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Heartland: Reflections on the Politics of a Regional Signifier
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Figure 1: A huge crop art image protesting the proposed Keystone XL pipeline covers an 80 acre corn field outside of Neligh, Nebraska, on April 12, 2014. The image, which lies on the proposed pipeline route that crosses the Ponca Trail of Tears, was created by the farmers, ranchers, and Native American tribes of the Cowboy and Indian Alliance in collaboration with artist John Quigley. Photo by Lou Dematteis / Spectral Q. Accessed at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/boldnebraska/13828142263> Used by permission of the artist.

In a protest against the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline in April 2014, activists in rural Nebraska created a massive public art display invoking the history, natural resources, and cultural identity of the American Midwest. Cut into the upper half of a circular wheat field were the rays of a rising sun, the outlined heads of a cowboy and a Native American, undulating lines depicting water, and the phrase

“Heartland #NoKXL.” The message was that two groups historically in conflict were united in their opposition to the pipeline and were linked to a global public sphere via the social media convention of the Twitter hashtag. It’s fair to say, when you carve a word into a wheat field, you think everyone who sees it will know what it means, and in fact social media users duly circulated the image around the world on Twitter and Facebook, which is where I first saw it. Yet while “#NoKXL” easily translates to “No Keystone XL Pipeline,” what does “heartland” mean in this context?

The answer is not as obvious as we might think. Coined in 1904 by the British geographer Halford Mackinder, *heartland* originally signified central Eurasia and its place in the geopolitics of European empires. It was little used until the 1940s when German propagandists deployed it to justify expansion into Eastern Europe. After the war, heartland slowly spread to other contexts, including the American Midwest, taking on slightly different connotations along the way, and by the early 21st century, the term had migrated geographically and culturally away from Mackinder’s original usage. The [Oxford English Dictionary](#) tells us a heartland is a “central region of homogeneous (geographical, political, industrial, etc.) character,” while the U.S.-based [Merriam-Webster's Dictionary](#) identifies *the* heartland as “the central geographical region of the United States in which mainstream or traditional values predominate.”

The Nebraska crop art appears to use the term heartland as a way claim the geographic and cultural space of the “mainstream” for an anticorporate, multiracial political protest. But this is far from the norm, as the dictionary definitions hint. In fact, the idea of an American Heartland in the Middle Western states is more

commonly a strategy of political conservatives and business boosters who typically represent the region as rural. There are long-standing urban uses of the term. Chicago is home to both the left-leaning Heartland Café, opened in 1976 and the free-market oriented think tank called the Heartland Institute, founded in 1984 as the Midwest Research Center.¹ But these city-based heartlands tend to be the exception. To put it bluntly, what people usually mean by the heartland is the Midwest without Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and the kinds of people who live in those big cities, without Native American reservations, and without rural poverty. If you think I'm exaggerating, try a Google image search for "heartland" and see how long it takes to find a person of color.

From Mackinder to the Midwest

How the Midwest became identified with this particular meaning of heartland is a story of cultural diffusion, confusion, and appropriation. As a spatial metaphor, heartland offered a way to think about power relationships between central and peripheral places that was flexible enough to apply to many specific contexts. And it was in its application to North America that its original cultural hierarchies were flipped and blurred in order to work at a broader cultural level. As a geographer, Liberal member of the British parliament, and former director of the London School of Economics, Halford Mackinder conceived of the idea of the heartland as a way to imagine British foreign policy vis-à-vis continental Europe and Russia. Mackinder

¹ "About the Heartland Café" www.heartlandcafe.com/about accessed June 19, 2014. ; Joseph Bast, "History of Heartland Institute," June 2013, heartland.org/media-library/pdfs/History%20of%20The%20Heartland%20Institute.pdf accessed June 19, 2014.

described central Eurasia as the “World Island,” the “heartland,” and the “pivot” around which other civilizations circled. Great civilizations (e.g., Britain), he argued, had developed on the periphery of Eurasia partly in response to repeated barbarian invasions. In the context of twentieth century geopolitics, whichever great power controlled the Eurasian land mass would have a decisive advantage over all others.² The German geographer Karl Haushofer became the most infamous follower of Mackinder as a propagandist for German expansion into Central Europe during World War II. Many Americans actually got their first introduction to the concept of the heartland through U.S. wartime information and propaganda explaining German strategy.³

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/higbie/2576332734/in/set-72157594476305746>

Figure 3: “The Defense of North America” from J.W. Watson, “Canada: Power Vacuum, or Pivot Area?” p. 53 in Hans Weigert, et al., eds., New Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography (London: George Harrap, 1949).

In the wake of World War II, the geopolitical concept of the heartland became part of the emerging Cold War conflict as the U.S. and its allies feared Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and Asia or fretted about possible attacks on North

² Halford Mackinder, Democratic Ideals and Realities: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1919).

³ Hans W. Weigert, Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942); Hans W. Weigert, German Geopolitics. (America in a World War, no. 19) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

America.⁴ Winston Churchill's noted 1946 speech "Sinews of Peace," for instance, evoked the heartland concept without using the term. An "iron curtain" was descending across the middle of Europe, Churchill warned his audience in Fulton, Missouri. Only "Greece with its immortal glories" was "free to decide its future." The other "capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe" were falling into a Soviet sphere, an unnatural separation from the cultural kin in Western Europe and North America.⁵ A year later, a U.S. senator from South Dakota spoke in similar terms, this time calling out the idea to the heartland by noting that "Europe and its heartland, Germany, have been the cradle of western civilization, and unless we help them to regain it, our own civilization, our standard of living, cannot survive."⁶ Cold War planning also invited comparisons between the strategic geography of Europe and North America, each with an interior heartland. As a U.S. Navy officer told a group of geographers in 1947, "Whether we like it or not we find ourselves on a World Island containing a heartland of industrial and economic resources not matched even by the old Asiatic World Island of Haushofer."⁷ By the 1960s, the

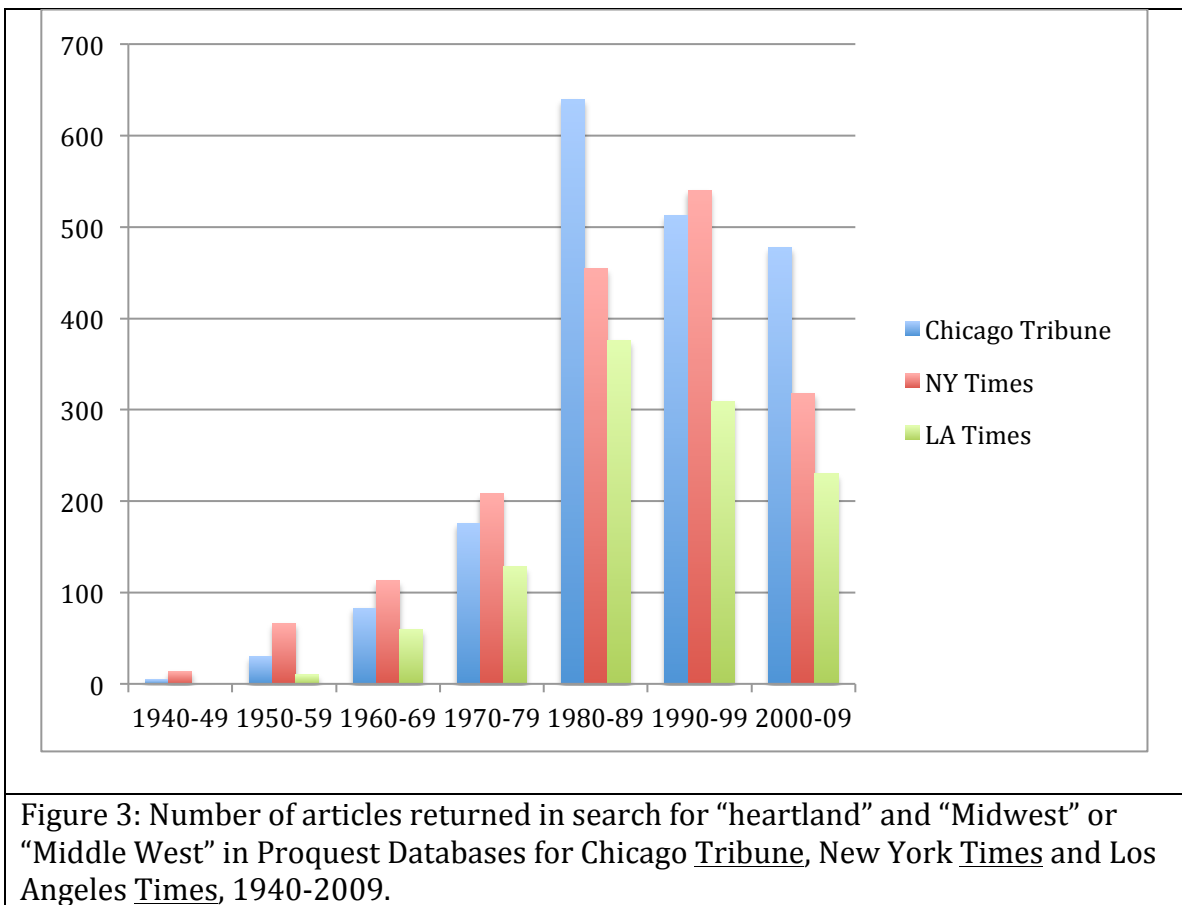
⁴ Halford Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," in Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography, ed. Hans W. Weigert, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and Richard Edes Harrison (New York: Macmillan, 1944); Hans W. Weigert, New Compass of the World, a Symposium on Political Geography (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

⁵ Winston Churchill, "Sinews of Peace," Mar. 5, 1946, Fulton, Missouri, full text at www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/biography/in-opposition/qiron-curtainq-fulton-missouri-1946/120-the-sinews-of-peace, accessed June 20, 2014.

⁶"Save Germany to Save World, Senator Urges," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), May 26, 1947, sec. ONE, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/177321146/citation/D6275E1C725E4D63PQ/2?accountid=14512>.; Hans Weigert's "New Compass of the World"

⁷Captain H. B. Hutchinson, "Navy Interests in Geographic Exploration," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 38(March 1948): 103; See also

threat of nuclear-armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles transformed this strategic calculus. The heartlands of both the US and the USSR were no longer safe from attack by virtue of distance from the coasts. But it was the economic and cultural dislocations of the 1980s that spurred the most frequent use of this particular term for the Midwest, as shown by a review of article databases for three major metropolitan newspapers (see Figure 3).



"Figure 5: The Defense of North America," in J. W. Watson, "Canada: Power Vacuum, or Pivot Area?" in Hans Weigert, et al., eds., New Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography (London: George Harrap, 1949), 53.

Making the Heartland Provincial

Journalists, authors, and advertisers began associating the Midwest with the term heartland just as the United States ascended to its role as global power during World War II. References to the American Heartland often reflected this global view, highlighting the region's industrial, commercial, and agricultural influence. But the term was relatively rare until the 1980s when its use in newspapers skyrocketed, and took on a different meaning in the context of deindustrialization, the farm crisis, and the waning of political liberalism. The earliest references to the Midwest as heartland portrayed a region that included heavy industry and ethnic diversity, as well as small towns and farms. For instance, an early reference to the heartland was a 1945 advertisement for a collection of midwestern writers proclaimed, "From out of America's Heartland comes a glorious anthology of the best in American writing." The book, titled American is West, featured the likes of Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, and Carl Sandburg, who in their heyday had been considered literary radicals, but by the 1940s were becoming part of the canon of American literature. Masters and Sinclair were well-known for the unflattering portrayals of small-town life, and Sandberg was closely identified with Chicago and its ethnic industrial working class.⁸ Other uses of the heartland trumpeted the region's global economic reach. An advertisement for American National Bank and Trust Co. declared, "The World is Coming to the Midwest." The central image was a globe circled by

⁸John T. Flanagan, American Is West, an Anthology of Middlewestern Life and Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1945); Helen Elizabeth Kolb, "Review of American Is West: An Anthology of Middlewestern Life and Literature by John T. Flanagan," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984) 39, no. 2 (June 1, 1946): 276-77.

airplanes, like electrons circling the nucleus of an atom. "More and more, the entire world needs the products of America's industrial and agricultural heartland," the ad read. "Direct air transportation now links the Midwest with the great countries of the world—Chicago has transformed from the hub of the nation to one of the major crossroads of the world."⁹ Boosters for agriculture also used found the heartland good ad copy. A full-page spread for *Successful Farming Magazine* touted the unprecedented standard of living for farm families in the "United States Heartland," including electrification, running water, and modern kitchen appliances. By virtue of their purchasing power, farm women were "freed from the dawn-to-dark drudgery of the past," and were leading a "second agricultural revolution...scaling up living standards and farm homes on Heart States farms...opening new and illimitable markets." The ad also featured an outline map of the U.S. with a heart shape encircling the Midwest.¹⁰ At the same time, heartland could combine nostalgia and regional triumphalism. A 1949 advertisement celebrating the centennial of the *Des Moines Register* closed with the sentence: "Into this second century the editors of the *Register* march with an abiding faith in the stability of the heartland and the promise of the long Iowa future."¹¹

Just twenty years into the *Register's* second century, the Midwest was on the verge of a steep economic decline, and a seismic political realignment. If few foretold the economic collapse, Republic strategist Kevin Phillips articulated the political side of things in his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, giving

⁹"The World is Coming to the Midwest," Chicago Tribune, September 24, 1946, p. 29.

¹⁰"Out of their soil...a better living," Chicago Tribune, October 29, 1948, p. A5.

¹¹"The Register Century," Chicago Tribune, July 25, 1949, p. 19.

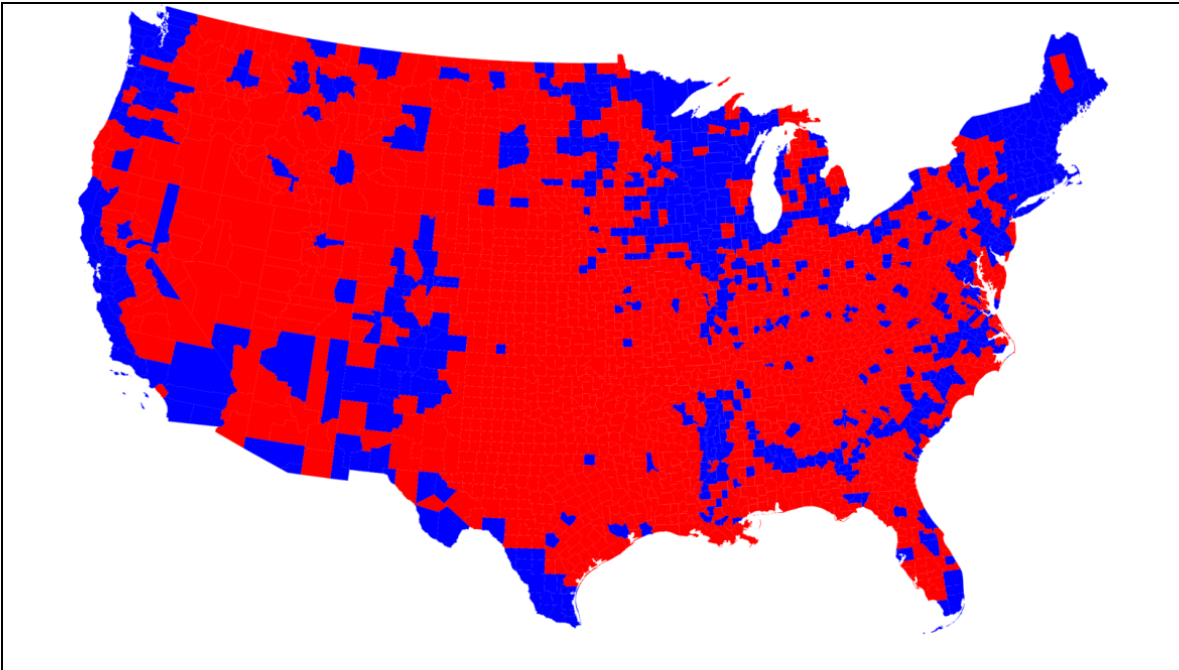
the states of the Middle West and South a pivotal role in the coming change. By siding with African American civil rights, Phillips argued, Democrats had upended the political settlement of the Civil War that divided the middle of the country between the Democratic Solid South and the Republican Midwestern states. Increasingly, the “heartland” would vote together for conservative politicians opposed to civil rights, the War on Poverty, and other urban-oriented social policies. “The Republican Party, as the socioeconomic representative of that America outside the core cities, stands to lose much less—and gain much more” from the post-Civil Rights political realignment, Phillips noted. “Over the remainder of the century, the Heartland should dominate American politics in tandem with suburbia, the South and Sun Belt-swayed California.” As if to emphasize the point, the Chicago Tribune printed an excerpt of Phillips’s book under the headline, “The Heartland’s Power.”¹²

Phillips’s was a very selective use of Mackinder’s concept of the Heartland, construing the region as chiefly rural and suburban while conveniently excluding major metropolitan areas chiefly because they tended to vote Democratic. At the same time, Phillips was particularly interested in white working-class voters who voted for the segregationist George Wallace in 1968 and 1972, whom he perceived as potential allies for Republicans.¹³ These voters were part of Phillips’s Heartland

¹²Kevin P. Phillips, The Emerging Republican Majority (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 410-411; “The Heartland’s Power” Chicago Tribune, October 19, 1969, p. 24.

¹³Dan T. Carter, The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Jefferson Cowie, Stayin’ Alive: the 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class (New York: New Press, 2010).

when they trended Republican, but part of the urban areas he cut out of the region when they held fast to the Democratic voting patterns.



Maps of county-level voting in the 2008 presidential election are the visual counterparts to the assertion that the “heartland” is politically conservative. Counties colored red for Republican majorities and blue for Democratic majorities. Mark Newman, “Election results by county, 2008 presidential election,” <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/2008>.

By the early 2000s, this selective Heartland was a familiar feature of election-night television in the form of the ubiquitous “red state, blue state” election maps. Dominated by vast stretches of red across the middle of the country, these seemed to indicate the political supremacy of the Republican party. Yet many of the Republican majority counties, especially west of the Mississippi, were sparsely populated, while much of the Midwestern blue on the map predictably represents the most populated urban counties. The maps support a strategic myopia that ignores places like Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland—not to mention the majority black counties of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and other southern

states—and casts the Midwest as a region defined exclusively by its small towns and racially homogeneity. More recently, the idea of Middle America drawing together against ideological and ethnic fringes has been a familiar aspect of Tea Party activism. Phillips presaged some of this rhetoric by crafting a conservative center in opposition to “Establishment Liberals” on the coasts who were peripheral geographically, politically, and culturally to what he considered the mainstream of America values.

When Phillip’s penned his treatise on the conservative Heartland, a shift of manufacturing to the Sunbelt was well underway, and over the following decades a combination of global competition and domestic policy turned what had been the “industrial Heartland” into the “Rustbelt.” When the farm foreclosure crisis of the 1980s brought a further shock to the region, “heartland” became a convenient and evocative way of talking about the social impact of epochal economic dislocations. “The family-farming heartland [is] withering into a desert of debts,” declared a page 1 Chicago Tribune headline in February 1985, seeming to draw a comparison to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. “Globalized economy hits home in the heartland,” said another headline highlighting the economic issues of the 1988 presidential election.¹⁴ In light of these economic transformations, the evocation of the heartland in popular culture took a turn for the sentimental, and the small-town. As the Chicago Tribune noted, a number of film and stage plays in 1979 focused on “a

¹⁴R.C. Longworth, “The family-farming heartland withering into a desert of debts,” Chicago Tribune, February 3, 1985, p. 1. See also, James O’Shea, “Recession hitting ‘Heartland’ hardest,” Chicago Tribune, July 2, 1980, p. E3; Terry Atlas, “Globalized economy hits home in the heartland,” Chicago Tribune, September 11, 1988, G1.

small-town setting, a crisis in a family unit, and an intimate involvement with people living their lives and working out their problems outside of or divorced from current political upheavals."¹⁵ But even films that highlighted small-town life could dwell on issues of industrial decline, globalization, and inequality. For example, the Academy Award-winning 1979 film Breaking Away focused on a group of working-class young men coming of age in the context of deindustrialization in Bloomington, Indiana. The film's protagonist, Dave, so longs to race with the Italian cycling team that he speaks Italian all the time, much to the good-natured annoyance of his parents and friends. As the limestone quarries close down, Dave's father faces the end of his status as a skilled worker quarryman and family breadwinner. Dave and his friends are derided as "cutters" by upper-class frat boys at the university, but are unable to actually be cutters, and so must struggle to forge a way to be men in post-industrial America. Despite its economic themes, the Chicago Tribune read the film as an affirmation of small town sentimentality. Audiences were "coming back to the heartland," the reviewer concluded, "hoping and believing that the heart is still true."¹⁶

Back to Heartland #NOKXL

And so we return to the Nebraska crop art that invoked the Heartland in order to voice the anticorporate message of a political alliance of Native- and Euro-American activists. This is obviously not the heartland that Kevin Phillips imagined in his

¹⁵Richard Christiansen, "America rediscovers its enduring heartland," Chicago Tribune, July 29, 1979, p. G3.

¹⁶Christiansen, "America rediscovers its enduring heartland."

prescient Emerging Republican Majority. On the other hand, in its dramatic use of an agricultural field as an artistic palette, the Keystone protesters followed a common approach of representing the region as essentially rural. As the landowner told Native News Online, “This land has been in our family for over 100 years. We have always been stewards of the land.” Speaking on behalf of Native people generally, a representative of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe gestured to a more distant past: “We as tribal people have been here since the beginning of time and we have seen the best and worst of what people can create.” Or, as the organizers of the protest wrote in their call to action: “Tribes, farmers and ranchers are all people of the land.”¹⁷ The heartland imagined by this political message is spatial, cultural, and temporal. It resides on a farm. It represents “people of the land.” It draws inspiration from ancestors who lived in the region in past, and future generations who will inhabit it in the future. This is a more situated and thoughtful heartland, I think, than that of the hotels, shopping centers, and other businesses that trade on regional identity. Only time will tell whether it presages a new way of deploying the term or a momentary detour from the norm.

¹⁷Levi Rickert, “Crop Art Size of 80 Football Fields Heartland Message: nokxl,” Native News Online, nativenewsonline.net/currents/crop-art-size-80-footballs-fields-heartland-message-nokxl, accessed June 9, 2014; Reject and Protect, “Call to Action,” rejectandprotect.org/call-to-action, accessed June 9, 2014.