



Guest Editorial

The State of critical geopolitics

As a body of scholarship that first emerged in the early 1990s, critical geopolitics bridged the disciplines of Geography and International Relations and was initially inspired in Geography by the pioneering work of 'dissident' scholars including Simon Dalby, John Agnew and Gearoid Ó Tuathail. The seminal works published by Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992), Ó Tuathail (1996a, 1996b) and Simon Dalby (1990, 1991) at the beginning of the 1990s subsequently burgeoned into a rich and vast array of publications and the now established field of critical geopolitics. Drawing inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, critical geopolitics did not seek to develop a theory of how space and politics intersect but was rather concerned with developing a mode of interrogating and exposing the grounds for knowledge production and of seeking to analyze the articulation, objectivization and subversion of hegemony. It was thus "merely the starting point for a different form of geopolitics" and as such offered "a seductive promise, a putative claim that one can get beyond a baleful geopolitics and recover the real beyond the categorical, the ideological, the dogmatic, the imperialist and the hyperbolic" (Ó Tuathail, in Jones & Sage, 2009).

Given the important influence of poststructural philosophies on critical geopolitics, it would be inappropriate to posit a foundational moment in which the origins of this approach could be secured. Nonetheless, it is striking how the emergence of critical geopolitics was coeval with the development of critical theories of international relations from the late 1980s onwards, especially in the work of Richard Ashley, James Der Derian, Michael Shapiro and Rob Walker (see the overview in Campbell, 2009). In particular, the separately developed but intellectually related arguments of Campbell's *Writing Security* (Campbell, 1992) and Ó Tuathail's landmark text *Critical Geopolitics* (Ó Tuathail, 1996a) demonstrated how common approaches emerged at this particular juncture. Campbell's *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, first published in 1992 and then in 1998 in a revised edition, was an extension of his 1989 PhD thesis completed at the Australian National University entitled *Security and Identity*. Ó Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics* (1996), the sixth volume in the University of Minnesota Press *Borderlines* series edited by David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro, was based on his 1989 Syracuse University PhD entitled *Critical Geopolitics: The Social Construction of State and Place in the Practice of Statecraft*.

Through these intersections, critical geopolitics scholarship sought to radically reconceptualise 'geopolitics' as a complex and problematic set of discourses, representations and practices. Through the 1990s a number of geographers used the term critical

geopolitics to encompass a diverse range of academic challenges to the conventional ways in which political space was written, read and practiced. Without wishing to homogenize a diverse and disparate body of work, we agree with Ó Tuathail's assessment that critical geopolitics is:

.....no more than a general gathering place for various critiques of the multiple geopolitical discourses and practices that characterize modernity. One important initial vector of critique was the recovery of textuality within practices which are represented as objective or practical, as 'beyond the text.' Geopolitics is inescapably cultural. A second was the displacement of state-centric readings of world politics and the recovery of the many messy practices that constitute the modern inter-state system. Geopolitics is inescapably plural. A third was the development of critical histories of geopolitical thinkers and discourses. Geopolitics is inescapably traversed by relations of power and gender (Ó Tuathail, in Jones & Sage, 2009).

In the two decades since its emergence, critical geopolitics has become an extremely popular 'gathering place', its attractiveness "possibly the sole result of the sexy combination of space and power" (Mamadouh in Jones & Sage, 2009), as it now constitutes an ever-growing body of research aimed at deconstructing geopolitical discourses and disclosing the hidden power relations behind them. The focus on the recovery of textuality was particularly popular in the early years, so much so that Nigel Thrift's (2000) article 'Its little things' directs our "mesmerised attention to texts and images" and calls for a more sensitive inquiry into the workings of geopower by attending to objects, the human body and matters of percept, affect and emotion, as well as the most ordinary ('precognitive') forms of sociality. In recent years this challenge has been taken up in, for example, the work of Gearoid Ó Tuathail on affect and the invasion of Iraq (Ó Tuathail, 2003), Ben Anderson's work on the geopolitical dimensions of affect and 'anticipatory practices' of security (Anderson, 2010a, 2010b), in the work of Carter and McCormack (2006) on film and the affective logic of intervention and in Sidaway's (2009) work on geopolitics, affect and place. As Müller (2008) has argued however, in discussing the textualism that has dominated critical geopolitics thus far, the concept of discourse in critical geopolitics continues to be relatively under-theorized and its theoretical breadth and depth remain largely unexplored. In a similar vein to Thrift (2000), Müller (2008) thus advocates widening the analytical focus of critical geopolitics to encompass a concept of discourse as language and social practice.

The focus on the displacement of state-centric readings of world politics and the recovery of the complex and prosaic practices that constitute the modern inter-state system has opened up the range of sites/texts/practices where 'geopolitics' is seen to take place. This has included work on anti-geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996b; Routledge, 1996, 2002) and on the popular geopolitical representations contained within magazines (Sharp, 2000a) cartoons (Dittmer, 2007; Dodds, 2007) film (Crampton & Power, 2005; Dittmer & Dodds, 2008; Shapiro, 2008), radio (Pinkerton, 2009) and digital video games (Power, 2007) along with a growing focus on geopolitics, visuality and visual culture (Campbell, 2007; MacDonald, 2006; MacDonald, Hughes, & Dodds, in press). The development of critical histories of geopolitical thinkers and discourses has also led to an interrogation of a growing range of formal geopolitical traditions (Atkinson & Dodds, 2000). This has included work on critical histories of geopolitics in Italy (Atkinson, 1995) Spain and Portugal (Sidaway, 2000; Sidaway & Power, 2005) Germany (Bach & Peters, 2002) and Turkey (Bilgin, 2007) amongst others. The inspiration for much of this work can be traced back to Les Hepple's engagement with the Latin American and Rumanian traditions of geopolitical thought. It is also worth noting here that Hepple's paper on 'The revival of geopolitics' (Hepple, 1986) appeared in the same year as Ó Tuathail's (1986) intervention on US–El Salvador relations and the 'new geopolitics' (the first of Ó Tuathail's published interventions on geopolitics) and was also something of an agenda-setting paper, calling for a renewed critical scrutiny of geopolitics (Sidaway, 2008a). As Atkinson (2001: 426) has noted, Hepple's insights foreshadowed concerns that would later occupy critical geopoliticians and presaged the concerns and questions of critical geopolitics, conveying "a sense of the arbitrary and diverse use of the label, and an impression of the plural contexts wherein geopolitics surfaced".

In September 2008 "The State of Critical Geopolitics" brought together one hundred contributors from around the world to consider what this work had achieved, how the field had changed in the last two decades and where it might be headed in the future (<http://www.geography.dur.ac.uk/conf/criticalgeopolitics2008/>). Organized by the Politics-State-Space research cluster at Durham University with sponsorship from the Political Geography Research Group (PGRG) of the RGS-IBG and the journal *Political Geography*, the conference opened with a series of position papers given by the keynote speakers who were asked to discuss how critical geopolitics shapes their current and on-going research and also address the *practice* of critical geopolitical inquiry. This is hardly the first time that the work of critical geopolitics has been reviewed (see, for example, Dalby, 2008; Jones & Sage, 2009; Mamadouh, 1998, 1999; Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006; Murphy, Bassin, Newman, Reuber, & Agnew, 2004). Nonetheless, just over a decade on from the publication of both a special 'Critical geopolitics' issue of this journal and Ó Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics*, we felt that, politically as well as intellectually, the time was right to appraise and reflect upon the contribution that this corpus of critical scholarship has made both within and beyond the discipline.

Rather than assuming critical geopolitics to be a single analytical or methodological endeavor, we recognize that this corpus of scholarship encompasses various ways of unpacking the tropes and epistemologies of dominant geographers and scriptings of political space. Indeed for some observers this may be one of its principal weakness; that as it has expanded and developed, its original concerns have been diluted into the variety of meanings attributed to it. Increasingly this has meant that critical geopolitics has something of an "identity problem" (Mamadouh, 2009) where its subject, key theoretical contribution and core methodology become increasingly harder to define as the field diversifies away from the hegemon (the US) and the greater powers to examine other states, or moves away from formal and practical geopolitics to

explore popular geopolitics or as it shifts away from state-centric approaches to study non-state actors such as social movements and transnational organizations and various forms of collective action. As Mamadouh (2009) has argued, such shifts imply a more elaborate understanding of the multiscalar practices of geopolitics, but we would suggest that this has not always been fully developed as the field has diversified and proliferated. Moreover, there is a danger in thinking critical geopolitics has vanquished its classical predecessor (see MacDonald, 2009), a view that might make critical geopolitics little more than an "academic fad" (see also Dalby, this volume).

The wide variety of themes addressed at the Durham conference illustrates this kind of diversification, including sessions on histories of geopolitics, on boundaries and borderscapes, on geopolitics migration and asylum, on contemporary geopolitical practices and the War on Terror, on critical geopolitics and the regional and on geopolitics and (audio)visual culture. The conference also included two sessions on the theme of geopolitics and development (to be published as a forthcoming issue of *Geopolitics*; see Power, in press) which sought to intensify the dialogue between critical geopolitics and development theory that began fifteen years previously in a series of interesting exchanges in *Transactions* between David Slater and Gearoid Ó Tuathail (Ó Tuathail, 1994; Slater, 1993).

A number of geographers have noted that critical geopolitics, in its quest to destabilize the normative and to decentre the nation-state, "rarely engages in transformative and embodied ways of knowing and seeing" (Hyndman in Jones & Sage, 2009) or has been too often restricted to unpacking discourses whilst stopping short of a concern for transformation in its quest to develop a transgression of binary oppositions. Anssi Paasi (2000, 2006) adds to this his critique of what he calls geopolitical remote sensing, an emerging tendency to observe and deconstruct discourses from a distance and out of context. Similarly, Megoran (2006) argues for more ethnographic research in political geography and critical geopolitics. In seeking to engage with transformative and embodied ways of knowing and seeing, critical geopolitics might also benefit from more serious and sustained engagements with other radical geographies such as feminist geographies, as in the literature on feminist geopolitics (Hyndman, 2004; Kofman, Peake, & Staeheli, 2004; Sharp, 2007).

Similarly, Mercille (2008) argues for a 'radical geopolitics' to reinvigorate the political spirit of critical geopolitics, suggesting that political economy might help identify some of the structural dynamics underlying practical geopolitical decision-making and global inequalities, helping us to explore the 'why' as well as 'how' of political/economic policy decisions. Additionally, Mamadouh (2009) raises questions about the lack of impact critical geopolitics has had on policy debates and amongst a variety of geopolitical actors. The vast majority of critical geopolitical scholars are of course academic geographers, most of whom have contributed to the development of critical geopolitics, past and present, but the task of taking critical geopolitics to other disciplines or even beyond the academy altogether is an important and on-going one.

We also recognize the necessity for an on-going critique of critical geopolitics, particularly the necessity of 'postcolonialising' political geography (Robinson, 2003) and developing more critical awareness of the situated basis of its claims and vantage point (Sidaway, 2008b). For example, Cowen and Smith (2009) argue that the reconstructive impulse of some critical geopolitics research leads to a universalization of the geopolitical discourse it originally sought to denaturalize and unpack. Although we think this argument depends on a problematic understanding of deconstruction as being distinct from reconstruction (see Campbell, 2008), their account of a "geopolitical social" which both crosses and crafts traditional borders of internal and external to the national state"

is important and consistent with much of the ethos of critical geopolitics as we understand it (Cowen & Smith, 2009: 22).

This special section publishes the five keynote presentations of “The State of Critical Geopolitics” conference. Many of the recent developments in the field of critical geopolitics (amongst others) are reflected in this set of papers, which includes contributions from two of the original ‘dissident’ scholars (Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail) along with some new voices (Katharyne Mitchell and Jennifer Hyndman) and one that has been somewhat reinvented as “critical geopolitics” (Derek Gregory). The move away from ‘textual’ analysis to a more locally grounded geopolitics is also particularly evident in the work of Gerard Ó Tuathail and Jennifer Hyndman. The increasing focus on questions of gender (that were originally drawn out in Jo Sharp’s (2000b) critique of Ó Tuathail’s (1996a, 1996b) book in a symposium published in this journal) is reflected here in the papers by Jennifer Hyndman, Katharyne Mitchell and Derek Gregory.

In “The question of ‘the political’ in critical geopolitics: Querying the ‘child soldier’ in the ‘war on terror’”, Jennifer Hyndman probes the possibility of a post-foundational ethic as the basis for ‘the political’ in critical geopolitics. Exploring some of the theoretical tensions within critical geopolitics by tracing the disparate fates of two young men, both child soldiers at the time of their capture, Hyndman points to the rise of biopolitics combined with geopolitics and identifies the intersection of sovereignty and governmentality as important concerns for contemporary critical geopolitics.

Using post-Dayton Bosnia as an example, Gearóid Ó Tuathail’s “Localizing geopolitics: Disaggregating violence and return in conflict regions” examines the challenges of developing a critical geopolitics grounded in the study of contested geopolitical regions and places. Reviewing anthropological and other place-sensitive studies of violent population displacement and post-war returns in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ó Tuathail examines the conceptual dilemmas and questions raised by attempting to create a grounded critical geopolitics. Ó Tuathail notes that any serious effort to develop a more geographically responsible geopolitics requires the supplement of regional expertise and fieldwork and argues that critical geopolitics can deepen its critical practice by grounding itself in regional research.

In “Seeing Red: Baghdad and the event-ful city” Derek Gregory explores the techno-cultural apparatus of US military operations and media briefings in occupied Baghdad from 2003 to 2007 and explores the digital mappings that were an intrinsic part of the US Army’s counterinsurgency strategy. Illustrating how the performances of these mappings were punctuated by a dialectical interplay of geopolitical and biopolitical imaginaries, Gregory illustrates how they were focal to the abstraction and legitimization of American military intervention and demonstrates how, in late modern war, visibility plays a vital role in both the conduct and the rationalization of military violence.

Simon Dalby’s paper (‘Recontextualising violence, power and nature: The next twenty years of critical geopolitics?’) traces twenty years of scholarship in critical geopolitics and reflects on the possibilities for the future, arguing that the original focus on critique, deconstruction and strategic discourses has been ‘diluted’ and ‘stretched’ as the label ‘critical geopolitics’ has been used more loosely and widely. In thinking about the future, Dalby suggests that critical geopolitics should still be about challenging militarist mappings of global space and argues that the links between global environmental change and security offer a framework that links the discipline’s traditional concerns with nature much more directly to the “spatial” tradition which has been the focus in much of the critical geopolitics literature.

Finally, Katharyne Mitchell’s paper, “Ungoverned space: Global security and the geopolitics of broken windows,” looks at the broken windows/zero tolerance language of danger and security vis-à-vis the spatial administration of populations, arguing that

broken windows policing, as an imaginative geopolitical scripting of the perils of chaotic and ungoverned space, helps to produce new forms of governance *through* security, which at the same time facilitates the formation and entrenchment of neoliberal practices and subjectivities. Mitchell documents how these concepts were deployed in both New York and Iraq to legitimate sovereign and disciplinary control over spaces and populations designated as disorderly or ungoverned and how these practices of spatial administration were linked, at both local and global scales, with the extension of neoliberal economic integration to previously isolated spaces and populations.

These papers are testament to the theoretical depth and political range of the concerns addressed by critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitics is still evolving and reinventing itself as the global political landscape changes and as new strategic campaigns such as the global War on Terror have emerged. Clearly it is not possible to agree on a common, strictly delineated definition of what critical geopolitics is or should be, and even if this was desirable (which we doubt) it would be unlikely to lead to a stable consensus within or beyond disciplinary boundaries. As a result, this eclecticism is what makes critical geopolitics such a necessary and stimulating intellectual and political ‘project’; its ability to be engaged in the analysis of a range of enduring global challenges like environmental catastrophe, new modes of war, persistent global inequalities, imperial desires and reductive representations. As Ó Tuathail (2009) has argued, only through a sustained engagement with such impasses and dilemmas can critical geopolitics seek to be more than “an academic niche chasing America-centric outrages that does not matter much in the arena of global practice”.

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