

Critical Geopolitics

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Glossary

Discourse A discourse can be thought of as a temporally and spatially specific lens through which the world is interpreted, thus defining the boundaries of what can be known.

Geopolitics Geopolitics is an aspect of the practice and analysis of statecraft which considers geography and spatial relations to play a significant role in the constitution of international politics.

Realism A theory of international relations which regards the state to be the only genuine source of agency in the international realm.

Introduction

The term 'geopolitics' was first used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen in 1899, but did not become popular until used in the early twentieth century by British geographer and strategist Halford Mackinder. Mackinder promoted the study of geography as an 'aid to statecraft', insisting that geographers had a key role in the practices of international relations. The study of geopolitics focused upon the ways in which geographical factors – such as proximity, land mass, geographies of resources, and so on – shaped the historical unfolding of international politics. He argued that certain spaces would be more vulnerable to attack because of the effects of distance on politics and that certain topographical features could promote security. In geopolitical arguments, the effect of geography on politics is based upon 'commonsense', rather than ideology: the 'facts' of geography are seen to have predictable influences upon political processes.

The concept of security is fundamental to the study of geopolitics. This refers to the protection of the state from the threat of external powers. Geopoliticians argue that they can aid national security by analyzing the effects of a country's geography, and that of potential conquerors on future power–political relations. Geopolitics claims to be able to predict which areas could strengthen a state, helping it to rise to prominence, and which might leave it vulnerable. As a result, geopolitics has traditionally been considered to be a very practical and objective study: the actual 'practice' of international relations has been seen to be quite separate from political theory.

Critical geopolitics refers to a range of approaches that arose through a revival of interest in political

geography to challenge dominant geopolitical arguments in the 1980s. This involved a number of intellectual positions from European and Anglo-American geography which arose to challenge the state-centrism and factual accuracy of conventional geopolitical theories. For instance, critical analysis of American exceptionalism and Cold War theories of the domino effect revealed the inherently ideological nature of the use of these geographical arguments. Such critical perspectives came from intellectual strands of Marxism and world systems approaches but the conceptual approach that has come to be most closely associated with the term 'critical geopolitics' has its origins in post-structuralism.

Post-Structural Critical Geopolitics

Founded initially by political geographers Simon Dalby and Gearoid Ó Tuathail (writing together and separately) in the late 1980s, critical geopolitics influenced by post-structuralist concerns with the politics of representation considers the ways in which the use of particular discourses shape political practices. Using the apparently oxymoronic term 'critical geopolitics', Dalby and Ó Tuathail sought to create a critical approach to subvert the taken-for-granted meanings of geographical discourse in explanations of international politics. The rise of critical geopolitics in political geography can be seen in a wider context. Post-structural approaches in international relations theory deconstructed the foundational concepts upon which the discipline had been built, including realism and sovereignty, in a way mirroring the theoretical agenda of critical geopolitics. However, the rise of both critical geopolitics and post-structural versions of international relations theory have created a very geographically specific tradition with few practitioners beyond North America and the UK (a notable exception would be Fin Anssi Paasi).

Critical geopolitical approaches seek to examine how it is that international politics is imagined spatially or geographically and in so doing to uncover the politics involved in writing the geography of global space. Rather than arguing over the true effects of geography on international relations critical geopolitics asks whose models of international geography are used, and whose interests these models serve. This approach owes much to Michel Foucault's insistence that power and knowledge are inseparable. For geopoliticians, there is great power available to those whose maps and explanations of world politics are accepted as accurate because of the influence

that these have on the way the world and its workings are understood, and therefore the effects that this has on future political practice.

Dalby and Ó Tuathail likened critical geopolitics to writing over the accepted political maps of the world to expose what these omitted and to highlight the power/knowledge relations upon which they depended. Unlike conventional geopolitics, for critical geopolitics geography is not a collection of incontrovertible facts and relationships 'out there' in the world awaiting description but is a discourse. Geographical orders are created by key individuals and institutions and then imposed upon the world. Ó Tuathail has called this process 'geo-graphing' – earth-writing – to emphasize the creativity inherent in the process of using geographical reasoning in the practical service of power. Geographical discourse used in representations of international politics then is the product of cultural context and political motivation. Those adopting critical geopolitical approaches grant a range of power to discourse, from those who see geopolitical discourse becoming out of synch with the geopolitical reality it seeks to describe and so causing inappropriate state practice, to a figure like French philosopher Jean Baudrillard for whom language and representation are everything (he famously illustrated this point by arguing that the Gulf War did not exist, it only occurred on television).

Conventional geopolitics draws on a discourse of objectivity. In part, this comes from the use of the apparently unchanging facts and laws of geography. However, the idea of geopolitics as an objective form of knowledge (and therefore an unbiased form of political practice) also emerges through the privileging of sight (especially with the use of maps and diagrams) over other senses in geopolitical reasoning. This allows the geopoliticians to write as if from afar, as if somehow unconnected to the world being surveyed reinforcing the idea of an objective account rather than one written from a position embedded within the events being discussed. It hides the fact that the geopolitician has his or her own point of view and loyalties. Although it is generally accepted that Nazi *Geopolitik* had a political agenda, this is considered to be an aberration of the 'science' of geopolitics. Yet the Foucauldian approach to discourse makes it clear that no geopolitician can be innocent of interest. For example, naval historian Mahan's geopolitics were influenced by his desire to build up the US Navy at a time when other technologies seemed to make naval power less important while George W. Bush's geopolitical construction of an 'axis of evil' stretching from Iraq to North Korea provides Americans with a named and territorialized enemy 'out there' in its 'war on terror'.

In addition to recognizing the situatedness of geopolitics, critical geopolitical approaches have focused on ways in which geopolitical arguments have sought to

create emotional response on the part of its subjects encouraging them not only to believe in certain representations of the world, but also, in some cases, to create active citizens remaking their world.

Critical Geopolitics and Identity

Conventional geopolitics is based around realist political thought. For realism, world politics is made up of an anarchic, unregulated space of the international and the ordered space of the sovereign state. States are understood to be the only (or main, in the case of neorealism) actor in international politics. The main role of the state is to provide security, protecting the domestic space and its citizens from the threat of the chaotic international. Realism is based around a binary of inside (domestic, state) and outside (chaotic, international). By privileging one side, a hierarchy is formed which naturalizes the unequal relationship between self and some defined other. For realism, ordered international space represents a peaceful system, whereas anarchy signifies global political space which has yet to be domesticated by a sovereign state. This discursive structure is necessary to the maintenance of the naturalization of the realist position as the explanation of international politics. Thus, legitimacy is provided to the states wishing to extend the order of their sovereignty to this chaotic space.

Critical geopolitical analysis of security discourse demonstrates that it is difference that threatens the states so that the essential moment of geopolitics is the division of space into 'our' place and 'their' place; its political function being to incorporate and regulate 'us' or 'the same' by distinguishing 'us' from 'them', 'the same' from 'the other'. In arguing this, critical geopolitics suggests that geopolitics is not something simply linked to describing or predicting the shape of international politics, but is central to the ways in which identity is formed and maintained in modern societies. National identity is not simply defined by what binds the members of the nation together but also – perhaps even more importantly – by defining those who exist outside as different from members of the nation. Drawing borders around territory to produce 'us' and 'them' of the nation and those who are different, does not simply reflect the divisions inherent in the world but also helps to create differences. While some critical geopolitics has sought to challenge the state-centrism of conventional accounts by highlighting the role of actors 'above' and 'below' the state, and those actors and issues which transcend the boundaries of states (such as environmental security), it has also sought to highlight this role of realism and the exclusion of difference in the construction of identity.

It has been argued that the first instance of geopolitics was Orientalism, the imaginative geography of the West

versus the rest so eloquently elucidated by Edward Said. Drawing upon the Western philosophical tradition of ordering the world through conceptual binaries, Said argued that Europe's representation of the Orient as other, was used to reflect back a positive image of the self. The West is everything that the rest is not. In other words, he is suggesting that the concept of difference between East and West is a geopolitical difference which is inscribed throughout the texts of Western culture whether travel writings, political texts, paintings, or in academic discussions. These texts 'preceded' experience, so empirical evidence was included but fitted into the categories that were already constructed. Travelers saw what they expected to see. For Said, this is particularly important because of the link between this imaginative geography and European power. This imaginative geography was made manifest over space as it was built into colonial policy, into the institutions of governance, and, more recently, into practices of aid and development. The imaginative geography of Orientalism shaped the real geographies practiced in the space of the Orient.

While it is easy to see the continuation of Orientalism in contemporary geopolitics of the 'war on terror' (and the identities this has inscribed on Americans and their others), critical geopolitics argues that we can see this logic playing out between other states too. For example, when the USSR was constructed as being completely unlike the USA, any description of the USSR as evil, aggressive, and unreasonable implies goodness, tolerance, and reason on the part of Americans. Again, geopolitics does not simply reflect the facts of geography but also in dividing the world into a state and the international realm helps to form geographical orders and geographical relationships.

The construction of 'otherness', and particularly the sense of danger that this presents, have implications for the practice of domestic affairs in addition to foreign policy. Critical geopolitical analysis has shown how the presence of external threats has been used within geopolitical discourse to disciplining domestic dissent. The construction of otherness simultaneously presents a normative image of identity to be imposed on national citizens.

The Critical Geopolitics of the Cold War

A good deal of critical geopolitical analysis has been turned to Cold War geopolitical discourse. Here it is very clear how geopolitical discourse was presented as factual and objective, but that it tied clearly into developing a normative sense of US identity through the creation of the USSR as entirely different and other to America.

One of the formative documents of the Cold War was sent as a telegram from Moscow, by George Kennan –

'Mr X' – a US official in the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was absolutely different from the USA so there could be no possibility of compromise between the two. This image of two distinct and incompatible territorial blocks was reinforced by political discourse whether Churchill's image of an Iron Curtain dividing Europe, or Ronald Reagan's depiction of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'. A number of interrelated geopolitical concepts reiterated this binary geography in political discourse. These were, most importantly, containment, domino effects, and disease metaphors.

Containment, first outlined by Kennan, referred to the military and economic sequestration of the Soviet Union. Russia's historical geography, and not simply its political and cultural difference, was invoked to give this argument scientific respectability: the USSR was seen as an inherently expansionary force which had to be kept in check.

The inevitability of Soviet expansion was also expressed in metaphors of dominoes or disease. Such metaphors saw the spread of communism or socialism as a result of proximity to territory ruled by Soviets. The domino theory assumed that Soviets, communists, and socialists everywhere were unqualifiedly evil. An American nuclear strike on Vietnam was essential in order to halt a Viet Cong victory which would set off a chain reaction of countries falling to the communists, like a row of falling dominoes. The domino effect can actually be seen to underlie the Vietnam war more generally. The argument insisted on the necessity for the United States to fight and win in Vietnam, for if South Vietnam fell to the communists and turned communist, then this would set in motion the tumbling of other states in the region – like falling dominoes; as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma would turn communist as well. Let unchecked, this process would continue to spread around the world, and would not stop until it reached the last standing domino, the USA. This discourse made future political action appear inevitable, unless proactive action – such as containment or preemptive strike – were enacted here and now.

The domino metaphor embodied a zero-sum game, a political system within which only two powers existed (the USSR and the USA), where only force could oppose force and where the unfolding of the process was inevitable – once started, the continuing fall of states was as unavoidable as stopping a line of dominoes from toppling once the first had been pushed. Disease metaphors were structurally very similar, relying upon notions of contagion or the malign spread of infection, again depending upon a simple notion of geographical proximity as the basis for social and political change. Even more so than with dominoes, disease metaphors illustrated the necessity for immediate action in order to prevent the further

spread of the malady. Both were based on 'natural' processes which implied that there was no politics or ideology involved only a 'commonsense' decision that action must be taken to stop them. The complexities of regime change were reduced to a simplistic mapping of location – proximity to a communist state made another vulnerable regardless of the political, social, and cultural characteristics of that state.

Although apparently a geographical theory, the domino theory eliminated any geographical analysis. Rather than being concerned with understanding geographical process, geopolitics reduces spaces and places to concepts or ideology. Space is reduced to units which singularly display evidence of the characteristics which are used to define the spaces in the first place (Asia 'is' exoticism, the USSR 'is' communism, Iran 'is' fundamentalism, the USA 'is' freedom and democracy, and so on). Geopolitical discourse is clearly linked to identity formation. All those on the inside have particular character traits (or should have, in this normative vision) which are completely at odds with those of outside. Any description of the other as negative would automatically reflect back a positive image onto the self. Every description of the Soviets as totalitarian or repressive, implied the opposite characteristics in the binary opposite space of the USA.

Popular Critical Geopolitics

Like conventional geopolitics, many early accounts of critical geopolitics maintained a clear distinction between high and low culture, seeing formal, theoretical, and practical forms of geopolitics lying with the 'intellectuals of statecraft'. There is a sense that international relations are beyond the realm of ordinary people, and beyond the effects of the politics of everyday life. Ó Tuathail insists that it is important to maintain a certain specificity to the term 'geopolitics' to keep it as a term closely associated with the writing of global space by those involved in international relations. However, it has been argued that this may overlook important practices of international relations which are not located within the formal practices of statecraft. Simply to describe a foreign policy is to engage in geopolitics and so normalize particular world views. Any statement concerning international relations involves an implicit understanding of geographical relationships or a world view.

It is unrealistic to assume that the intellectuals of statecraft are somehow beyond or outside of hegemonic national culture, or that their pronouncements are somehow unaffected by the circulation of ideas and beliefs therein. Key social beliefs are not simply imposed from above but emerge through hegemonic assemblages (government but also education and media) which may

not all present a seamless image, and through which 'intellectuals of statecraft' themselves are socialized into the world. Moreover, in order to make their arguments believable to their audiences (in many cases, ordinary people, and not just other intellectuals of statecraft), they must refer to concepts and values that have consonance for the population at large, if their support is to be assured. The media – both high and low culture alike – is intimately bound up with geo-graphing the world, as are a range of activities normally described as occurring outwith the sphere of international politics. There are numerous examples of the permeability of boundaries between media geopolitics (factual and fictional) and formal geopolitical practice, from the role of CNN as favored US narrator of the two most recent Gulf Wars to President Reagan's enthusiastic suggestion after seeing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) that the next time American hostages were taken in the Middle East he would know what to do about it, and recent reports that the American government intelligence specialists have held secret meetings with Hollywood filmmakers and writers to map out possible future scenarios of terrorist threat.

As a result of the influence of cultural context, different countries' geopolitical traditions draw upon specific metaphors to create images of international geography. Political elites must use stories and images that are central to their citizens' daily lives and experiences. By reducing complex processes to simple images with which their audiences would be familiar, geopoliticians could render political decisions to be quite natural, or could make the result of the process appear predetermined (as the domino example has demonstrated). For example, sport metaphors have been particularly prominent in the USA. Such language points to the 'essential' differences between national potentials for world-class performance and naturalizes a global arena in which the rules of the game are understood, and within which there are clear (unequivocal) winners and losers. The political difficulties and violence of conflict are reduced to technicalities in game play.

Embodying Geopolitics

Because of its relentlessly critical nature, the work of critical geopolitics is never done. There is a need to constantly be critical of any statement regarding the geography of world politics. As any statement must always be situated and partial, critical geopolitics can always seek to reveal the interests lodged within it. The post-structural variety of critical geopolitics has been critiqued for this relentlessly negative critical attitude, from those who regard this lack of ontological commitment as a limitation of the approach. There is critique

but no positive alternative. The dominant form of textual analysis has also faced critique for leaving critical geopolitics detached from the real practice of politics, and the visceral implications of these practices on peoples around the world.

Feminist political geographers, while sharing critical geopolitics' critique of dominant representations of international politics, have nevertheless argued that the textual focus of critical geopolitics restricts the nature of what alternative forms of politics can be imagined, and instead insisting on a form of geopolitics that is attentive to the embodiment of the people through whose lives it is articulated. This perspective insists that critical geopolitics thinks of bodies as sites of performance rather than narrowly defined as simple surfaces for discursive inscription. Discourses do not simply write themselves directly onto the surface of bodies as if these bodies offered blank surfaces of equal topography. Instead, these concepts and ways of being are taken up and used by people who make meaning of them in the different global contexts in which they operate. Various theorists have tried to work in notions of embodiment to produce a more materially grounded critical geopolitics, incorporating ethnographic approaches alongside textual analysis, and in terms of the bodies of those caught up in the representational practices analyzed by critical geopolitics.

Feminist critics have noted a more general failure to acknowledge feminist heritage, so that the widening of 'the political' is seen to come from post-structuralist sensibilities rather than feminist arguments about the personal being the political, reproducing the idea of geopolitics as a masculinist tradition. While women have not generally been part of the hallowed intellectual societies or elite 'intellectuals of statecraft' critiqued by critical geopolitics, their bodies most certainly have always been caught up in the resulting political geographies: flows of migrants and representations of vulnerable women and children to be protected by the state. So, although women have not been found in the formal spheres of geopolitics, they are very much caught up in the day-to-day practices upon which international relations depend. As feminists have highlighted, while men can stand in for their country in battle, women tend to literally embody the nation as its mothers and daughters, their bodies are often clearly inscribed with

geopolitical meaning as the territory to be defended by men, potent symbols of national purity to be protected from foreign violation. For women in such conditions, of course, geopolitics is never simply a textual device.

Others have analyzed the production of radical alternatives to dominant geopolitics, not in academic circles, but in the grassroots of collectives existing outside of the state. Such 'antigeopolitics' also seeks to open up space for forms of resistance beyond academic textual analysis.

See also: Anti-Geopolitics; Cold War; Critical Geography; Environmental Security; Foucauldianism; Geopolitics; Military and Geography; Political Geography; Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies; Terrorism; War; World-System.

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