



Lost in conceptualization: Reading the “new Cold War” with critical geopolitics

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A B S T R A C T

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Focusing on the debates on energy security in Germany, this paper analyzes the structure, logic, and circulation of the “new Cold War” as a geopolitical narrative. We use the literature in critical geopolitics to analyze the conceptual implications of an apparent dissociation between the media and governmental stance toward the new Cold War and its embedded geopolitical logic. The relationship between the “kind” of geopolitics inherent in the new Cold War and the different “forms” in which it circulates suggests a blurring of boundaries between all such geopolitical forms, through multiple crossings-over between institutions, textual genres, and circulating actors. The media presence of the New Cold War also highlights the ambiguity of the “popular” in popular geopolitics, which is further refracted on other geopolitical forms which share its characteristics. This not only makes imperative the more precise formulation of key conceptual categories such as popular or banal geopolitics, but also calls into question the link between the state and particular geopolitical logics, as well as the relationship between the mass media and geopolitics.

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Introduction

“Are we seeing the start of a new Cold War?”, asked with palpable angst the summary of a BBC Panorama programme which claimed to investigate “the growing gulf between Russia and the West” (TV Choice, 2008: 56). Whether we are indeed seeing a “new Cold War” has been a matter of considerable debate. We do not intend to settle it here, because in our view, to ask if a new Cold War is in the offing is to subscribe *eo ipso* to a stale political imaginary which rests on the fallacy that the “old” Cold War is an uncontested political or analytical point of reference. (This is why, from this point onward, we will not put the syntagma the “new Cold War” inside inverted commas; this is to de-clutter the text, not to make reference to a “really existing” new Cold War.) Instead, we are concerned in this article with the structure, logic and circulation of the new Cold War as a geopolitical narrative.

To an extent, our intervention follows up a recent guest editorial in *Political Geography* which drew attention to the dangers inherent in the framing of “Anglo-American geopolitical discourse” toward Russia in terms of a new Cold War (Foxall, 2009: 330). Contra Foxall, we start from the observation that, despite being widely circulated in the Western media, most governments have rejected the new Cold War analogy. On this premise, our task in this article is twofold:

first, to show precisely how the new Cold War is constituted as a geopolitical narrative; and second, to analyze, focusing on the particular context of Germany, the conceptual implications of this apparent dissociation between the media and governmental stance toward the new Cold War.

The reasons for this engagement stem from the theoretical and normative concerns of critical geopolitics. The “old” Cold War provided both the political context for the emergence of critical geopolitics, and its main object of analysis. The foundations of critical geopolitics were laid in the analysis of the Cold War’s spatiotemporal symbolism, political rationality, and discursive logic (Dalby, 1990; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). This has enabled not only the denaturalization and critique of Cold War geopolitics, but also the disciplinary reconstitution of geopolitics as a legitimate topic. From this perspective, it is obvious that the new Cold War prompts questions similar to those asked by critical geopolitics about the Cold War: for example, what spatial and historical identities are ascribed to its actors, and what political logic is derived from the panoptic geopolitical gaze that constitutes these identities? Furthermore, the new Cold War stimulates new questions about the Cold War itself, not only in political terms – i.e. whether its confrontation and hostility are rekindled – but also in symbolic and conceptual terms. Was the trope “the Cold War”, for example, truly meaningful during the Cold War, or had it become even then a geopolitical cliché whose significance was exhausted by endless repetition?

The second reason for the engagement with the new Cold War emerges from the normative concern of critical geopolitics, driven

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by the idea that certain geopolitical logics are morally noxious and politically counterproductive (Agnew, 2004: 635). It has been the self-assumed task of critical geopolitics to displace such geopolitical representations (Ó Tuathail, 1994b: 314), which are produced mainly by and for the state (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 192). From this perspective, the emergence of a geopolitical narrative proliferated against the message of state elites is bound to be significant for critical geopolitics. The absence of state endorsement is all the more significant if the geopolitics conjured up in and by the new Cold War is indeed redolent of the Cold War both in its narrative structure and deleterious logic, for this suggests not only that this geopolitical logic has spread beyond the governmental level, but also that it is resident and resilient in places where it does not need state endorsement. The first observation is not necessarily surprising, as we know for example from the concept of popular geopolitics, to which we will turn below. However, the second observation is heavy with significance, because the normative impulse of critical geopolitics to steer toward alternative kinds of geopolitics – e.g. progressive rather than conservative, to use Kearns's dichotomy (2008), or anti-geopolitical rather than imperialist, to use two categories used in a reference text (Ó Tuathail, Dalby, & Routledge, 2006) – is usually predicated on the geopolitical imagination and agency of non-state actors (Megoran, 2006).

We can see therefore that the media popularity of the new Cold War makes immediately relevant the conceptual apparatus of critical geopolitics. One of its key concerns is to capture the multiplicity of the actors involved in the production of geopolitical knowledge in order to make full sense of the depth of geopolitical messaging, which percolates beyond the thin layer of theoretical traditions into the very fabric of national identity and popular culture. Through the identification of different, although interrelated forms of geopolitics – usually categorized in the triad of formal, practical and popular – authors writing in critical geopolitical vein have attempted to reflect on the relationship between the sites where geopolitical visions are articulated, legitimated and normalized (Ó Tuathail, 1999, 2004; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998). Thus, while the “kind” of geopolitics concerns its logic and policy prescriptions (e.g. conservative or progressive), geopolitical “forms” concern which actors contribute to inscribe such geopolitical logic in a particular context, and by what means. Given that the new Cold War was heavily proliferated by the mass media – usually the vectors of popular geopolitics – the puzzle concerning what kind of geopolitics resides in the new Cold War is thus compounded by the fact that this kind is often resisted by state elites in practical geopolitics. A key question concerns therefore what happens to geopolitics itself in the absence of state ownership and elite entrepreneurship. For instance, is the geopolitics in the new Cold War politically irrelevant if it is invoked in non-state discourse? Or is the mere presence of the new Cold War narrative in the mass media a sufficient indicator of the popularity of this geopolitical vision?

This contested circulation of a geopolitical narrative brings into sharp focus the disciplinary debate concerning the “essence” of geopolitics. To a certain extent, theorists agree that the meaning of geopolitics is diffuse and fluctuating, which has led to many attempts to fix its meaning contextually through conceptual gambits that inaugurate novel geopolitical forms. In addition to popular, formal and practical geopolitics, there is also “emotional” geopolitics (Pain, 2009), “everyday” geopolitics (Pain & Smith, 2008), and also “banal” geopolitics (Sidaway, 2001, 2003, 2008). These categories seek to capture the omnipresence of the geopolitical, its *embodiment in*, as well as its *effect on* subjectivities, publics and policies. We can thus ask whether the ubiquitous circulation of the new Cold War narrative renders its geopolitical content banal, everyday, or just popular. The issue is not, it must be emphasized, that of labeling the new Cold War one way or another. The questions that drive our

analysis are conceptual and normative: are such concepts analytically useful for understanding the geopolitical *in*, and the effects of the new Cold War? Normatively, we argue that it matters if the new Cold War “popularizes” a conservative (or classical) geopolitics. Conceptually, we take our cue from Ó Tuathail's exhortation that critical geopolitics should develop “precisely defined concepts [which] will allow fine-grained historical and contemporary studies of geopolitical culture” (2004: 99). Our reading of the new Cold War signals that the prefixing of geopolitics must be definitionally sharper, if key conceptual categories such as popular or banal geopolitics are to offer analytical purchase on complex geopolitical constructs.

We begin by presenting one of the contexts in which the narrative of the new Cold War has emerged; we justify its selection and proceed to examine the structure of the narrative in this case. In the next two sections we analyze conceptually the patterns of emergence and circulation of the new Cold War narrative in Germany. In the conclusion, we will return to the issue concerning the significance of the new Cold War for the definition of geopolitics and the disciplinary constitution of critical geopolitics.

The context: the new Cold War in Germany

The case for our case

Empirically, our analysis focuses on Germany, where the narrative of new Cold War has surfaced in media and think-tank debates on energy security especially during the “gas crises” created by disputes between Russia and Ukraine in 2006 and 2008. Methodologically speaking, the selection of Germany is not necessarily an indication of its uniqueness. Talk of a new Cold War has emerged in various circumstances related to the relationship between Russia and the West – NATO enlargement, energy, the US missile shield, the 2008 South Ossetia war, the Arctic – but also in other contexts such as Darfur (Engdahl, 2007). Headlines about a new Cold War appeared across NATO countries, as well as in Australia (The Australian, 2008), Japan (Kang, 2006), or China (China Daily, 2008; People Daily, 2001). The widespread circulation of the new Cold War narrative in so many contexts points out the difficulty inherent in its generic study, since within each context where it emerged there are different aggregations of actors, audiences, and agents who propagate it.

As we shall illustrate below, the precise chronology, causes, timing and consequences of the “gas crises” are deeply contested (for a backgrounder, see Stern, 2006). In essence, they concerned the price of the gas imported by Ukraine from Russia, the price paid by Russia for the transit of gas for the EU market through pipelines on the territory of Ukraine, and the measures taken by both sides as a result of the lack of agreement on both issues. The most evident and dramatic repercussion of the disputes was the interruption of gas deliveries to a number of European countries, although Germany was generally not affected. In Germany, the reaction to the gas disputes was expressed in two rival narratives, both of which can be found in other contexts: on the one hand, the government's official narrative of Russo-German strategic partnership, and on the other, the narrative of the new Cold War. Just as the vast majority of Western governments did, the German political establishment has also rejected unequivocally the analogy between the Cold War and the energy politics sparked off by the gas disputes. However, the topic diffused rapidly from the narrow circle of energy policy specialists into mainstream media, where energy security became coterminous with the new Cold War.

Evidently, these two narratives are not produced through mere reference to the events leading to the gas disputes (our understanding of narrative draws from Ciută, 2007). Following Ricoeur, we see the proponents of the two narratives constructing “meaningful

[totalities] out of scattered events” (Ricoeur, 2005 [1981]: 279) through the story plot, which “introduces an intelligible order [...] and combines together circumstances, goals and hazards” (Ricoeur, 2005 [1981]: 39). It is these narrative plots that hold together the elements of the “grammar of geopolitical reasoning” in each of the two narratives (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 609), and through each plot, grand schemes of action are mobilized (Ricoeur, 2005 [1981]: 291) which draw on the stocks of “canonical narratives” shared by the narrators with their audiences (Bruner, 1987: 15). Thus, while both narratives carry geopolitical markers, they are significantly different in terms of the logics of interaction they proffer: one driven by an economic plot and predominantly cooperative (although it too is suffused with spatial and temporal hierarchies, and laden with imperial constructions of identity; see Klinke, *in press*), the other fiercely conflictual and driven by security concerns. Consequently, each narrative works with its own interpretation of German–Russian relations, establishing different rationalities, interests, and policy prescriptions for the actors involved.

Of course, it is always somewhat artificial to carve a discursive field in two. Although in our presentation below we have deliberately chosen the most striking formulations to illustrate the discrepancy between them, it is probably best to think of the two narratives as the ends of a spectrum, given that authors and actors often blend elements from both. It must be emphasized however that their various iterations contain all the narrative elements we highlight, and also that in the period covered no significant third storyline on energy security emerged in German public debate.

In what concerns the specificity of the German context, the public presence of an overtly geopolitical narrative such as the new Cold War is intriguing in and of itself, given the politics of contestation that have surrounded both the use of the term “geopolitics” (*Geopolitik*), and the attempts to legitimize – while heeding the terminological taboo – geopolitical modes of reasoning as the basis for post-Cold War German foreign policy (Bassin, 2003). Also, the coexistence of the two narratives is to some extent indicative of the hiatus signaled by Behnke between the “*Geopolitik*-informed geopolitical visions” that emerged in Germany after the end of the Cold War and the security narratives adopted by German foreign policy makers, who tended to elide these visions (Behnke, 2006: 397) while still being haunted, as Bach and Peters put it, by familiar “geopolitical ghosts” (2002: 14). Moreover, the emergence of the new Cold War narrative in Germany stands out because its premonition of an energy conflict between Russia and the West runs against Germany’s established position as an advocate of the development of deeper EU–Russia relations.

Methodologically, our study is based on document analysis of official documents, public speeches, think-tank publications, and coverage of the gas disputes in the mainstream printed media between 2006 and 2008. While taking into account the unevenness of media coverage of energy security issues, we have included different publication formats and broad ideological orientations, surveying reports on the broader theme of German energy security, as well as direct references to – either for, or against – and proxy analogies for the new Cold War. Our survey included the dailies *Die Welt* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the weekly broadsheet *Die Zeit*, the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, and the tabloid *Bild*. As with the printed mass media, our survey of German think-tank publications has also taken into account their different positions on energy security; we have focused on outputs from the state-sponsored *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, affiliated to the German Christian Democratic Union, the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* associated with the Social Democratic Party, and the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*. A selective presentation of our reading of these sources is inevitable, mainly because our intention is not to map objectively discursive patterns and

regularities, but to highlight the disjunction between two different narrative geopolitical emplotments of the gas disputes.

Energy security and the “strategic partnership” narrative

The response of the German political establishment to the events leading to the gas “crises” was generally restrained, pointing out that Germany did not experience significant shortages, although the disputes did have the potential to affect Germany negatively since approximately 40% of its domestic gas consumption is imported from Russia (Bundesregierung, 2006). This reaction was formulated against the background of an established German energy narrative, originated in the 1970s oil crisis and the era of *ostpolitik*, which was continued after the end of the Cold War by the liberal-conservative government of Helmut Kohl and the Red–Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (for an overview of Germany’s energy policy, see Duffield, 2009). Combining a (quasi)liberal emphasis on market principles, interdependence and cooperation between producer and consumer countries (Bundeswehr, 2006: 57; Steinmeier, 2006c), this narrative was driven by an economic plot, and steadily constructed the vision of an enduring cooperative relationship between Russia and Germany, partnership that was seen at the same time mutually beneficial, and one for which “no alternatives” existed (Schröder, 2005). While the latter may account for the narrative’s elision of almost any reference to the issue of democracy in Russia, the emphasis was constantly on the complementarity of Russian and German interests: one rich in energy resources and needing significant investment and modernization, the other rich in capital and resource hungry (Merkel, 2008).

Unsurprisingly therefore, this narrative enabled a reading of the disputes as economic, rather than political events, and saw Russia driven by market rationality, rather than political ambition. As a consequence, the crises had little effect on German energy policies. In general, German officials have been more likely to steer the debate toward policies promoting interdependence rather than confrontation with Russia (Steinmeier, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b). Moves to diversify supply through energy partnerships in the Caucasus and Central Asia (*Deutsche Welle*, 2007) did not hinder progress in the construction of Nord Stream, a gas pipeline which connects Russia directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea, which will effectively make Germany a hub for the distribution of Russian gas in Europe (Rahr, 2007: 16).

The Cold War reloaded

The German government’s narrative was soon challenged by a rival geopolitical storyline, which started to circulate intensely in newspaper and magazine articles, think-tank publications, and geopolitical bestsellers. This narrative offered a different event logic, made different assumptions concerning the interests and intentions of the actors involved, in particular Russia, and as a consequence drew vastly different conclusions about the effects of the gas disputes on Germany and the latter’s response to them. In essence, both the dispute between Russia and Ukraine, and the temporary interruption of gas supply to a number of European states were taken as sign of Russia’s renewed foreign policy assertiveness with regards to the former Soviet space in particular, and in European and world politics more generally. The disputes, in other words, were neither about money, nor about gas: these were seen as convenient proxies for what was essentially great-power politics.

The narrative of the new Cold War is not just that there is a war that resembles the “old” Cold War. It also reproduces the symbolic order and hybrid vernacular – part description, part prescription – embedded in Cold War geopolitics, working with the same binaries that portray the identities of the protagonists and the bonds of



Fig. 1. 'All roads of Marxism lead to Moscow! Therefore CDU'. CDU election poster, 1953, Deutsches Historisches Museum (reproduced by permission).

interaction, conflict and in/security that structure their relationship: East/West, aggression/defence, authoritarianism/democracy, irrationality/rationality, and politics/economics. The analogy is conjured up through direct reference (Beste, 2006; Hartmann, 2007; Kornelius, 2007; Scholl-Latour, 2008; Umbach, 2006); in negation (Himmelreich, 2007b; Rahr, 2007); through proxy metaphors such as "cold power politics", "cold reality", "cold peace", "cold warriors" or a "new ice age" (Beste, 2007; Stürmer, 2007c); or, as the two images above exemplify, through graphic illustrations that clone the symbolism and personifications which structured representations of the "old" Cold War (Figs. 1 and 2).

Underlying this story is, as one would expect, a particular way of understanding the world and international politics. The new Cold War marks the dawn of an "age of energy conflicts" in which "politics becomes dominated by energy security" (Follath, 2006a: 70; Thumann, 2006). Darwinian echoes reverberate throughout this new world, its generalized "hunt for resource reserves" (Kornelius, 2007) leading to a great "geopolitical gamble" (Umbach, 2006: 9). A strong tension between change and continuity lurks beneath this conservative vision, which sees the *new* oil geopolitics (Rosenblatt, 2006; Stürmer, 2007a) as a symptom of *enduring* patterns of competition for power. The new Cold War is seen to revive the "power politics of old, spheres of influence, hegemony and imperialism lite" in general (Stürmer, 2007b), and in particular the "geopolitical struggle between the former Cold War rivals" (Beste, Hammerstein, Ilsemann, & Mascolo, 2007: 26) for "securing influence in the former Soviet space" (Posener, 2006). In this conflict, energy constitutes the "currency of power" (Himmelreich, 2007c), with oil and gas replacing tanks and missiles (Panjuschkina & Sygar, 2008: 299; Sager, 2008: 209) as "weapons" that subdue enemies "more effectively than a nuclear arsenal" (Joffe, 2006). Thus the gas disputes are represented as the beginning of Gazprom's "Western offensive" (Hartmann & Schraven, 2006; Thumann, 2008), which proves Russia's willingness to use the "energy weapon" (Beste, Dohmen, Sauga, & Schepp, 2006: 25; Follath, 2006b: 84). This is seen to reflect the primacy of political over economic goals which structures Russian foreign policy, as it did in the Soviet Union (NSC-68, 1950: V).

In a twist to the familiar bipolar structure of the Cold War, the two key protagonists of the narrative are Russia and Germany,

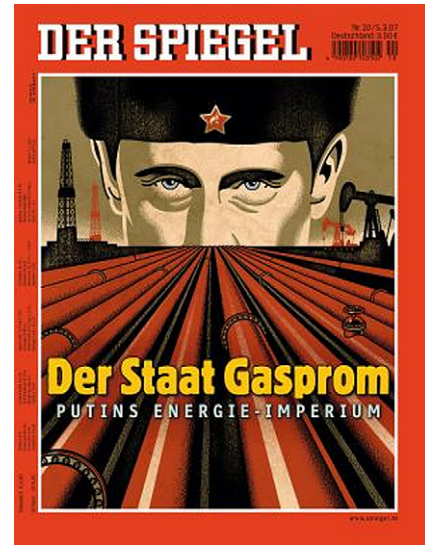


Fig. 2. 'The State Gazprom: Putin's Energy Empire'. *Der Spiegel*, October 2007 (reproduced by permission).

although most tellings of the story see Germany sharing both danger and destiny with the other members of the EU. The difference between the two protagonists could not be greater: on the one hand, Germany, a weak, somnambulant democratic non-power. On the other hand, Russia is seen as a rising "aggressive" and authoritarian empire (Lucas, 2008: 13) "unscrupulously expanding its sphere of influence" (Thumann & Voswinkel, 2007; Voswinkel, 2007), like the Soviet Union before (Kennan, 1947: 575; NSC-68, 1950: 1). Russia's "grasp for Europe" (Lipman, 2006) is thus seen to inhere in its very *nature*: this is what "illiberal regimes" do (Asmus, 2007), and this is what Russia is: "aggressive" (Hartmann, 2007), "impolite", "irrational" and "spiteful" (Mayr & Neef, 2006: 88). Russia's move "towards its authoritarian past" (Reitschuster, 2007: 15) is at once one "away from the West" (Kluschmann, Neef, & Schepp, 2006: 115; Motyl, 2007: 36), so its behavior is a sign of the unbridgeable gulf that separates it from the "key values of the Euro-Atlantic democracies" (McCain, 2007). The new Cold War reiterates therefore the familiar spatiotemporal tropes of the "old" Cold War, from Adenauer's apocalyptic vision of "Asia [arriving] on the Elbe" (Patton, 1999: 21), to that of Russia as a mortal danger to "the rebirth of Western democracy" (Adenauer, 1965: 298) due to its pathological intolerance to "free societies" (NSC-68, 1950: V) – although it must be emphasized that most of these tropes, in particular the role played by Russia, Eastern Europe or more generically the East in the constitution of the West and its civilizational identity, predate significantly the "old" Cold War (see for example Neumann, 1999; Wolff, 1994).

However, the new Cold War narrative is not one of despair. Its policy horizon is determined by the belief that Germany can overcome the crisis, that its weakness is temporary and its lethargy surmountable (Follath, 2006b: 78; Himmelreich, 2007a: 56). Thus, the gas crises must be the "wake-up call" for "sleeping beauty" Germany (Dohmen, Jung, Reuter, & Schlamp, 2006: 34), lest it falls through the new "supply gap" (Riley & Umbach, 2007: 113). The parallel with the Cold War missile gap draws on similar symbolisms of conflict: the justification of Cold War containment also drew a picture of a lethargic and naïve West which at the same time was powerful enough to counter the Soviet threat (Schöllgen, 2004: 48). Victory in the "new" war is seen to hinge on understanding the enemy's "hidden" weaknesses. Although apparently indomitable, Russian power is considered just a "Potemkin village" (Kremp,

2007), barely propped by a weak economy, rusty industries, thin infrastructure, and weakened by endemic corruption (Quiring, 2007; Scholl, 2006: 31). Even Russia's "swinging of the energy club" is taken as a sign of weakness (Adomeit, 2006: 12), just as the Soviet Union's wielding of its "great missile club" was (Der Spiegel, 1962: 42). If met with strength and decisive action, these "seeds of decay" in contemporary Russia "would begin to flourish and fructify", just as they did within the Soviet system (NSC-68, 1950: V).

The policy implications of the new Cold War narrative are immediate: "everything that lessens the dependence on Moscow's oil and gas must be promoted" (Himmelreich, 2007b). The development of an EU energy policy (Follath, 2006b: 88) must be complemented by a tougher German/EU stance toward Russia and immediate overtures toward Ukraine, Belarus and the Central Asian states, to counter Russia's advances (Singhofen, 2007: 55–56). The construction of pipelines bypassing Russia is thus seen as imperative as the development of renewable energy sources and the return to nuclear energy and coal (Koch, 2006; Rutz, 2008).

Landscapes and timescapes of the New Cold War

From a critical geopolitical perspective, it is unsurprising that grand geopolitical narratives such as the Cold War draw on historical analogies and national mythologies, or that they linger in apparently innocuous sites. What interests us is not its veracity or adequacy but rather, the work done by this latest of historical analogies, one of the many that appear with metronomic regularity in diplomatic, journalistic and academic assessments of international politics (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 608). This work is relevant both in policy and symbolic terms. Historical analogies are powerful tools which harness, select and isolate collective memories (Brändtström, Bynander, & 't Hart, 2004). Familiarity and simplification act as conveyor belts between different audiences and discursive levels, enabling the communication of entire universes of meaning and praxis through single words such as "Munich" or "Korea" (Agnew, 1998: 4).

The historical analogy with the Cold War is normatively laden both in terms of the actions it prescribes, and in terms of the moral story it tells. This moral story is reinforced by the symbolic order invested in the new Cold War, and conveyed through the implicit and explicit, temporal and spatial politics of its traditional geopolitical rendition of the world. The new Cold War appears therefore as a form of power/knowledge designed to render distant places both knowable and controllable (Dalby, 1990; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998). As the "old" Cold War did, its geopolitical imaginary appeals to policy makers and analysts particularly through the use of maps, and suppresses political contexts in favor of neat spatial abstractions, and historical complexity in favor of totalizing codes.

These dynamics are evident in the new Cold War not only through the clear demarcation of security spaces, but also through an explicit normative investment in the identities of the actors involved. The ostensible logic of protection of the new Cold War – Germany and Europe ("us, here") must be protected from Russia ("them, there") – is enabled by the portrayal of a moral Self confronted by an Other which is different as it is villainous. It is here that the temporal politics – which, as Aalto and Berg argue, has always been "deeply involved in geopolitics" (Aalto & Berg, 2002: 267; see also Klinke, 2010) – of the new Cold War becomes most apparent. Spatial/moral othering is legitimated by temporal labels sanctioned through historical analogy. Time is converted into space through the carving up of history in grand temporalities – modernity here, pre-modernity there – and through the use of temporal markers (like "backwardness") as moral standards for the depiction of the Other (Agnew, 1998). This is precisely how the

relationship between Russia and Germany is politically and normatively signified in the new Cold War narrative: Russia drags Germany and the West back in the past, and thus assumes an illegitimate identity – that of an empire – which has been historically discredited.

By popular demand? The geopolitics in the new Cold War

How can we make conceptual sense of this geopolitical narrative? It may be argued that the significance of the new Cold War narrative should not be overestimated, since it was not adopted by the government and caused only minor policy changes. It may also be argued that the sponsors of the new Cold War narrative do not mean that there really is a direct equivalent of the Cold War, but use it as a convenient handle on a situation that requires a "narrative of intelligibility" (Dodds, 1996: 589). Either way, a puzzle persists: *to whom* is the new Cold War intelligible, and why is *this* geopolitical vision of the world appealing enough to be carried by the mass media, and not only without, but also against state sponsorship? This is where the conceptual apparatus of critical geopolitics acquires increase relevance, starting from two fairly immediate observations. First, the very visible schism between the two narratives we have described above is basically one between two different "kinds" of geopolitics. Second, the mix of actors and distribution formats for both narratives alludes to the conglomeration of different geopolitical forms – formal, practical and popular, which we define below – which fits a well-established understanding of geopolitics as a discourse circulating between the interconnected fields of foreign policy practice, academia and popular culture (Ó Tuathail, 1999, 2004; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998).

The conceptual puzzle created by the new Cold War comes precisely from the relationship between the two "kinds" of geopolitics embedded in the two narratives, and the geopolitical forms involved in their circulation. This relationship concerns both the political and institutional hierarchies that bind the three geopolitical forms, and, crucially, the associations drawn between certain geopolitical "kinds" or *logics* (e.g. *Geopolitik*), specific *actors* (e.g. state elites), and particular geopolitical *forms* (e.g. practical). This puzzle, it must be emphasized, is organic to the theoretical edifice of critical geopolitics where these categories are formulated, not to generic interpretations of what and how the mass media delivers in terms of (geo)political content.

Messy geopolitics: actors, logics, media and geopolitical forms in the new Cold War

The first conceptual challenge instigated by the dissociation between the two narratives concerns the relationship between the actors reproducing the new Cold War and the form(s) in which it circulates. Critical geopolitics has long recognized that geopolitical tropes "saturate" and "leak" "beyond the formal sphere of government" (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008: 441), and has developed a variety of conceptual constructs to account for this phenomenon, in particular the triad of popular, practical and formal geopolitics. *Popular geopolitics* is understood as the "various manifestations to be found within the visual media, news magazines, radio, novels and the Internet" (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008: 441; Sharp, 1993, 1996). *Practical geopolitics* is defined by Ó Tuathail as "how foreign policy decision-makers make sense of international crises, how they construct stories to explain these crises, how they develop strategies for handling these crises as political challenges, and how they conceptualize 'solutions' to these crises" (2002: 603). Finally, *formal geopolitics* refers to the "formalized theories and grand strategic visions of geopolitical intellectuals" (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 113) and the

“institutions and forces shaping geopolitical thought in particular places and contexts” (109–110).

According to these definitions, the widespread media coverage of the new Cold War seems at first sight a perfect example of popular geopolitics. But what does this actually mean? While Ó Tuathail suggests that popular geopolitics is actually “popular” in the sense of being widely shared by the public opinion (2004: 85), most of the formulations of this concept focus on the process and outlets through which geopolitical codes are popularized, i.e. transmitted to the public opinion. In the first instance, “popularity” banks on the ubiquity-as-commonality of geopolitics, while in the second, “popularity” relies on the ubiquity-as-availability of geopolitics. In our view, this distinction is essential, for there are considerable differences between a situation where the new Cold War is a widely shared geopolitical construct, and that where the new Cold War is disseminated to an audience with the purpose of changing existing geopolitical constructs and their associated policies. Here, critical geopolitical literature is decidedly ambiguous. For Sharp, for example, popular geopolitics is a mix of “sources” and “conceptions of geopolitics” (Sharp, 1993: 491, emphasis added). At times, popular geopolitics takes the broader meaning of “the domain of the public realm and the media” (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 355). Debrix signals that popular geopolitics is considered “a genre/discourse in its own right” (2003: 155), yet at the same time discusses “the [Reader] Digest’s deployment of popular geopolitics” (157, emphasis added), which implies that popular geopolitics refers not to the media, but to a type of geopolitical formulation which the media deploy.

In contrast, the German government’s strategic partnership narrative fits comfortably the definition of practical geopolitics, where the focus is decidedly not on geopolitical content, but on specific actors: “practitioners of statecraft, statespersons, politicians and military commanders” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 194). According to this definition therefore, the difference between popular and practical geopolitics concerns the “who”, not the “what” of geopolitical messaging. The key role of this differentia is accentuated by the fact that, in terms of presence (i.e. “where” it resides), practical geopolitics is virtually indistinguishable from popular geopolitics, for just as popular geopolitics is “created and debated by the media” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 110), practical geopolitics too is “widely disseminated by the media” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 114), and is also “ordinary and informal everyday discourse” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 114). Dodds’s suggestion that we see at times “popular geopolitical reasoning of [...] governments” (2000: 125) can only strengthen the conclusion that there is virtually no distinction between the two geopolitical forms, other than their actors. However, in our case the apparent dissonance between the “popular” geopolitics of the new Cold War and the “practical” geopolitics of the strategic partnership narrative is constituted especially by the “what”, i.e. the geopolitical logics embedded in each of the two narratives.

This dissociation between popular and practical geopolitics is further complexified by the presence of the third geopolitical form. The fervid publication activities of various German think tanks suggest that the new Cold War also fits *formal geopolitics*. In addition to analyses published by German think tanks, we locate here the leading international affairs journal *Internationale Politik*, as well as best-selling monographs taking an explicitly geopolitical angle. Once again, the definition of formal geopolitics mixes actors – “intellectuals, institutions and forces” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 110), i.e. those who write geopolitics – with outputs, i.e. the particular form taken by their geopolitical production as “a highly codified system of ideas and principles” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 194). What the German case seems to reveal therefore is the partial convergence of popular and formal geopolitics as *distinct formats* for the circulation of the *shared logic* and geopolitical message of the new Cold War. This convergence

is only partial, because the “formal geopolitics” of Russo-German energy relations is divided. While some think tanks – e.g. *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* and *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* – have partially embraced the new Cold War angle, others – such as *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, and *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* – have engaged the topic from the quasi-liberal geopolitical perspective outlined above. Geopolitical bestsellers circulating in Germany are also divided, some disseminating the new Cold War narrative in its most strident form (Lucas, 2008; Reitschuster, 2007; Sager, 2008), while others denounce Russia’s geopolitical “encirclement” (Krone-Schmalz, 2007; Rahr, 2008; Scholl-Latour, 2006), or remain ambiguous about the new Cold War (Stürmer, 2008).

The thematic convergence of popular and formal geopolitics seems to suggest therefore that the best way to differentiate between the three geopolitical forms is according to the actors who formulate geopolitical messages, and their institutional affiliation. However, even this categorical difference is destabilized by the manifold ambiguities of the German context, inherent in the mixture of voices, audiences, story-telling devices and places of speaking. German intellectuals of statecraft, to use another foundational concept of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 193), contribute to the dissemination of the new Cold War narrative as TV talking heads, government advisors, book writers, and newspaper editorialists. Journalists, academics and practitioners are given voice in the pages of *Internationale Politik*. German geopolitical bestsellers have a similarly tortuous personality. While some of them clearly begin their life in the field of formal geopolitics, the very fact that they are “best-selling” is an indication of some form of popularity. Thus, formal geopolitics seems to share both characteristics of popular geopolitics, i.e. the commonality of its (best-selling) message, and its availability. To add to the ambiguity, the actors of formal geopolitics operate simultaneously in all three fields.

The new Cold War thus comprehensively destabilizes the distinction between geopolitical forms, crossing over repeatedly between textual genres, vectors of circulation and institutions. While this observation is significant enough in the framework of critical geopolitics and makes imperative the sharper formulation of these essential concepts, it does not solve the puzzle of the schism between the geopolitical logics of the two narratives. Furthermore, this categorical mashing suggests a lack of structuring of national geopolitical contexts, which runs contrary to the way most critical geopolitical literature envisions them.

Hierarchies and dissociations

The dissociation between popular and practical geopolitics is bound to be significant for critical geopolitics, since one of its key tasks is “to demonstrate how popular and elite forms of geopolitical reasoning collude with one another” (Dodds, 2001: 473). Furthermore, this dissociation fits neither the hierarchical understanding of the relationship between popular and practical forms typically endorsed in critical geopolitical literature, nor the media model underpinning this hierarchy. While this hierarchy is at times deliberately rejected (Sharp, 1993), it is maintained both implicitly, in the constant order of their enumeration – first formal, then practical, then popular – and explicitly, as a combined product of how critical geopolitics conceptualizes the international system, the role of “intellectuals of statecraft” and state elites, and state–media relations.

The latter is decisive here, given that, as discussed above, the mass media have a constitutional role in the definition of popular geopolitics. The hierarchical structuring of geopolitical contexts is embedded in the very definition of popular geopolitics as the “domain of the public realm and the media that foster support and

legitimacy [...] for foreign policy" (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 355, emphasis added). The essence of popular geopolitics is therefore "the calculated popular mobilisation of popular geographical prejudices for a public audience in order to (re)direct public policy" (Gregory & Pred, 2007: 3). From this perspective, it is argued that the media not only reproduce "dominant geopolitical discourse" (McFarlane & Hay, 2003: 212), but also cover events such as the energy crises in narratives that reflect "the interests of existing political elites and power structures" (214). A significant part of critical geopolitical scholarship tends therefore to see the mass media as mere mouthpieces of the political establishment, and thus subscribe – although mainly implicitly – to the indexing theory of media–state relations, according to which "mass media professionals [...] tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (Bennett, 1990: 106; Hallin, 1986).

We cannot debate here the pros and cons of indexing theory, which is not without critics (Althaus, 2003; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Robinson, Brown, Goddard, & Parry, 2005). What we do want to point out is that authors in critical geopolitics have been inclined to generalize this media model, and thus obviate the assumptions and choices involved in their use of it. The dissociation we have highlighted in the German context suggests that the relationship between media organizations and the political establishment is a lot more complex. Just like foreign policy leaders formulate arguments whose "coherence and consistency [...] is contextually dependent" (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 607), so too media organizations tune their geopolitical messages for specific audiences. Whether this particular dissociation is caused by the different audiences to whom newspapers or politicians speak – e.g. domestic or international, each with their "corresponding art of following a story" (Ricoeur, 2005 [1981]: 278) – or rather, is produced by a gap between genuinely different conceptions of security underpinning their views on energy policy, this can only be established contextually.

More generally, we think that the indexing media model does not fit the conceptual triad of practical, formal and popular geopolitics, because the distinction between them is eradicated by this rigidly hierarchical model for the transmission of geopolitical narratives. If intellectuals of statecraft work out geopolitical narratives to be used by politicians and diffused to the wider public by a subservient media, this means that the same geopolitical logic and content should circulate everywhere. Yet the distinction between the new Cold War and "strategic partnership" narratives is precisely one of geopolitical logic. We do not wish to argue that lay geopolitics is completely autonomous either from the ideas that emanate from formal geopolitics, or from the interests that circumscribe the deployment of geopolitical knowledge in foreign policy. If anything, our study emphasizes precisely the blurred boundaries between geopolitical forms, where similar narratives are adopted by different actors and similar actors act upon differently emplotted stories. What we do want to signal is both the contextually-situated narrative autonomy of various geopolitical actors, and the fact that this blurring of boundaries calls into question the very labels "practical", "popular", and "formal".

We can now turn to the final step in our analysis of the puzzle stemming from the dissociation between the different geopolitical logics embedded in the two energy security narratives and the geopolitical forms that carry them.

The new Cold War and the banality of geopolitics

It could be argued, of course, that the new Cold War is nothing more than an attention-grabbing but lazy cliché. This could indeed be the case, because the tropes of the Cold War lend themselves

easily to non-specific use and lax symbolism. However, the media circulation of the new Cold War narrative is hardly without consequences. The first of these emerges from the very presence in the public sphere of the geopolitical logic connoted by the new Cold War, while the second derives from the potential popularity of this logic, as discussed above. This combination of presence and circulation hints at the possibility that the geopolitical logic of the new Cold War is largely taken for granted, and it is precisely this geopolitical "common sense" (Sharp, 1993) that has induced the emplotment of energy security along the lines of the new Cold War narrative. To put it differently, the new Cold War is at the same time the product of a geopolitical reflex, and a hermeneutic ritual that produces the geopolitical "normality" which underpins it. This potential normalization of the geopolitics in the new Cold War clearly resonates with the concept of *banal geopolitics*, which emerged in critical geopolitics precisely as the result of a growing concern that certain geopolitical logics have become "everyday", "ordinary", and "normalised" (Sidaway, 2001: 607).

It would seem, therefore, that the new Cold War narrative provides further evidence in support of the argument regarding the banalization of geopolitics. Sidaway's concern that the current "daily (banal) reproduction of imperial and interventionist geopolitics [has] deep antecedents in the Cold War" (Sidaway, 2008: 2) can only reinforce the need for conceptual investigation: is the new Cold War a banal geopolitics? Does banal geopolitics offer a kind of conceptual grip on the new Cold War that is not afforded by the other concepts discussed above, especially popular geopolitics? Although initially appealing, a meticulous unpacking of banal geopolitics reveals its problematic relationship with other concepts and its uneasy place in the theoretical landscape of critical geopolitics. In essence, we see two significant problems.

Banal geopolitics emerged from an analysis of the practices and symbolism of contemporary war. Authors who work with this concept argue that the banality of geopolitics comes from the fact that "it is more or less unexceptional" (Sidaway, 2001: 607), and more precisely, that "a new mode of techno-war and intervention [...] has been normalised" (607). This is particularly evident in the US-led global war on terrorism (GWOT), where "war and a plethora of new strategies, military technologies and security procedures have become everyday and ordinary" (Sidaway, 2008: 2).

In this context, the first problem is that the concept of banal geopolitics relies on several loose categorical proxies: something which is implicitly considered equivalent to geopolitics has become banal. If indeed "the substance of warmaking [...] is now normal, taken-for-granted geopolitics" (Sidaway, 2001: 606) because "attacks have become *unremarkable*" (606, original emphasis), then geopolitics is banal *only if geopolitics equals war*. A similar conceptual transmutation sees banal geopolitics as the phenomenon in which "a sense of emergency becomes generalized throughout society and conflict becomes the norm" (Flusty, Dittmer, Gilbert, & Kuus, 2008: 620). While this line of reasoning is not without merit, its unmistakable Agambenian overtone provides the clue: it is conflict and the "state of exception" that are banal, not geopolitics, unless we take geopolitics to mean the state of exception (Agamben, 1998). In another instance, banal geopolitics is at the same time state practice and a mode of academic inquiry which seeks "to deconstruct the banalities of world politics" (Dodds, 2000: 122). The problem is therefore that "banality" is tagged onto different issues and problematics which all bear the name geopolitics.

Such conceptual mutations are not objectionable in themselves; some authors have argued that they are both expected and inevitable, because "geopolitics does not have a singular, all-encompassing meaning or identity" (Ó Tuathail, 1994a: 269). Notwithstanding, the surreptitious morphing of geopolitics into war does not open up the concept, but narrows it down significantly. By reducing geopolitics to

state violence, banal geopolitics resurrects a very traditional understanding of the geopolitical, similar to those embedded in “the ‘mummified’ theories that critical geopolitics has so outspokenly left behind” (Bassin, 2004: 621). Traditional geopolitics also established a similar inextricable relationship between geopolitics and war, and rendered war a matter-of-fact, unremarkable aspect of international politics. Furthermore, just as traditional geopolitics, banal geopolitics remains indissolubly linked to the state, as a critique of its violent practices and media performance.

This brings us to the second problem. Sidaway argues that “violence and acts of terror have long possessed a taken-for-granted banality” (2003: 649). Indeed, critical geopolitics has challenged both the normalization of perpetual and unavoidable confrontation in the geopolitics of the Cold War, and the normalization of violence and oppression in the colonial narratives of classical geopolitics. Yet this means that, from a critical geopolitical perspective, *traditional* geopolitics has *always* been banal. If this is so, what does the emphasis on “banality” add to our understanding of geopolitical practices and narratives like the new Cold War? What is specific to the historical and political now that makes it a “moment” of banal geopolitics (Sidaway, 2008: 2)?

This problem, we argue, stems from the fact that banal geopolitics is torn between its dual understanding as violence and as a way of narrating it. As Sidaway argues, “war is more or less taken for granted as the norm, fed [...] by a daily media coverage about ‘terrorism’” (Sidaway, 2008: 2, emphasis added). It is this media intensity that defines the geopolitical “moment” Sidaway refers to. What most engagements with banal geopolitics find disturbing is the way violence is *told*, its investment in mundane “objects, communications, performances” (Flusty et al., 2008: 619), and chiefly, the fact that we – the generalized “we” of the audience – have stopped reacting: with horror, outrage and resistance, the way we used to. Essentially, banal geopolitics hinges on an imaginary moment in the past when the public consuming geopolitics was still innocent, when its moral sense had not been numbed yet by constant exposure to the atrocities of global war, famine, or poverty, so it could still see them for what they truly are, rather than mere news, mere “things” happening to other people in other places.

While potentially interesting, this signification of the banality of geopolitics coincides almost entirely with other geopolitical concepts, which it as a consequence undermines. As we argued above, it is exactly “daily media coverage” that makes the new Cold War fit conceptually the parameters of popular geopolitics, so if popularity is defined by ubiquity-as-availability, banal geopolitics is popular geopolitics. Furthermore, practical geopolitics is also “widely disseminated by the media in popular political culture”, and has “the significant quality of being unremarkable” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 114). Although its normative drive is undoubtedly stronger, banal geopolitics is virtually indistinguishable from both popular and practical geopolitics, which adds uneasily to its similarity to traditional geopolitics.

Whereas such similarities are not necessarily an analytical sin, the example of the new Cold War illustrates the conceptual limits of banal geopolitics. Its parameters are either insufficiently differentiated from other concepts, or too vague, as suggested by the ambivalence of terms such as “everyday” and “normal”, which vacillate between occurrence and acceptance. If anything, banal geopolitics reinforces a version of the concept of popular geopolitics which focuses on availability and on the *attempts* to normalize, through media presence, geopolitical logics such as that of the new Cold War. Yet the dissociation we have signaled above shows that the geopolitics *in* the new Cold War is contested, so mere media presence cannot equate normalization. If banal geopolitics is to shed light on the geopolitics in the new Cold War, or on the contextual construction of geopolitical narratives in general, it

must specify clearly its understanding of the geopolitical and the role the media play in its propagation.

Conclusion

As remarkable or predictable as its emergence has been, we did not intend to confirm or disconfirm the new Cold War narrative. We asked: how does this narrative work as a form of geopolitical knowledge and practice? We answered that the New Cold War is a conservative geopolitical narrative which draws on all the “mythic qualities” of traditional geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 113). Yet even if the media circulation of the new Cold War narrative is a hermeneutic reflex which signals the deflation of geopolitical tropes, the presence of *this* geopolitical logic in public debate is hardly without significance. This is not just because our example goes against claims that “popular usage is vacuous rather than redolent of old-style disciplinary geopolitics” (Agnew, 2004: 635). In our view, the presence of “old-style” geopolitics in popular usage is not that unexpected. What is unexpected from the perspective of critical geopolitics is the severing of the umbilical link between the state and this “kind” of geopolitics, as is the fact that on this issue popular usage contradicts state-endorsed geopolitical vision. This brings into question the degree to which popular usage is “open to conversion to new meanings” of geopolitics (Agnew, 2004: 635), as well as the relationship between geopolitics and the mass media, and in particular its role in transforming its own popularity-as-omnipresence into the popularity-as-assent of particular kinds of geopolitics.

If the circulation of the new Cold War brings emphatically to the fore the ambiguity of the “popular” in popular geopolitics, its geopolitical content is bound to the disciplinary quest for the essence of geopolitics itself. Demonstrating the effects of such geopolitical narratives requires sharp categorical distinctions as well as contextual sensitivity, so conceptual finesse and normative engagement are inextricably linked. Our study suggests that this link is not only empirically complex, but also theoretically under-specified in critical geopolitics, at times deliberately so. To attest, Ó Tuathail’s call for “precisely defined concepts” (2004: 99), with which we opened our analysis, stands in stark contrast with his earlier claim that “formal, practical and popular geopolitics were not developed in critical geopolitics partly because they are so mutually implicated and difficult to separate” (2000: 395). We illustrated that conceptual precision is valuable in and of itself, and that its absence undermines the normative agenda of critical geopolitics. Without clear *concepts*, it is difficult to sustain the *normative* difference between, as well as the analytical shift from, for example, the geopolitical imaginations of state “elites” to that of “the people” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Megoran, 2006; this argument draws on Ciută, 2009, esp. 322–324).

Furthermore, one of the key strengths of critical geopolitics, the constant stretching of its analytical boundaries, may also become a liability: the absence of clear conceptual markers makes unsustainable the booming industry in appending new qualifiers to geopolitics, which has seen the emergence of, among others, feminist, radical, emotional, embodied, subaltern, actor-network, everyday, and bio-geopolitics. Without such clarity, it will remain difficult to tell whether the widespread circulation of the new Cold War narrative indicates the merging of these geopolitical forms, or whether, on the contrary, its conservative geopolitical tropes signal a continuing sedimentation of “old-style” geopolitics – which, of course, is a key task of critical geopolitics.

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