

Political geography II: (counter) revolutionary times

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I Revolt against 'the system'

I am a genuine revolutionary; they [the Democrats] are the genuine reactionaries. We are going to change their world; they will do anything to stop us. They will use any tool – there is no grotesquerie, no distortion, no dishonesty too great for them to come after us (Newton Leroy Gingrich to the Republican National Committee, January 1995).

In its final issue of 1995, *Time* magazine (owned by the largest media conglomerate in the world, Time–Warner, a conglomerate that got even bigger in 1995 with its friendly acquisition of Turner Broadcasting, the holding company of CNN and other cable operations) named USA Republican leader Newt Gingrich what it still unashamedly calls its 'Man of the Year'. Gingrich probably deserved the award, for the organization he headed (GOPAC) and the opinion research tested rhetoric it helped champion transformed the discourse of American politics in 1995. Through pioneering use of focus groups to create a political platform (the 'Contract with America'), skilful use of political props (like the Contract itself), deft use of reactionary alternative media (like conservative talk radio and television) and intensive training seminars for Republican candidates (his 'Bell Labs of politics'), Gingrich's Republican party assumed control of both houses of the US Congress and a record number of governorships in November 1994. This achievement by the Republican right was a remarkable one since so many of the problems facing the USA – from the budget deficit to rising inequality and persistent violence – were the legacy of years of political control by the Republican right and their conservative Democratic allies. Yet, Gingrich's party won by presenting themselves as revolutionaries, as outsiders to what they termed 'the system'. In contrast to 'big government' Democrats, who according to a GOPAC memo called 'Language, a key mechanism of control' were to be described using focus group tested words like 'decay', 'sick', 'pathetic', 'stagnation', 'corrupt', 'waste' and 'traitors', the Republican party represented, again using words identified by GOPAC focus groups, 'change', 'truth', 'moral', 'courage', 'family', 'peace' and 'duty' (Didion, 1995). Add to this informational warfare a more socially acceptable hatred of the poor (Gans, 1995), Gingrich's

boyish fascination with history, science fiction and Tofflerite third-wave futurism (Toffler, 1980), and one has a late twentieth-century discourse of counter-revolution, a revanchist movement of the already affluent utilizing the screens of power to reinstrumentalize state institutions, social values and economic regulations to meet their needs, interests, fears and desires. Those already privileged within the current system of power and privilege in the USA are channelling anxiety and rage against a PR-tested caricature of 'the system' in order to deepen their own control and dominance over its future development.

The questions posed by the phenomenon of Newt Gingrich's 'revolution' are questions involving strange postmodern fusions of information technology, economic power, multimedia-led identity and warped morality. Similar questions are provoked by that other defining media event drama of 1995, the O.J. Simpson trial and the ability of Simpson's million-dollar defence team to re-present domestic violence and murder as racism and corruption in 'the system'.

In keeping with last year where I sought to review emerging points of theorization and debate within a broadly defined political geography (Ó Tuathail, 1995), this year's report isolates three different emerging loci of theorization which I am organizing around notions of technogeographies, psychogeographies and moral geographies. (Supplementing the geopower theme identified last year are important new essays in Blunt and Rose, 1994, Bell *et al.*, 1995 and, more unevenly, Hooson, 1994. Also see Falah, 1994.) This report is an attempt to identify and gather together some of the emergent questions posed to us by the rapidly changing world we encounter in our institutions, classrooms, societies and media. Political geography today is less a distinct subfield of geography than a gathering point for discourse on both the sharp and stealthy crystallizations of geography and politics found throughout our deterritorializing global modernities (Featherstone *et al.*, 1995). As evident in Painter's (1995) recent textbook, there is a certain unease with the label 'political geography' in these times of hybridity and globalization. Painter's book addresses familiar contemporary themes (state formation, citizenship and welfare, imperialism, geopolitics, social movements) from a critical interpretative perspective. The work is conceptualized as an entwining of traditional political geography with the critical perspectives found today in cultural and feminist geography, the goal being to further the blurring of these subfields. The end product is a robust and theoretically challenging work for undergraduate students, one which situates the questions political geographers ask at the heart of the questions asked by contemporary critical social theorists in general.

II Technogeographies: GIS, television and world communications

Though he later considered it a 'nutty idea', Newt Gingrich's proposal to provide the poor with a laptop as a solution to their problems is a mark of how much our contemporary culture is a technoculture saturated with mythic signs promoted by third-wave multimedia technology industries. Possession of technological objects like computers seems to promise a better and bright future for all those who buy (into) them. Crucial to the maintenance of this cyberhype is the role played by technointellectuals and popular futurists like George Gilder, the Tofflers and, more recently, Gingrich himself (1995) and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates (1995). All represent a future where technological change acts to produce 'revolutionary' transformations which open up new horizons of opport-

unity for the fit, smart and connected (including 'third-wave terrorists' attacking the spaces of flows in Tokyo or Paris; Toffler, 1995). Absent, of course, is any serious analysis of the materialist inequalities of the condition of postmodernity.

Complexes of humans and machines have long been a matter of concern in political geography and geopolitics. Consideration of transportation and military technologies is central to geopolitical theorizing (Rollins, 1995; Virilio, 1995). Yet, the impacts of information technology, television and world communications on geography have only recently received the attention they deserve (Adams, 1995; Augé, 1995). Closest to the discipline of geography is the problematic of GIS or geographical information systems. John Pickles' (1994) edited collection *Ground truth* is a welcome attempt to explore the social implications of the use of GIS in contemporary society (see also Curry, 1994). In two excellent essays in the volume, Pickles (1994: vii) argues that technologies are now 'transforming our ways of worldmaking and the ways in which geographers and others think about and visualize the places, regions, environments, and peoples of the earth'. Pickles notes how GIS technologies are shifting the ontology of the real, creating new virtual sign systems and are complicitous with the triumph of aesthetics over ethics in contemporary technoculture. Other useful essays sensitive to political issues include those by Taylor and Johnston, McHaffie, and Roberts and Schein. John Goss's article on geodemographic marketing information systems is superb (see also Luke, 1996). The book, however, is only a start; many other deeply political machinic geographies such as the use of GIS and GPS (global positioning system) in surveillance and warfare (like JSTARS in Bosnia), the drive to police the informational superhighway with legislation and clipper chips (a key escrow which allows government agents to decipher encrypted communication), cyberwar geopolitics or the use of geodemographic informational systems in political campaigns await investigation (Conley, 1993; Bender and Druckrey, 1994).

In a year where emissions from Bosnia, Chechnya and the O.J. Simpson trial saturated the airwaves, the need to research the technogeographies associated with television and the televisual is more evident than ever. A good point of departure is Mackenzie Wark's (1994) *Virtual geography*. Organized around four global media events, Wark seeks to explore how our lived everyday experience is now mediated by hyper-real televisual events. 'We no longer have roots, we have aeriels' is Wark's mantra as he follows the media vectors of the gulf war, the collapse of the Berlin wall, Tiananmen Square and the Wall Street crash of 1987. His exploration of the hyper-reality of world political events is an important and challenging one, though it does tend to lead him into hyperbole a little too often. His method of elaborating theory through concrete media event study is praiseworthy in principle though not always in the way Wark actually operationalizes it. Interestingly, his mantra is already obsolete. The line between television and interactive multimedia is blurring. We no longer have aeriels but satellite dishes, cable hook-ups, power PCs and World Wide Web links. To follow these vectors takes us into the virtual world of cyberspace with its own virtual class (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994), cyberculture (Dery, 1994) and machinic gender possibilities (Stone, 1995), all of which are posing profound challenges to conventional understandings of politics, knowledge, the body and what it means to be human (Guattari, 1995; Heim, 1993; Sassower, 1995; Doel, 1996).

A useful historical genealogy of the progressive internationalization of communications is Armand Mattelart's *Mapping world communication* (1994). Aware that the question of communications is a diffuse and shifting one, Mattelart structures his nuanced

and critical account around the communications triangle of war, progress and culture. He begins in the nineteenth century with an account of communications as a crucial element of war, continues into the twentieth century with an excellent discussion of the entwining of technologies of communications with ideologies of development as modernization (drawing upon his experience of militarism and cultural imperialism in Latin America), and concludes with today's 'vaporuous world of flows, fluids, and communicating vessels evolving into "dissipative structures"' (Mattelart, 1994: 209). Mattelart organizes a great variety of related 'communication' problematics – advertising, American modernization and management, deregulation, geopolitics, glocalization, aesthetic militarism, propaganda and the fate of different technical networks – into what he decides is 'a strategic map' to the 'informational society' so we can combat its domination. Rejecting the smooth and transparent view of globalization offered to us by the media and technointellectuals, Mattelart (1994: ix) describes our world as 'a contradictory system made up all at once of interdependencies and interconnections, of schisms, fragments, and exclusions'. A useful illustration of this is Nestor Garcia Canclini's *Hybrid cultures* (1995; translated from the 1989 Spanish original) which examines the mix of modern and high, traditional and popular cultures in Mexico. Concentrating on artistic production and the staging of popular culture, Canclini describes our present condition as one characterized by 'oblique powers' in which sociopolitical relations are no longer vertical and bipolar but decentred and multidetermined. Neo-conservative groups, he suggests, have been successful not simply because of their economic resources but because they have better captured the sociocultural meaning of these new structures of power (Canclini, 1995: 258).

David Morley and Kevin Robins's (1995) *Spaces of identity* wrestles with the entwined problematic of the production of contemporary cultural identities and the role of communications media in the reconfiguration of these identities. An excellent introduction to the geopolitics of identity formation in Europe and the west more generally, the collection of previously published articles explores its problematic in review essays on euroculture, the debate over *Heimat* (the concept and television series) in Germany, techno-orientalism in the USA and the end of history as the end of ethnocentrism. The essays contain many useful insights into television ('the private life of the nation state' according to John Ellis), imaginary communities, Europe's 'white continentalism' and the rewiring of global-local connections. Yet, despite its ranging and suggestive synthesis, the book surfs too much on a sea of academic cites, never engaging in a detailed, concrete and empirical way with the issues it reviews.

Developing a general critique on the emergent infostructures of the 'informational mode of production' (Poster, 1990; 1995) is surely more important than ever given the speed at which technological systems and networks are outpacing our ability to control and comprehend them. *Resisting the virtual life* (Brook and Boal, 1995) is a collection of short readings and critiques of a wide variety of aspects of the informational society. Less a burning barricade across the highway to the total surveillance society (as Mike Davis describes it on a front-cover blurb) than an uneven collection of disparately politicized interventions, the book does have a few important pieces on direct-marketing panoptics (Gandy), on demassified communication markets (Besser), media activism and radical democracy (Drew), soldier-cyborgs (Robins and Levidow), the masculinist world of software engineers (Ullman) and on schools in the new computerized work world of the future (Neill). Most delightful is Doug Henwood's exposé of technoboosters like George Gilder ('the goofy poet laureate of entrepreneurship') with US Bureau

of Labor statistics showing that the share of the workforce employed directly in information superhighway tasks is well under 2% (Henwood, 1995: 167). Among the fastest-growing job categories are sales clerks, cashiers, janitors, security guards and nurses:

If you strip away the high-tech gloss, this future looks in many ways like the nineteenth century or even the early days of the Industrial Revolution, times of massive polarization and displacement – exciting, even liberating, if you were on the right side of things, but frightful and immiserating otherwise (Henwood, 1995: 170).

III Psychogeographies: identity-assembly processes in anxious times

The trouble in NAFTAland that began with the Chiapas revolt in January 1994 deepened in 1995 as the Mexican state convulsed with new scandals and the effects of the peso devaluation (Ross, 1995). The trouble also spread to Canada which went to the brink of disintegration as Quebec voters almost voted to request independence (Kaplan, 1994; Williams, 1994) and to the USA where a bomb in Oklahoma City blew a federal building apart and left 169 people dead. Disparate as these events are, they are nevertheless elements of a politics of anxiety provoked by globalization, a response inciting new projects of identity formation in the midst of global flows and flux (Reich, 1995; Wood, 1994). In their discussion of the meaning of community and its relationship to the media in contemporary Europe, Morley and Robins point to what they describe as a 'psychogeography' of anxiety and fear in the new Europe: 'Community, at whatever level, may function as a mechanism for social defence and the evasion of anxieties and fears' (Morley and Robins, 1995: 197). Community formation can become a way of coping with the vertigo of the postmodern through a way of belonging which is closed to the world. This attempt at closure through the invention of a rhetoric of separatism, regionalism or mythic nationalism, however, is fraught with tensions (Agnew, 1995). It can also involve the invention of liminal spaces which are supposedly beyond the grid of oppressive structures and states yet nevertheless complicitous with their foundational myths (witness Israeli and American extremist movements; Wills, 1995).

At work here are important psychoanalytic processes that have not received the attention they deserve within political geography. At a variety of points, Morley and Robins appeal to psychoanalytic insights in their discussion of the politics of identity assemblage but do not follow up on this appeal. David Sibley's (1995) excellent new work *Geographies of exclusion* addresses the problematic of psychoanalysis much more explicitly. Drawing on object relations theory, he discusses abjection (the radically excluded), the generalized other, stereotypes, racism, disease, pollution, purity, defilement and the mechanisms of boundary enforcement and spatial purification that characterize our contemporary culture. Yet, important as Sibley's discussion of these issues is, his discussion is both too broad and too short. His exploration of the psychogeographies at work in the creation of national identities, alien others and geopolitics, for example, is much too brief. Yet, problematizing the familiar concerns of political geographers in the manner he does is intellectual progress (see also Falah and Newman, 1995). The extension of psychoanalytic perspectives (particularly post-Lacanian feminist perspectives) into geography is fraught with difficulties (like tendencies towards reductionism and decontextualization), yet such research traditions offer important supplemental vocabularies for interpretation and explanation. In her discussion of

Derek Gregory's *Geographical imaginations* (1994), Rosalyn Deutsche (1995: 174) points to the danger of an 'over-rapid historicization' that 'forecloses complex questions about the relationship between psychic and social life'. Investigations of spatial consciousness, she suggests, also require investigations of the spatial unconscious. Investigations of geographical or geopolitical imaginations also require consideration of geographical and geopolitical imaginaries, the psychic registers where subjects search for stability and wholeness (Krishna, 1994). Collective identity formation in times of stress, individual and national self-imaging (and imagining), gendered/corporeal regimes of visible unity, purpose and plenitude: all are processes uniquely problematized by the discourses of feminist psychoanalysis. These processes and more have been at work in Bosnia, where hysterical masculinist nationalism continued to produce genocidal behaviour by Bosnian Serbs in Srebrenica and Croats in the Krajina in 1995 (Cigar, 1995). They are also at work in Russia, a country amidst a serious crisis in its self-image and, in a different manner, in the USA. In both states, strong masculinist military figures are proving attractive if fleeting templates for projects of national renewal and symbolic salvation (Powell, 1995). Critical psychoanalytic problematizations of embodiments of various identities can already be found in geography (Pile and Thrift, 1995; Duncan, 1996). The extension of this research into political geography should be encouraged and welcomed.

IV Moral geographies: on the social production of moral proximity and distance in political life

If Newt Gingrich's counter-revolution succeeds, it will intensify trends already manifest in USA society for decades. Income inequality has increased dramatically as have incarceration and execution rates (Harries, 1995). In 1994, for example, nearly 7% of all black male adults in the USA were in jail or prison compared with less than 1% of white adult males (*The New York Times* 4 December 1995). In June 1995, 1.1 million Americans were behind bars, a 9% increase on the year before. Children, meanwhile, make up the largest group of those in poverty in the USA.

That a further intensification of these already existent trends is contemplated is indicative of a political culture that is systematically producing moral distance from its own cruelty. The moral character of political actions is either invisible or purposefully concealed by political ideology. Like postmodern society itself, political geography has only fitfully engaged questions of ethics and morality in recent years (Corbridge, 1993; Smith, 1994; Matless, 1995, reviews an emergent Foucaultian understanding of moral geographies in social and cultural geography). Given the state of our world, this relative neglect should be rectified. In the works of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is a discourse on morality and ethics that is eminently applicable to the concerns of political geographers. In his powerfully probing analyses of the moral dimensions of modernity and postmodernity (especially in the light of the Holocaust; Bauman, 1989; 1991; 1993), Bauman has identified, as he summarizes it in his latest work, first, 'the tendency to substitute ethics, that is law-like code of rules and conventions, for moral sentiments, intuitions and urges of autonomous selves' and, secondly, 'the tendency towards "adiaphorization" – that is exemption of a considerable part of human action from moral judgement and, indeed, moral significance' (Bauman, 1995: 99–100). A key difference between modernity and postmodernity, he suggests, is that the context in which moral

attitudes are forged (or not) today is that of life politics (beholden to the neoliberal Utopia of the market) rather than social and systemic structures (bureaucracy, fundamental to the unfolding of the Holocaust). Postmodern life strategies render human relations fragmentary and discontinuous:

they are all up in arms against 'strings attached' and long-lasting consequences, and militate against the construction of lasting networks of mutual duties and obligations. They all favour and promote a *distance* between the individual and the Other and cast the Other primarily as the object of aesthetic, not moral evaluation; as a matter of taste, not responsibility (Bauman, 1995: 100).

Bauman's work lends itself nicely to political geography for he is concerned with the social production of proximity to or distance from the Other, our primal site of responsibility according to Immanuel Levinas, a key philosopher for Bauman.

This theme of the social truncation of moral responsibility towards the Other or its suppression in the name of a socially sanctioned 'ethics' of the state or market is an important one that should be exploited by political geographers. As Shapiro (1994: 482) argues, the state system as a horizontal organization of space around the principle of state sovereignty is itself a moral geography, 'a set of silent ethical assertions that preorganize explicit ethico-political discourses'. The recent special issue of *Political Geography* on 'Spaces of citizenship' engages these general issues (Painter and Philo, 1995). Studying the specification of citizenship, for example, involves examination of the processes by which universes of moral obligation and responsibility are established within states, moral geographies of inclusion and exclusion that define and circumscribe citizens and others (like women, immigrants and sexual deviants; Bell, 1995; Kofman, 1995). The study of democratization, the subject of a current US National Science Foundation research initiative, also involves the study of moral geographies, geographically varied struggles between tendencies towards openness and pluralism, on the one hand, and closure and fundamentalism, on the other (Connolly, 1995; Murphy, 1995). The analysis of foreign policy discourse can also be interpreted in terms of moral geographies (Dalby, 1996; Myers *et al.*, 1996; Ó Tuathail, 1996a; 1996b).

One hopeful sign that a truncated sense of responsibility and morality has not yet become hegemonic in our own community was the recent vote in an open meeting during the annual RGS/IBG conference for a motion calling upon the RGS to end the Shell Oil Company's position as corporate patron immediately. Whether the RGS Council continues to accept money from a transnational corporation complicitous with a predatory Nigerian state that murdered Shell's most vocal critics will reveal the extent to which morality within the extended geography community resists or is beholden to the rules and 'ethics' of a market society. Moral arguments, as Bauman constantly reminds us, are unreasonable for reason has too often been complicitous with institutionalized cruelty, exploitation, repression and state violence in the twentieth century. The 'developmental' rationality of General Sani Abacha's regime has bred corruption, ecocide and murder in west Africa (Brooks, 1994; for a general poststructuralist critique of developmentalism as a normalization system, see Escobar, 1995). Geographers everywhere are right to be 'unreasonable' in the face of such 'reason' and its allies.

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