GEOPOLITICS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY: WHY A GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE IS ESSENTIAL IN DEFINING THE FIELD OF GEOPOLITICS[1]

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INTRODUCTION

I will explore the definitional differences between political geography and geopolitics, and how these differences have developed through a contextualized intellectual history of the discipline of geography. By contextualized intellectual history I mean the way that the theoretical

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direction and the types of questions asked by geographers have reflected the combination of real-world issues and the flows in the prominence of particular social science approaches that geographers have largely followed (Flint, 1999). The main argument of the paper is twofold. First, the definitional difference between geopolitics and political geography is blurred at the moment (and is likely to remain so). Second, that such a blurring in the distinction between geopolitics and political geography makes it imperative that political geographers in particular, and human geographers in general, are at the forefront of geopolitical analysis. Political geographers have the ability to bring the full complement of geographical concepts to bear upon the topic of geopolitics. The implication being that a geographic approach to geopolitics, as opposed to one driven by a political science approach and/or the practitioner of foreign policy, is more able to understand geopolitics as a multi-scalar, multi-actor, and complex process that is a tool for peace and integration rather than constructing difference and justifications for war.

The paper is organized in the following manner. In the first section I explore some definitions of geopolitics and political geography. This is not an exhaustive or definitive exploration but will serve to highlight the key differences between geopolitics and political geography, and why confusion over whether the two bodies of knowledge are, or should be, separate is understandable. In the second section of the paper, I provide a very brief sketch of the history of the discipline of political geography to emphasize the changing role of geopolitics in the purpose and prominence of the sub-discipline. In the third section of the paper I introduce a contemporary ways of thinking about the content of political geography, in both an ontological and epistemological sense, which illustrates how the definition of political geography and geopolitics has become blurred and why this is a positive development. In the fourth and final section of the paper I

briefly introduce some implications for the discipline, and society as a whole, of adopting geographical perspective to geopolitics rather than one driven by the imperatives of statecraft.

DEFINITIONS OF GEOPOLITICS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

The contemporary standard reference book for human geographers, *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Gregory et al. 2009), is illustrative of the difficulty in defining political geography and geopolitics, and the distinction between the two. Political geography is defined as a "subdivision of human geography analyzing ways in which politics and conflict create spaces and places and, in turn, are themselves partially determined by the existence and nature of geographical entities" (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 549). In contrast, the entry for geopolitics doews not offer a distinct definition but concentrates on the contested nature of the term, and how the understanding and practice of geopolitics has changed over time (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 300-301). The one clear message emerging from the dictionary entry is that geopolitics as a form of statecraft practiced by foreign-policy elites is dramatically different from multiple forms of academic inquiry (critical geopolitics, feminist geopolitics, and geoeconomics).

The definition of political geography from *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, though brief, belies a level of complexity that is ultimately useful for our understanding of geopolitics. Jones et al. (2004), follow the earlier approach of Painter (1995), in simply saying that political geography examines the intersection of 'politics' and 'geography.' The reason for the inverted commas is that both politics and geography are seen as multifaceted. Geography comprises concepts such as place, space, territory, scale, and networks that

interact with each other and 'politics.' Politics is about power, but this too is multi-faceted, and includes multiple power relations, institution building, policy, and the dissemination of discourses.

The importance of discourse in political geography dominated a revived understanding of academic geopolitics. Geopolitics became primarily defined as a way of seeing the world, a montage of viewpoints, each trying to normalize a particular set of power relations through what is ostensibly defined as an "objective" or "neutral" academic position (Dodds, 2005). The emphasis upon geopolitics as discourse is the result of the reinvention of geopolitical analysis through the approach of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996), that built upon the notion of discourse, or the fusion of power and knowledge given prominence by the work of Foucault (1977 and 1984). However, defining geopolitics on the basis of post-modernist and post-structural thought has precluded the adoption of a specific definition as that would be a meta-narrative itself, the type of certainty or project that post-modernism and post-structuralism are opposed to. Hence, the geopolitics of critical geopolitics is counter to the modern geopolitical imagination (Agnew, 2003) of what we may call traditional geopolitics, but offers nothing concrete in return, other than a strategy of being critical of all geopolitical representations. The particular geographic approach of critical geopolitics is its concentration upon how different states and regions of the world are represented in geopolitical discourses with the intention of labeling them as targets of particular action or inaction.

The contribution of the critical geopolitical approach has been to show the importance of representation and discourse in the practice of geopolitics (Müller, 2008). However, feminist geographers have criticized the approach for remaining focused upon the foreign policy elites of states, rather than on the practices and actions of non-elites or "everyday" people, especially marginalized groups. Feminist

geopolitics has provoked an academic approach to geopolitics that is grounded in fieldwork, analyzes how people act within particular settings or contexts, and how these actions illustrate how dominant power relations are challenged (Staeheli et al., 2004). Though it is not surprising that the feminist approach largely focuses upon women as geopolitical actors, the approach is applicable to any social group or set of individuals. The main components of the approach being fieldwork that is able to view and understand the actions of people in particular settings. In other words, geopolitics is as much a matter of practice or action, and the way it creates, maintains, and challenges power relations, as it is the representation of power relations (Flint, 2011, p. 67). The feminist geopolitical approach is also intrinsically geographic through its recognition of the way particular geographic settings frame political actions; hence we can begin to see how the feminist geopolitical approach is akin to the first definition of political geography presented at the beginning of this section.

More recently there have been calls for a renewed geoeconomics – an approach that intertwines economic processes and structures with geopolitical actions (Mercille, 2008). Such an approach actually rests on a long history in the discipline of geography that has connected economic imperative with geopolitical actions. The classic or traditional geopolitical frameworks of Friedrich Ratzel (Buttmann, 1977) and Sir Halford Mackinder (Kearns, 2009) were driven by imperial competition and were focused upon the fusion of territorial goals within a global economic setting (Parker, 1985; Hepple, 1986). The same can be said of the US geographer Isaiah Bowman (Smith, 2003).

As discussed in the next section of this paper, the revival of the political geography in the 1970's was heavily indebted to a framework that could easily be described as geoeconomics, namely world-systems analysis. Peter Taylor, one of the most important figures in

contemporary political geography, adopted the world-systems approach of Immanuel Wallerstein (1979) to create a framework of for a political geography that was global and historical in scope (Taylor, 1985). This approach has played a continuing role in political geography, as evident in the latest edition of the textbook introduced by Peter Taylor (Flint and Taylor, 2011). The essence of the world-systems approach is to identify geopolitics as a "single logic" of entwined economic and political power relations. In other words, economics and politics are inseparable. Hence, the complexity of politics identified in Jones et al.'s (2004) definition of political geography are addressed by fusing economic and political processes and identifying politics as a nexus of territorial and institutional strategies (Flint and Taylor, 2011, pp. 37-44). The particular geographic focus of the geoeconomic approach is the contested construction of spaces, places, and scales as a component of the fused politics and economics of the capitalist world-economy (Flint, 2010).

The discussion of critical geopolitics, feminist geopolitics, and geoeconomics has, so far, been undertaken with an implicit understanding of what they are not, or what they intend to challenge or contradict. That foil is what is known as classic or traditional geopolitics. Traditional geopolitics emerged from previous traditions of the spread of European control and domination across the globe (Agnew, 2002) but came of age in the period of competition between powerful states at the end of the nineteenth century. European powers, plus the USA and Japan, developed their own 'geopolitical traditions' (Dodds and Atkinson, 2000) that were based on ostensibly neutral or objective science (such as Ratzel and Kjellen's theory of the state as organism or Alfred Thayer Mahan's and Sir Halford Mackinder's sweeping global histories) that provided simplistic classifications that regionalized the world into strategic imperatives and geographically determined behaviors (Flint and Taylor, 2001, pp. 1-5). The end result

was state-specific policy recommendations (Germany's *Lebensraum* or Britain's imperial imperative) that were aimed at increasing the position of one country at expense of others. Traditional geopolitics was a matter of statecraft that saw territory as a zero-sum game of strategy and control. It was the practice of state elites, and claimed to "know" the dynamics of the world to such an extent that predictions could be made warranting a particular foreign policy. Geography was a static backdrop that created knowable and durable strategic imperatives. In short, traditional geopolitics added a rudimentary geography to the practices of realist international relations.

The discussion of definition allows us to draw two conclusions that are important for this paper. First, we can understand why the definition of geopolitics in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* was vague: Geopolitics is a contested enterprise; there is a politics to what geopolitics is. What has emerged over time is an understanding of geopolitics as something other than a tool for state elites to "know" or evaluate inter-state politics and justify particular, and usually aggressive, foreign policy decisions, up to and including war. It is now an analytical tool and one aimed at giving voice to oppressed or marginalized voices. Second, considering the contributions of feminist geopolitics and geoeconomics means that we need to incorporate many politics and many spaces in such a way that the definition of geopolitics becomes (perhaps) indistinguishable from that of political geography.

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF GEOPOLITICS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

In discussing definitions of geopolitics and political geography it has been noted that traditional geopolitics took on a prominent role in geography at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth

century while new forms of geopolitical thought (the critical, feminist, and geoeconomics geopolitical schools) emerged at particular moments. Hence, the paper may only be complete if a brief history of the sub-discipline is offered. I must stress that this history is merely aimed at making the paper coherent; fuller histories of political geography and geopolitics may be consulted as necessary (Flint, 1999; Agnew, 2002; Mamadouh , 2005; Bassin, et al., 2004).

Agnew describes how what he calls the modern geopolitical imagination (2003) was essential in framing a Eurocentric view of the world. The modern geopolitical imagination regionalized or classified the world, while normalizing the idea that states were the primary political actors, and ones that should constantly compete for supremacy. Such ideas of mapping, classification, and territorial control were central to the formation of the modern discipline of geography (Livingstone, 1992). The epitome of the dominant role of geopolitics came with the imperial competition and wave of colonization in the late 1800's and early 1900's, a time that also saw the establishment of geography departments in European universities, and a public and policy-making role for intellectuals such as Ratzel, Kjellen, Mackinder, Mahan, and Bowman (Parker, 1985; Hepple, 1986).

A significant historical figure is General Karl Haushofer, the ex-World War One officer who founded the Journal of Geopolitics for a semi-popular audience. Though he did have connections to the Nazi party these were wildly overblown by US propaganda, leading to Haushofer's indictment for war crimes and his suicide (Bassin 1987; Ó Tuathail, 1996). The portrayal of geopolitics as the evil science behind Nazi plans for world domination had serious implications for academic political geography. Post-World War Two political geography became equated with geopolitics and was tarnished. Interest in the sub-discipline waned and what political geography

there was became functionalist and technocratic, essentially a form of planning advice in terms of border locations and electoral districts. It became uninteresting precisely because the politics had been removed from political geography (Flint and Taylor, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Ironically, as geopolitics disappeared almost completely from the academic agenda and political geography withered the state practice of geopolitics remained vigorous. The Cold War imperatives of the United States and the Soviet Union meant that plenty of geopolitics was written and deployed within state bureaucracy (Nijman, 1993). Classic Cold War tropes such as domino theory and containment served to inform the global role of the US, and were made acceptable within the realm of US popular culture through movies (McAllister, 2001) and magazines (Sharp, 2000). In other words, geopolitics as a state practice thrived in the context of the early Cold War but the academic pursuits of geopolitics and political geography were sidelined (Parker, 1985; Hepple, 1986).

The emergence of political geography in the 1970s and 1980s was catalyzed by a global political context of political conflict and tensions. The challenge to United States global power evident in the Vietnam War and the domestic divisions evident in anti-war demonstrations and race riots brought politics front and center to the academic agenda. In other words, there was an opportunity, a need even, to reinsert politics into social science, in general, and political geography, specifically (Flint, 1999). The intellectual context of the time promoted Marxism as the most prominent philosophical approach, one that identified economic processes as the driving force behind political and social divisions. Emergent political geographies adopting a Marxist analysis analyzed intra-state politics (Cox, 1979) and international issues (Taylor, 1982). The critical, or the political, was front and center of the new political geography but it revolved around a singular set of processes – the economics of capital

accumulation.

The growing confidence of the new political geography soon engaged with an increasingly eclectic social scientific context. The word “critical” became prevalent and post-modern and post-structural approaches required scholars to think of a variety of different structures, power relations, and forms of politics. Race, gender, disability, colonial legacies, and cultural representations all became important fields of study. Each discipline (and sub-discipline of geography) adopted these new topics and approaches in their own way. For political geography, the manifestation was the emergence of critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics and the subsequent effort of geoeconomics to reassert the importance of economics (Cox et al., 2008).

Shifts in social science provoked and enabled a new engagement with geopolitics. The twin critiques of post-modernism and post-structuralism resulted in two new developments. First, the elite driven and dominant narratives of traditional geopolitics were challenged through the approach of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Second, the singular critique of the Marxist approach was challenged by calls to examine power relations beyond the economic; namely gender, racial, and post-colonial, to name just the most prominent and pertinent for geopolitics (Staeheli et al., 2004).

This is not to say that traditional geopolitics faded away. It has always been practiced by states and there are always voices wishing to simplify and classify the world to promote a political agenda (the work of Samuel Huntington (1993), Robert Kaplan (1994), and Francis Fukuyama (1992) being some of the most prominent). However, as an academic enterprise it has been largely rejected by Western scholars, who are more concerned with challenging frameworks that promote a militaristic state agenda (Mamadouh, 2005) and are increasingly focused on understanding processes that

may lead to peace (Megoran, 2011; Kirsch and Flint, 2011). The important conclusion to draw is that geopolitics must consider multiple political goals, processes, and actors and not the singular strategic, competitive statecraft promoted by traditional geopolitics.

A GEOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING GEOPOLITICS

The eclecticism of contemporary political geography has allowed for an analytical geopolitics that is not a tool of state policy (Mamadouh, 2005). The ability of geography to provide a framework for an analytical geopolitics has emerged through changes in geography that focused on processes and structures; to the extent that attention on the contingencies of multiple structures and processes is now the norm (Cox et al., 2008).

The shift to analyzing processes was a gradual and piecemeal affair, but one key intervention for political geography was the volume edited by Roger Kasperson and Julian Minghi (1969) entitled *The Structure of Political Geography*. This collection of classic texts and new work was intended to integrate political geography with changes in the broader discipline of geography and the social sciences in general (Kasperson and Minghi, 1969, p. ix) by promoting a structural-functional approach and recognizing the need to incorporate process and behavior. Kasperson and Minghi (1969) challenged political geography to change from a largely descriptive and prescriptive endeavor to a field of academic inquiry that engaged action but within societal and geographic settings.

The tensions that Kasperson and Minghi (1969) saw in their approach were immediately evident and prefaced existing debates on the duality of structure and agency and the difficulties in designing research that does not prioritize one over the other, but tries to get at

the mutuality of behavior and setting:

> *"Our claim is that the approach to political geography through structure has tended to emphasize the purely formal aspects of landscape features resultant from political activity in a fairly static manner with more interest in their origins, typologies, areal variations, distributional characteristics of size, shape, and so forth, than in their treatment as spatial functions of a political system incorporating a complex set of relationships of behavior, process, and structure. Furthermore, even in its more functional cast, structure has been over-emphasized as a way into political geographic problems, thereby diverting attention away from these other aspects of the system such as political process and behavior without due consideration of which the functional aspects of structure cannot, in the final analysis, be fully understood" (Kasperson and Minghi, 1969. p.70).*

Over time, the social sciences, geography, and political geography have certainly embraced process to the extent that examination of multiple processes is the norm. The result has been that contingency rather than a mono-causal structure is the most common entry point for political geography inquiry. A prominent exemplar is the work of Doreen Massey (1994) whose views of place and space rely upon a complex interaction of historically interwoven social processes:

> *Places are networks of social relations "which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed. Some of these relations will be, as it were, contained within the place; others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too" (Massey, 1994, p. 120).*

Massey's approach, which is largely reflected in contemporary human geography, invokes an understanding of 1) behavior, rather than structure, being the focus of geographical change and 2) geographical outcomes being contingent upon multiple actions rather than the product of a singular over-arching structure.

One prime example of this change has been evolving theorizations of geographic scale. Peter Taylor's (1987) seminal introduction of political geographic scales became the target for criticism, they were viewed as being reified and pre-determined by structural needs rather than the product of social action (Marston, 2000). Though such critiques largely missed the point that Taylor was trying to make about the role of the socially constructed nation-state scale in framing a particular scope and form of political activity, the trend has been to see multiple scales as blended or manifest, epitomized by the term glocalization (Swyngedouw, 1997). All scales are seen to be impacting upon, and being reproduced by, particular political actions (Delaney and Leitner, 1997). For example, an act of terrorism is simultaneously an individual, local, state, and global action. The simplistic global portrayals of traditional geopolitics are inadequate frameworks to understand the multi-scalar intricacies of political behavior.

So far we have seen the development of political geography as a discipline interested in multiple processes and intertwined multiple scales producing contingent settings for political action. To complete the argument one more concept must be considered, and that is the nature of power. Traditional geopolitics envisioned power as material entities that could be possessed. This was measured in different forms of indices that included things such as GDP, the amount of steel and coal production, the size of the armed forces, and ownership of particular weaponry (such as nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, etc.). However, such a view of power has been exposed as being

inadequate. Material power only has meaning, or an effect, once it is seen to act in relation to other actors. The resulting relational sense of power has now become dominant and requires a geographic approach that analyzes dynamic interactions between multiple geopolitical entities (Allen, 2003). Such an approach is very different from the fixed mappings of traditional geopolitics that evoked power through geographic position and state attributes.

In summary, political geography as evolved to be an analysis of multiple actors (states, NGOs, multi-national companies, diasporas, etc.), operating in relation to other actors, to create contingent and dynamic geographic settings, which engage multiple scales simultaneously. In addition, what is politics has expanded beyond a narrow definition of statecraft to include a variety of positions, identities, narratives, and goals. The environment, citizenship, and identity politics are just some of the political agendas that intersect with more traditional politics of borders, territorial disputes, state-building, and economic exploitation. It is such an eclectic collection of topics and theory that defines contemporary political geography and has, in turn, reclaimed and redefined the subject of geopolitics.

THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY APPROACH TO GEOPOLITICS

Contemporary political geography has emerged to be a sub-discipline embedded in cutting-edge social science and driving changes in social scientific thought. Geopolitics, in its rich and multi-faceted forms, is central to these debates and contributions. Ironically, this was the case too in the heyday of traditional geopolitics. Two things have changed. First, is the theoretical complexity of political geography. Second, is the attitude of geographers, which has shifted away from a desire to "whisper in the war of the Prince" and be connected to militaristic statecraft and towards an activist commitment to an agenda for peace

(Megoran, 2011). These two changes are closely related to each other.

In a summary of the previous section, the theoretical foci of political geography (reflecting human geography in general) can be identified as:

■ Recognition of processes of social construction: The theoretical implication being that politics and geography are dynamic and inter-connected projects.

■ Political geography is practice and representation. The theoretical implication being that dominant and authoritative narratives are to be challenged.

■ Political geographies change over time. The theoretical implication being that political behavior is context specific, an understanding that counters geographic determinism.

■ Political geography implicated multiple scales. The theoretical implication being that multiple processes, beyond a narrow conception of statecraft, must be considered.

■ Political geography studies multiple actors. The theoretical implication being that multiple agendas, again expanding a narrow conception of statecraft, must be considered.

Contemporary political geography is situated within a broad definition of geography (multiple spaces and scales) and politics (beyond inter-state competition). Furthermore, the contributions of feminist, racial studies, and post-colonial studies have emphasized that all social relations are politicized. If multiple geographic settings are the product of social action (the argument of social construction) and all social action is political (following an expansion of what we define as politics) then any attempt to create separate definitions of geopolitics and political geography seems futile. Rather, the terms are blurred; geopolitics and political geography are the study of the recursive interaction between politics and geography.

Defining political geography in this way has important

implications for the way geopolitics is practiced and engaged by geographers. Hence, the attempt to define geopolitics as a means by which geographers informed statecraft is no longer tenable. Instead, the current condition of political geography and the overwhelming attitude of political geographers enable new projects that are motivated by:

- Identifying and enabling inter-connection. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of creating and classifying differences.
- Identifying shared goals and concerns. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of creating immutable oppositions and declaring zero-sum games.
- Identifying historical dynamism. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of defining unchanging and deterministic geographic factors.
- Identifying contingency. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of requiring deterministic explanations.
- Situating political geography with an international community of scholars. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of defining the agenda of a particular state, especially one with pretensions of a global role.
- Acknowledging and promoting an inclusive approach to creating geographic knowledge. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional geopolitical goal of defining geopolitics as the preserve of privileged and state elites, usually from the Western world.

CONCLUSION

The primary argument of this paper has been to declare there is no strong distinction between geopolitics and political geography, and that this is a good situation. The practice of traditional geopolitics was

theoretically sparse and implicated in militaristic practices of state-building, war, and empire. Traditional geopolitics hid behind a cloak of objectivity to offer policy prescriptions for particular states. Over time, political geography has recovered from its loss of relevance and prominence that resulted from its association with state practices of geopolitics. The hiatus allowed political geography to emerge as a significant player in new social science theorizations. Political geography is, therefore, a central part of our understanding of the world, and this understanding has evolved in such a way that politics is identified as occurring within many geographical settings through the actions of many multiple actors. Hence, the distinction between geopolitics and political geography has become blurred, and arguably meaningless.

Such theoretical developments have gone hand-in-hand with changes in the attitudes of scholars who identify themselves as political geographers. Rather than promoting geography as a tool for state-policy, usually in a militaristic fashion, political geographers increasingly see themselves as advocates for peaceful, cross-cultural, global engagement. This is not to deny that some aspects of geography, notably geospatial technologies, are heavily implicated in the militarized security activities of the state (Benjamin, 2012). But the tone and attitude of political geography publications and courses is one that attempts to foster understanding of global events rather than promotion of one's own national agenda. If that is the outcome of the blurring of the distinction between political geography and geopolitics, then it seems a positive one. If boundaries between academic sub-disciplines and disciplines become fuzzy then perhaps the boundaries that divide the world will become more permeable and less divisive too. ❖

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