers’ ‘human capital.’<sup>10</sup> Whether this increase in human capital came at the detriment of host countries would be a question for further research.

How the role of the Peace Corps in U.S. capitalist imperialism is best understood remains to be seen. The brief frameworks above do not answer this question as much as offer proposals, appeals for us to continue this line of inquiry. The aim of this work is not necessarily to abolish the Peace Corps and certainly not to invalidate the work done and the connections made by hundreds of thousands of volunteers. The aim is to offer possible ways to critically consider the intersections between U.S. capitalist imperialism and U.S. narratives and programs centered on ‘aid.’

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<sup>10</sup> One of neoliberalism’s main critiques of political economy is the lack of emphasis on what neoliberals call ‘human capital.’ If an income is a return on capital in capitalism, a wage is the worker’s return on ‘human capital’ — the mental and physical characteristics that allow a person to make a specific wage (education, work experience, connections, health, etc.) (Foucault 124).

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