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**INTRODUCTION:**

**RETHINKING GEOPOLITICS**

Towards a critical geopolitics

*Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby*

Is geopolitics dead? At first glance the end of the Cold War, the deepening impacts of ‘globalization’ and the de-territorializing consequences of new informational technologies seem to have driven a stake into the heart of geopolitics. As the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, so also crumbled a pervasive and persuasive order of geopolitical understanding about meaning and identity across global political space. Particularistic and parochial yet nevertheless hegemonic, Cold War geopolitics was always too simplistic a cartography to capture the heterogeneity and irreducible complexity of world politics in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the very ideological directness of Cold War reasoning was its strength. It drained international affairs of its indeterminacies and lived off its ability to reduce the organic movements of history to a perpetual darkness of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ It provided strategic elites with a discourse that they could instrumentalize to further their bureaucratic careers within the military–industrial–academic complex created by the Cold War. It provided political leaders with scenes for demonstrating hardheaded statesmanship, comforting and easy applause lines, and a workable model of ‘gamesmanship’ in international affairs. Last, but not least, it provided the public with a recognizable and gratifying fantasy story of heroes and villains fighting for the fate of the world in obscure and exotic locales across the globe. Cold War geopolitics, in short, was a powerful and pervasive political ideology that lasted for over forty years. It was also premised upon an extraordinary double irony. It simultaneously denied both geographical difference and its own self-constituting politics (Ó Tuathail 1996).

While regional variations of the Cold War script live on in certain locations – in US–Cuban relations, for example, and on the Korean peninsula – the days of Cold War geopolitics as the spellbinding ‘big picture’ of world politics, the global drama that eclipsed all others, have ended. Strategic analysts have been searching ever since for a new global drama to replace it, launching ‘the end of history,’ ‘the clash of civilizations’ and ‘the coming anarchy’ among others as new blockbuster...
Described and understood by the geopolitical tradition of wise men of sanctity, geopolitics is a spatial practice that intertwines policy and representation. It is not just a material action but a cultural construct, shaped by the geopolitical imagination. The concept of geopolitics was introduced by the French geographer Charles de Gaulle in the 1930s, who argued that geopolitics is the science of international relations and the art of statecraft.

Geopolitics is a way of understanding the world that is based on the idea that the distribution of land and natural resources is a significant factor in determining political power. This view has been influential in the development of international relations theory and in the study of global politics.

In the postmodern era, geopolitics has been criticized for its narrow focus on power and its neglect of cultural factors. However, recent scholarship has begun to explore the ways in which cultural factors, such as language, identity, and history, can be integrated into a more comprehensive understanding of global politics.

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evolve and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disrupt those ideological manoeuvres. For the political unity of the nation is not an essentialist identity. The difference of space incorporates the nation as a form of geopolitical practice.

Critical geopolitics bears witness to the irredeemable plurality of space and the multiplicity of possible geopolitical constructions of space. Thus, this is the second argument characterizing critical geopolitical practices: they challenge the everyday life of states in contrast to conventional geopolitics, which particularize the everyday life of states in the context of the state and the conceptual borders that define the geopolitical.
RETHINKING GEOPOLITICS

distribution and consumption. Linked together, as seen in Figure 0.1, they comprise the geopolitical culture of a particular region, state or inter-state alliance. In understanding ‘the geopolitical’ as a broad socio-cultural phenomena it is important to appreciate both that geopolitics is much more than a specialized knowledge used by practitioners of statecraft and that the different facets of its practices are interconnected in various ways to quotidian constructions of identity, security and danger. Geopolitics saturates the everyday life of states and nations. Its sites of production are multiple and pervasive, both ‘high’ (like a national security memorandum) and ‘low’ (like the headline of a tabloid newspaper), visual (like the images that move states to act) and discursive (like the speeches that justify military actions), traditional (like religious motifs in foreign policy discourse) and postmodern (like information management and cyber-war). While its conventionally recognized ‘moment’ is in the dramatic practices of state leaders (going to war, launching an invasion, demonstrating military force, etc.), these practices and the much more mundane practices that make up the conduct of international politics are constituted, sustained and given meaning by multifarious representational practices throughout cultures.

Fourth, critical geopolitics argues that the practice of studying geopolitics can never be politically neutral. Critical geopolitics is a form of geopolitics but one that seeks to disturb the objectivist perspectivism found in the history of geopolitics and in the practices of foreign policy more generally. It is a ‘situated knowledge’ that intervenes to disturb the ‘god trick’ of traditional geopolitics, which
claimed to re-present effortlessly the drama of international politics as an intelligible spectacle without interpretation. This conceit, while certainly not particular to the geopolitical tradition, is a consistent feature of geopolitical texts from Mackinder to Kissinger and from Bowman to Brzezinski. Yet it is a conceit that is persistently being undone in the course of exposition and analysis, for writings that deny their interpretative status open themselves up to deconstruction. Classical geopolitics is a form of geopolitical discourse that seeks to repress its own politics and geography, imagining itself as beyond politics and above situated geographies in a transcendent Olympian realm of surveillance and judgement. The response of critical geopolitics is to insist on the situated, contextual and embodied nature of all forms of geopolitical reasoning.

One means of doing this is to insist on the gendered nature of geopolitical writings and interpretative acts, demonstrating how practices of statecraft are also practices of man-craft-ing (e.g., the political leader using military action to demonstrate his toughness, as Israeli Labor leader Shimon Peres did in unleashing Israeli warplanes against guerrilla and civilian targets in southern Lebanon during his election battle with Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu in April and May of 1996, an election he nevertheless lost) and how acts of geo-gra-phing (the intellectual whose geopolitical representations are self-fashionings evoking ‘the hardheaded geopolitician,’ or the tabloid newspaper whose jingoism is part of a strategy of defining itself as ‘patriotic’). Geopolitics, whether high or low, is invariably complicitous with hegemonic forms of masculinity (Dalby 1994). In Mackinder’s case, that masculine subjectivity is a privileged English imperial manhood, while in Kissinger’s case it is an elitist émigré cosmopolitanism (Kearns 1997; Isaacson 1992). In the cases of Oliver North and Timothy McVeigh, that masculine subjectivity is an insecure and ultra-patriotic warrior masculinity (Gibson 1994).

Fifth, and finally, in conceptualizing geopolitics as ‘situated reasoning’ a critical perspective also seeks to theorize its broader socio-spatial and techno-territorial circumstances of development and use. Historically, the question of geopolitics has always been the question of states and their societies, technological networks and their relationship to territoriality (Matellart 1996). As a practical rationality devoted to thinking about space and strategy in international politics, geopolitics has historically been deeply implicated in what Foucault (1991) terms the ‘governamentalization of the state.’ Questions such as ‘What is the path to national greatness for the state?’ (a key question for Alfred Mahan), ‘What is the best relationship of a state to its territory and how can the state grow?’ (a fundamental question for Friedrich Ratzel), and ‘How can the state be reformed so that its empire can be strengthened’ (Mackinder’s question) were the practical governmental questions motivating the founders of what we know as ‘classical geopolitics.’ The history of this practical problem-solving statist knowledge is bound up with the formation of states and empires and the techniques of power that made it possible for them to develop discrete objectifiable territories and societies for management and control.

Geopolitics itself is part of the drive to create ‘the right disposition of things’ within states and societies through the adoption of certain visualization technologies (like cartography and social sciences such as geography), the establishment of certain techno-territorial networks (railways, telegraph cables, automotive highways, national media and now digital information super-highways), the implementation of certain governmental reforms (customs unions, tariff reforms, military spending programs) and the pursuit of certain military strategies and technologies (naval buildups, strategic lines of communication, defensive perimeters and strategic bases). Critical geopolitics, thus, situates its engagement with geopolitics within the context of literatures on the historical expansion of states (Giddens 1987; Mann 1993), techniques of governmentality (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996) and histories of technology and territoriality (Mumford 1967; DeLanda 1991; Virilio 1997).

Inevitably, given that these five arguments radically problematize the meaning, location and stability of that which is considered ‘geopolitics,’ there is a tremendous diversity of influences and approaches, topics and themes within what we loosely call ‘critical geopolitics.’ The different essays gathered together in this volume are reflective of that diversity but they are all united in a common commitment to rethink geopolitics in creative and critical ways. They further extend the critical analysis of geopolitics begun in special issues of the geography journals Society and Space (1994) and Political Geography (1996), while supplementing the themes presented in our co-edited (with Paul Routledge) introductory volume The Geopolitics Reader (O Tuathail, Dalby and Routledge 1998). This volume is not meant to be a survey of the new conditions of geopolitics in the late 1990s; it does not discuss in detail such phenomena as the expansion of NATO, the problem of failed states, the geopolitics of finance, or the regional impacts of globalization. Rather, its focus is on the conditions of possibility of geopolitical truth, knowledge and power. From the more formal analytical styles of Kim Rygiel and Jouni Hakli through Timothy Luke’s innovative prose to James Der Derian’s journalistic immersion in the vertiginous simulations of cybercorporations, we have attempted to include a variety of stylistic modes of thinking critically about geopolitics. How one might analyse, engage and critique geopolitical practices is not an intellectual and political given. Neither is substance completely divorced from style. To rethink geopolitics necessarily requires a multiplicity of perspectives to unpack the many practices that involve questions of geopolitical power/knowledge.

Three themes thread their way through the chapters in this volume. The first is the theme of modern geopolitics and the state. As Agnew (1998) and others have suggested, the modern geopolitical imagination came into its own at the time of the consolidation of the modern inter-state system after the Treaty of Westphalia. Geopolitics was a form of state geo-power, its gaze a governmental one interested in ‘the right disposition of things so as to lead to a convenient end’ (Foucault 1991: 93). Geopolitics, in other words, was not essentially a practice concerned with international space but a practice concerned with both
two sides of the same murderous geopolitics. Any consideration of the Holocaust that fails to take account of its spacing, Doel and Clarke conclude, is seriously impoverished.

Anders Stephanson’s chapter of notes on the Cold War ostensibly takes up the question of this unusual term’s origin but quickly becomes a wide-ranging reflection on the genealogy of war and the territorialization of its conceptualization within broader systems of belief. Noting the embeddedness of notions of cold war in spy novels and popular culture generally, Stephanson finds the concept signifying an absolutist non-recognition of one’s antagonist as a worthy opponent and a consequent refusal of dialogue and diplomacy with this opponent. Precisely defined in this manner, Stephanson claims that the Cold War actually ended in the early 1960s, with Reagan’s revitalization of its themes in the 1980s a shallow form of posturing. Stephanson also argues that its origins can be found in Roosevelt’s policy of ‘unconditional surrender’ towards Nazi Germany, a policy with Civil War precedents and roots in US notions of national exceptionalism more generally. Practising the important refusal of distinction between physical and conceptual space, Stephanson traces how certain states, like the USSR and the United States, territorialized ecumenical philosophies. Arguing that the Cold War was a US project, Stephanson finds its logic in the American tradition of refusing negotiation in times of war, for wars were considered absolute moral struggles between good and evil. The global struggle between the USA and the USSR after World War II was quickly spatialized in these terms (and in universalized American Civil War terms as a struggle between the enslaved world and the free world), but this geo-ideological struggle never became actual war. The Cold War, Stephanson concludes, was a contradictory unity of non-war and non-recognition, a continuation of war by all means other than war – in third spaces – between two antagonists that refused to recognize themselves recognizing one another. When that non-recognition slipped somewhat and feeble diplomacy began, the Cold War, Stephanson suggests, ended.

Carlo Bonura extends the concern with the spatialities in political thinking into the contemporary academic debates about political culture and the methods whereby it might be described and measured. Drawing on work in contemporary international relations theory and critical geopolitics, he shows that the taken-for-granted nature of the cartographic practices of American political science rest on what John Agnew (1998) calls the ‘territorial trap.’ The social construction of sovereignty is, he argues, crucial because the incorporation of particular cultures, their articulation as nations, is the converse practice of the construction of the possibility of international relations. In the process, Bonura once again emphasizes the importance of ‘remembering’ the spatial practices of politics precisely where they are so frequently ‘forgotten’ because they are simply so obvious. Political identity is conjoined with geographical location and specified in terms of states, even in many cases where researchers claim to be studying global phenomena under such rubrics as geocultural areas. The technical apparatus of
themes of ‘good men overcoming chaos and disorder in the international realm’ — typified by Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan — and ‘heroic men struggling against the tyranny of a feminized state.’ The disastrous consequences of such identities is a theme picked up later in Matt Sparke’s chapter on Timothy McVeigh.

Klaus Dodds analyses popular geopolitics in a series of images that would appear at first glance to be a highly unlikely site for such analysis. He looks at a number of cartoons drawn by Steve Bell on the theme of the violence in Bosnia in the 1990s and the ambiguities of the ‘Western’ response to the suffering of populations undergoing ethnic cleansing and living through warfare and siege. Dodds demonstrates how the themes of exclusionary identities and cultural homogenization are implicated in the construction of geopolitical frameworks. Bell’s cartoons helped to expose the inadequacy of the Western geopolitical framework towards Bosnia and the moral distancing that this framework involved. As visual critique, Bell’s cartoons helped to un-enframe the Bosnia constructed by policy makers, making it a place of stark moral responsibility, a part of our universe of obligation once again. Bell’s cartoons reinforce the point that geopolitical images are in all facets of popular culture, not just in the planning seminars of national security bureaucracies and foreign ministries.

Matt Sparke extends these themes in considering the (con)fusions of many different forms of geopolitics evident in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing. Problematic the inclusionary/exclusionary dynamic of a geopolitical system he terms ‘Heartland Geopolitics’ — itself a (con)fused of physical space and idealized space — Sparke traces its double displacement by the Oklahoma City bombing as domestic not foreign terrorism, and by the history of one of the convicted bombers, Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh. Projected initially upon a foreign Orientalist otherness, the Oklahoma City bombing turned out to be the work of domestic terrorists who, in a mark of the many-layered dimensions of Heartland Geopolitics and its attendant patriot system, represented themselves as authentic patriotic insiders striking a blow against the imposing ‘foreign outsider’ of the federal government — represented as ZOG or the Zionist Occupied Government in some of the racist, anti-Semitic far right literature — particularly enforcement agencies like the Federal Alcohol, Firearms and Tobacco Bureau, which had a branch division in the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Mapped as a ‘crazed outcast’ after the bombing, lead suspect Timothy McVeigh was actually an inside product of the US government’s own patriot system, the US military, in which he served as a gunner during the Gulf War. Sparke traces the subsequent displacement of the legislative clamour to ‘do something about terrorism’ in Congress, mostly on to minority death row inmates and illegal immigrants, as a shoring up of the ‘heart of whiteness’ of Heartland Geopolitics. Ironically, McVeigh is a self-styled defender of this implicitly racist Heartland imagination, a Rambo-esque figure who chose to do the dirty work that no one wanted to do in order that ‘white America’ would be awakened to the threat posed to it by its corrupted and ‘feminized’ state. Geopolitics, as Sparke’s essay makes clear, is everywhere.
The Persian Gulf is another region where popular, practical and formal geopolitics have long intertwined. Beginning with the Gulf War of 1991, Sidaway’s chapter traces the emergence of the ‘Persian Gulf’ as a region of US strategic anxiety in the 1970s, particularly during the administration of Jimmy Carter. Popular representations of Zbigniew Brzezinski’s Cold War ‘arc of crisis’ vision in magazines such as Time help to establish the region’s geo-strategic significance in the Western mind. Although nominally a East versus West vision, Brzezinski’s geo-strategic representation also had an important North–South dimension that persisted after the end of the Cold War in 1990. Sidaway’s chapter is a useful reminder that post-World War II geopolitics involved much more than the Cold War and that geopolitics is never far removed from geo-economics. It is also a reminder of how decades of media representation of a region as strategically vital in due time makes war in that region eminently more ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable.’

The third and final theme in this volume extends concerns with popular culture and geopolitical identity further by focusing explicitly on informationalization and cyber-political identity in a range of real and virtual worlds. Paul Routledge examines the case of the Zapatista ‘insurgency’ in southern Mexico. Beginning symbolically on 1 January 1994, the Zapatistas were a guerrilla movement with a difference that sought to use global media vectors to advance their cause through info-war more than through real warfare. Symbolically challenging the image of Mexico expensive and image/manipulated by the Salinas administration by American public relations firms during the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, the Zapatistas deftly captured the world media’s attention and used this initial attention to disarm the Mexican state symbolically and construct an effective global communications infrastructure that disintermediated the Mexican state and its official media (O’Tuathail 1997b). In so doing, the case of the Zapatistas suggests new forms of political practice in the informationalized spaces of the global media. It also raises the important question of how practitioners of critical geopolitics can engage in a constructive dialogue with forces of opposition.

James Der Derian investigates the worlds of simulation and the construction of virtual realities in which war can be planned, played and analysed by militaries facing numerous possible contingencies in the complex spaces of the contemporary world. He notes that real potential conflicts are in danger of being overwhelmed by the technologically mediated hyper-realities and hyper-identities made possible by virtual spaces. An important theme in his work is the juxtaposition of popular culture with the scenarios of warfare. Commercial video games and training exercises for the marines are often one and the same product. Popular geopolitics and practical geopolitics reproduce each other, and images of danger from military scenarios become part of the discursive economy of popular imaginations invoked in political discussions of foreign policy. But, in an inversion of the conventional assumptions of military secrecy and corporate openness, his efforts to talk to the most high-profile imagineers of popular culture in Disneyland met a blank wall of silence, while the corporations supplying

the military are anxious to demonstrate their wares. In the process of inventing scenarios and stories of future conflicts, the simulations tell only some stories of the history of, in this case, American warfare. The simulations that reinvent American identities do so by remembering only some of the violent past. The iconography of success is enshrined in the narratives that structure the identities that play the simulations. In the process, Der Derian concludes that all sorts of new dangers may be created.

Timothy Luke’s chapter explores some of the potential political implications of the rapid growth of electronic and especially ‘digital’ communications of cyberspace. Using numerous neologisms, he considers the change in power in a world in which material flows across boundaries are replaced by electronic flows, atoms replaced by bits in the evaluation of political boundaries: virtual life replacing real political life. Thinking about possible new political identities in the language of the atom state fails to grasp the contemporary accelerations and interconnections in the virtual life of cyberspace, where geography is now a matter of laser flows and digital images. Luke offers a cautionary word on the assumptions of universal access to cyberspace, pointing out that only some people in some parts of the world have access to computers and the money to gain access to Internet servers, on a planet where 70 per cent of humans do not even have a simple telephone service. The digital nation is one that may transgress state boundaries, but it remains the virtual home of a small elite fraction of the world’s overall population. Nonetheless, with the rapidly growing interconnections on the Net and the expansion of computer-using populations, the ability of states to maintain control over information and communication is becoming increasingly limited as cultural identities and technological capabilities collapse some of the traditional notions of space and political identity.

Simon Dalby’s concluding chapter works at the largest scale, the globe itself, arguing that the contemporary languages of geopolitics are involved with the specification of the planet itself as apparently threatened and in need of securing and management. The ecosphere frequently enters into geopolitical discussions in ways that perpetuate many of the earlier geopolitical practices of modernity. By specifying the planet as threatened by environmental degradation, the precise cause of the degradation is often obscured and the managerial ethos of governmentality. This is reinforced by the use of powerful information technologies to monitor the physical properties of the planet, invoked to ensure that the political order premised on modern modes of consumption continues uninterrupted. The culture of consumption is taken for granted as the starting point for geopolitical specifications of danger to the culture of modernity. But inverting the logic of security by looking at the specific localities of the ‘South’ that are supposedly the cause of environmental insecurities subverts the normal direction of geopolitical gaze and turns it back on the culture of expertise that can know a planet in such a manner. By turning the analysis back on the producers of geopolitical texts he argues, in parallel with many of the critiques in earlier chapters, that the attribution of blame for insecurity caused by, in this case, environmental
degradation, to external Others, obscures the role of the global political economy in causing insecurity in numerous places. Although not a formal conclusion to the volume in the conventional sense, this analysis of the ‘Pogo Syndrome’, which obscures political responsibilities, in part through the cartographic representations of contemporary geopolitics, reprises many of the themes from earlier chapters.

This introduction is subtitled ‘towards a critical geopolitics’ because we do not understand this book as a statement of a fixed and finished project. Critical geopolitics is very much work in progress, a proliferation of research paths rather than a fully demarcated research field. Its continued development is dependent, we believe, on an intellectual openness to new forms of critical social theory from across the social sciences and humanities, and to a relinquishing of conventional disciplinary attitudes and delimiting borders. We look forward to new variants of critical geopolitics that will address the connections between political economy and geopolitical practices, cultural studies and popular geopolitics, gendered identities and geopolitical discourse, psychoanalysis and geopolitical imaginations, actor-networks and geopolitical cyborgizations, cyber-war and virtual geopolitics, globalization and the restructuring of geopolitical regions. We present the essays in this book in the belief that they provide some preliminary steps towards these and other future variants of critical geopolitics. We hope that these new variants and voices can extend the problematization of geopolitical practices to challenge the assumptions that practitioners have for so long taken for granted.

References