Locating critical geopolitics

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Abstract. The authors review and locate the emerging literature of critical geopolitics. They illustrate some of the main lines of development within a rapidly expanding literature. This literature analyses geopolitics as discourse and also deconstructs policy texts to examine the use of geographical reasoning in statecraft. Critical geopolitics also links up with critical work in geopolitical economy and development studies. Areas are identified in which critical geopolitics could engage productively with research and scholarship in related fields.

Critical geopolitics
In a survey of geopolitical writings, Parker (1985) suggested that it was possible to identify a Western Geopolitical Thought. Within such a 'thought', geopolitics (as a popular term and/or as a formal practice) has often appeared conflicting, contradictory, and confusing. Critical writers, however, have begun to unpack various 'traditions' of geopolitical thought (for example, Dalby, 1991; Dodds, 1993a; 1994a; 1994b; Ó Tuathail, 1986; 1992a; 1993a; 1994a). This reflects a wide interest in reassessing Anglo-American, Continental European, and South American geopolitical thinking (for example, Bassim, 1987; Hepple, 1986; Kearns, 1984; Kelly, 1984; Paterson, 1987; Schultz, 1989; Smith, 1984). In particular, revisionist writers have argued that we should carefully investigate not only the historical contexts in which geopolitics has been written, but also how these have been interpreted elsewhere. This has led to a welcome ‘debunking’ of some of the more popular mythologies attached to geopolitical histories. It has initiated further reflection on the historicity of geopolitics, drawing upon the debates over writing more contextual accounts of histories of geographical knowledge (Livingstone, 1992; Ó Tuathail, 1994b).\(^1\)

Compounding this, a number of writers have recently adopted research perspectives which can be loosely termed ‘critical geopolitics’, from which to launch alternative accounts or explanations of phenomena defined as 'geopolitical'. This critical overhaul of geopolitical theories and concepts has been influenced by a variety of changing political and theoretical landscapes. Without claiming to develop a fully comprehensive account of either critical geopolitics or developing new areas of research, in this short paper we attempt to locate these developments and to suggest ways in which critical geopolitics could further contribute to or engage with a range of debates involving issues of representation, authority, power, and knowledge. The debates we have in mind are not only those new departures such as postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial theories but also a number of themes associated with political economy.

\(^1\) In his papers (1992a; 1994c) on Mackinder, Ó Tuathail has made an important intervention by suggesting some ways forward through the ‘deconstruction’ of geopolitical traditions. Compare Ashley’s (1987) intervention.
Specically in the following sections we deal in turn with the critical geopolitical literature inspired by Foucault and Said, the deconstructive approach to geopolitical texts, the links with political economy, and the recent debates about development and geopolitics. In the final section we suggest some tentative directions for further research in critical geopolitics.

**Foucault, Said, and critical geopolitics**

The single most important influence on the existing literature of critical geopolitics has been a Foucauldian insistence that one should explore the power/knowledge nexus in discourse (Foucault, 1980). A number of critical geopolitical writers (for example, Dalby, 1990a; Dodds, 1993b; Ó Tuathail, 1989) have cited Foucault’s recorded comments with the editors of *Herodote* in 1976:

> “The longer I continue, the more it seems to me that the formation of discourses and the genealogy of knowledge needs to be analyzed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power. Tactics and strategies deployed through the implementations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organisation of domains which could well make up a sort of geopolitics where my preoccupations would link up with your methods ... Geography must lie at the heart of my concerns” (1980, page 77).

The concepts of power, knowledge, and geopolitics are thereby bound together in a provocative way. What is suggested is that forms of power/knowledge operate geopolitically: a certain spatialisation of knowledge, a demarcation of a field of knowledge, and the establishment of subjects, objects, rituals, and boundaries by which a field (and the world) is to be known. As Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, page 198) have argued, “Our foundational premise is the contention that geography is a social and historical discourse which is always intimately bound up with questions of politics and ideology ... geography is a form of power/knowledge itself”. The authors of the earliest studies (for example, Dalby, 1988; 1990a; Ó Tuathail, 1989; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992) positing a critical geopolitics argued that, by examining the various narratives, concepts, and signifying practices that reside within geopolitical discourses, it would be possible to understand something of the power of those discourses to shape international politics.

The appeal of Foucault’s theorising was multifaceted. In the first instance, Foucault’s work is replete with references to space, networks, boundaries, and cartography. The spatial metaphors of terrain, colonisation, and campaigns permeate Foucault’s writings. Furthermore, Foucault’s sensitivity to the construction of what he termed the genealogies and archaeologies of knowledges and related questions of shifting subjectivities, audiences, powers, and politics have been drawn upon in the moves to think and write critically about geopolitics.

In turn, the use made of Foucault’s notions by Said through creative synthesis of these ideas with frameworks from Gramsci has been of fundamental importance. If there is a single text that has influenced the existing critical geopolitics literature more than any other, it is probably Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*. Said’s attempts to chart the creation and evolution of a series of ‘imaginary geographies’ of the Orient (and to chart their contemporary resonances) has had widespread appeal (for example, Driver, 1992; Rogers, 1992; Young, 1990). In terms of a stimulant to think through a critical geopolitics, his argument that “Orientalism” amounted to “a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts” (Said, 1978, page 12) has been richly suggestive.
In addition to providing a general frame for a critical geopolitics, Said’s work raised the issue of whether from Mackinder onwards, Anglo-American geopolitical writing has been essentially predicated on a Western discourse which positions the ‘East’ as a threat or danger to the ‘West’. “The geographical pivot of history”, for instance, published in 1904 clearly sets out Mackinder’s fears that European Christendom was threatened by “Asiatic nomads from the East” located within the heartland of Eurasia. Mackinder (1904, page 430) argued that “Were the Chinese, for instance, organised by the Japanese, to overthrow the Russian Empire and conquer its territory, they might constitute the yellow peril to the World’s freedom ...” In the subsequent decades following Mackinder’s famous paper, the oriental codes of the West were transformed into the codes of the Cold War (Pietz, 1988). The depiction of the Soviet Union, for example, in the ‘Mr X’ telegram as a despotic orientalist power has been analysed in these terms in critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992).

Said’s work has provided a framework for a critical geopolitics which illustrates the importance of the representational practices used by political elites to describe foreign affairs. Dalby (1988; 1990b) and Ó Tuathail (1992b; 1992c; 1992d; 1993b) have explored how American foreign policy professionals depicted the Cold War and the so-called ‘New World Order’. The geopolitics of the Cold War was built around a language of ‘blocs’, ‘containment’, and ‘dominoes’ (O’Sullivan, 1982). Critical geopolitical analyses have illustrated how places were thereby defined; variously as threats or as strategically important, and how those depictions have changed radically over time. In Ó Tuathail’s (1992d, page 439) terms:

“The focus of critical geopolitics is [therefore] on exposing the plays of power involved in grand geopolitical schemes ... Fundamental to this process is the power of certain national security elites to represent the nature and defining dilemmas of international politics in particular ways ... These representational practices of national security intellectuals generate particular ‘scripts’ in international politics concerning places, peoples and issues. Such ‘scripts’ then become part of the means by which hegemony is exercised in the international system.”

A distinction has been made between the formal types of reasoning employed by the expert within the academy or think tank and the more practical forms of geographical reasoning employed by foreign policy professionals to depict places and spaces (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). The initial focus on high-level decision-making and elite representation in the United States was justified in terms of the ability of such elites: “... to represent particular regional conflicts, whose causes may be quite localised, in their own terms ...[and]... to create the conditions whereby peripheral or semi-peripheral states selectively adopt and use the geopolitical reasoning of the hegemon” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, page 195).

Yet, although the focus has therefore tended to be top-down, critical geopolitics has not only been concerned with those elites who are in charge of, or in positions to influence, the foreign policy apparatus of state. Following Ó Tuathail’s (1989) suggestion that there also existed sites of popular forms of geopolitics (for example, the media, architecture, and schools), investigating those popular sources of information or forms of knowledge about the world has become an increasingly important topic (Popke, 1993; Sharp, 1993). For instance, Sharp’s (1993) recent paper on the American version of the Reader’ Digest usefully documents why we should be concerned with popular sources of information. As she notes:

“An overconcentration on the understandings of elites tend to collapse the sociology of knowledge production into the internal dynamics of the geopolitical text ... [yet] geopolitics pulls out themes learned in schools and reproduced in the media.
The media gain acceptance and power because they are generally perceived as providing knowledge of the world: geopoliticians cannot ignore it" (1993, page 494).

Within Sharp's paper there is a careful analysis of the varied representation of American identity and the Soviet Union as a particularly dangerous ‘Other’. In doing so, Sharp illustrates how the Readers Digest as a popular media source presented itself as a representative of American values and how we might think about the close linkages between such media representations and more formal sites of geopolitics.

**Deconstruction, survey, and critical geopolitics**

In a general sense, critical geopolitical writers have attempted to ‘deconstruct’ the representational practices of conservative foreign policy elites, to reveal how they ‘spatialise’ international politics. Dalby (1990b, page 173), for instance, argued that “Geopolitics is about that ideological process of constructing spatial, political and cultural boundaries to demarcate the domestic space as separate from the threatening other”. Consequently, Dalby’s analysis of foreign policy and national security attempted to deconstruct or unpack the ideological processes that legitimated this (see also Dodds, 1994c). As Dalby (1990b, page 185) concludes, “By asking questions such as security for whom?, the structures of power implicit in the conventional formulations of security can be exposed. In doing so a space is opened up for critical geopolitical inquiry that does not presuppose the state as the provider of security”. Likewise, in his analysis of European or New Zealand peace and feminist movements and of concepts of environmental security (1992a; 1992b) Dalby has analysed how security can be redefined in a non-state-centric fashion (Dalby, 1993). Dalby is therefore concerned to ‘deconstruct’ security as a spatial practice which externalises threats, urging instead a critical investigation of possible new practices and vocabularies of security.

Critical geopolitics has also attempted to engage more thoroughly with Derridean strategies of deconstruction. In the first instance, there has been an interest in linking a critical questioning of geopolitics with more wide-ranging issues of the traditions of Western philosophy and a critique of so-called ‘naive realism’, which holds that the world is self-evident or that the facts simply ‘speak for themselves’. Ó Tuathail’s (1989) critique of what he called “natural attitude” geopolitics was a precursor to these more refined critiques of the epistemic realism of orthodox geopolitics. Read this way, geopolitics is not granted an essential meaning or presence. In the terms of linguistic theory, the word geopolitics is a sign that refers not to a stable signified but to chains of other signifiers. In this case, it is suggested that there is no pure presence or fixed meaning when ‘geopolitics’ is invoked (Ó Tuathail, 1994b; 1994d). The meaning, therefore, of geopolitics takes place within the play that is the web of language and (con)text. As such, geopolitical discourse in global politics is understood to be the result of perpetual ‘geo-graphing’: the production and dissemination of strategic texts and maps.

From this position, challenging conventional geopolitics means problematising the geo-optical supports (ways of seeing, sites of production) that underwrite and undersee geopolitical traditions. The vision of the geopolitician is most clearly illustrated through the usage of the map or survey. Though its meaning and form may be flexible, geopolitics always involves some observation of the world. The map was usually the cloth onto which the geopolitical writer ascribed identities and strategies. Many scholars (for example, Driver, 1992; Rose, 1993) have drawn attention to the importance of the 19th-century European subject as the sovereign
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'seeing-man' empowered to see and classify nature as an inventory of sites. The panopticism of the geopolitical writer was, as Mackinder noted in 1905, the "very essence of geographical power" (cited in Ó Tuathail, 1994c). The division of the world into heartlands, rimlands, pivot zones, or inner crescents was underwritten by the epistemological assumption that the world could be flawlessly represented, save for the inherent problems posed by scale and dynamism. In effect, the distance between the narrator (graphing) and the narrated (geo) had been collapsed. The collectors of knowledge, thus, were important in defining agendas, establishing standards of intelligibility, and creating social realities. The panoptical discipline of geopolitics occupied centre stage: 'eyes that see but are not seen'.

Critical geopolitics and geopolitical economy

Critical geopolitical writers have demonstrated that the ability of political elites to depict or represent places in certain ways should be an important component of investigating international politics. However, a purely discourse-centred critical geopolitics faces a number of potential difficulties. In particular, the institutional functioning of geopolitics within political and civil society may be underspecified and the material side of geopolitics neglected (Ó Tuathail, 1992c). However, a number of useful frameworks for approaching the materiality of geopolitics do exist. Since the 1970s various writers have argued that the emergence of so-called post-Fordism and flexible production or accumulation has been associated with a period of geopolitical disorder in which the globalisation of capital and ideas has disrupted the traditional forms of sovereignty and international regulation (Harvey, 1985; Leyshon, 1992). In this context, an analysis of geopolitical economy has been proposed to "incorporate both the processes of economic and political change and the rhetorical understanding that gives a geopolitical order its appeal and acceptability" (Agnew and Corbridge, 1989, page 268). In Corbridge and Agnew (1991, page 88) the concept of geopolitical economy is further specified as an approach "which builds upon uneven development theory and which affirms, once again, the insistently spatial foundations of capitalist production, exchange and regulation". Others, such as Bond (1991), have argued that geopolitics needs to be located within a "theory of why the restructuring of trade, investment, and invisible financial flows is in large part emanating from the supranational strongholds of financial capital [without which]—the subdiscipline [sic] of geopolitics will not easily trace the displacement of tensions in the capitalist mode of production from traditional superpower rivalries into other realms" (page 325).

The value of geopolitical economy approaches as a complement to critical geopolitics is clear. The former provide some theoretical and empirical opportunities for grounding elite geopolitical reasoning within the material circumstances that elites sought to reproduce. In this respect, the work of Ó Tuathail (1992c; 1993b) provides useful illustrations of how forms of practical geopolitical reasoning might be related to material circumstances within the world-economy. Ó Tuathail's (1992c) exploration of the debates in the USA over the FSX fighter aircraft saga sought to illustrate how the depictions of Japan during this episode could be related to other debates over the geoeconomic definitions of national security and the increasingly unsustainable geopolitical vision of the USA in the post-Cold-War world. Ó Tuathail (1992c) argues that the changing political-economic circumstances in the 1990s meant that geoeconomic discourse would increasingly characterise debates over US-Japan relations (see also Ó Tuathail and Luke, 1994).

The book edited by Williams (1993a) on The Political Geography of the New World Order contains work by a number of authors attempting to link up changes
within the material circumstances within the global geoeconomic and the global geopolitical orders. Williams (1993b), for example, examines the growing expressions of racism and xenophobia within the European Community and relates them to the challenges posed by the New World (Dis)Order. He notes that "Increasingly, in this transition to a new world order, the fresh challenge is ambivalence and uncertainty as to what to believe" (1993b, page 5). For critical geopolitics, the challenges posed by such ‘ambivalence’ present further opportunities to investigate how the demands of the nation-state (with its fixed spaces and discourse of sovereignty) are to be reconciled with the claims to (national) identity(ies) within the context of globalisation on the one hand, and local resistances on the other hand.

Critical geopolitics and development studies

The evolution of development theory in the postwar period has been well summarised by a number of scholars (for example, Bloomstrom and Hettne, 1984; Kay, 1989; Sachs, 1992). However, an area of direct interest to critical geopolitics is the relationship between development theory and the geopolitics of the Cold War. The invention of a set of strategies for ‘development’ in the 1940s has been interpreted by scholars such as Luke (1989; 1991), Pletch (1981), and Escobar (1988) as a particular Occidental technique for the legitimisation of a series of interventions designed to control and discipline what became known as the Third World.

These analyses point out the connections between the postwar project of Third World development through (Western directed) modernisation and a geopolitics of containment. The paradigm of modernisation proposed a Western vision of development for the non-West and a plethora of programmes were designed to insulate the Third World against the ‘virus’ of communism. Development, modernity, and anticommunism went hand in hand in official US government aid agencies. This trend was perhaps best epitomised by Rostow’s (1960) influential text The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto in which he posited a linear evolution of the Third World to capitalist modernity, should the right (geopolitical) choices be made. However, this was part of a much broader discourse of modernisation, in which variously political, economic, and cultural aspects of transition to capitalist modernity were posited.

Slater (1992; 1993) has begun to chart the possibilities for research linkage between critical geopolitics and development studies (see also Popke, 1993). Slater (1993, page 421) claims that "All the major conceptualisations of development in the post-war period contain and express a geopolitical imagination which has had a conditioning effect on the enframing of the meanings and relations of development". In recent years, the work of scholars such as Corbridge (1991), Escobar (1988), Parajuli (1991), Sachs (1992), and Watts (1993) has also illustrated that the sorts of questions posed in development studies, such as the possibility of development, the prospects for North–South relations, the future of state socialism and the importance of social movements, similarly relate to geopolitical frames. The point is that Western recipes for development were not uncontested. Alternative paths to modernity via socialist orientation and radical nationalism were pursued, with certain measures of Soviet support—as in China, Vietnam, Cuba, and a variety of other states.

Influenced by these revolutionary paths and the experience of continued underdevelopment in Latin America, a heterodox set of theories of ‘dependency’ emerged in the writings of Latin American intellectuals. Slater (1993, page 429) characterises this as “The South theorises[ing] back”. He indicates how dependency and other postcolonial radicalisms emerging from the Third World were always saturated with
geopolitical frame and metaphor. It is here worth recalling Said's observation that "If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical element. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" (1993, page 271).

One of the most important areas critical geopolitics could further explore concerns the roles of social movements throughout the world in resisting the power of development programmes and the state system. In doing so, critical geopolitics begins to explore how social movements challenge state power and put in context the colonisation of the 'political' by the nation-state (see Mendlovitz and Walker, 1987; Routledge, 1993; Walker, 1988a). Such social movements are often place specific and are frequently involved in forms of resistance which not only involve dissent, but also attempt to create and implement alternative practices based on a vision of 'local' identity, specific knowledges, and cultural systems. We think here, for example, of various radical Islams, liberation theologies, and local ecological and native rights organisations throughout the Third World.

All of these have limits, in a world where tremendous concentrations of geo-economic and geopolitical power persist, and there certainly is a sense in which the move to such pragmatic issues and 'cultural' resistances registers a failure of the Third World to chart viable noncapitalist alternatives to Western development strategies. Such limits need to be borne in mind. Yet so do the challenging research and theoretical frontiers generated by the activity of such movements, as well as the persistence of struggles for human rights and local or national self-determination. One of the consequences for critical geopolitics in taking such issues seriously is that the empirical and theoretical frameworks are further broadened. In the existing work on the scripts or stories of foreign policy elites (with the exception of Dalby, 1990/1; 1993) little consideration has been given as to whether those types of stories were being contested at the time and how alternative stories and sets of resistances were marginalised.

Summary and prospects
The attempt simultaneously to deconstruct and reconceptualise geopolitical discourses under the label of critical geopolitics remains an ongoing project. We have tried to show here how, to borrow the sentiments of the political theorist Walker (1988b, page 88), critical geopolitics aims to engage in study that "opens up rather than closes off", the possibility of rethinking and reconstructing geopolitics. There is a need, as Atkinson (1993), Dodds (1993a), and Sidaway (1994) all argue, to broaden the empirical base so that research is less tied to empirical studies of the Anglo-American world. The writings of Said, Slater, and others that we have drawn upon here indicate some ways in which the intellectual challenges of taking seriously the variety of ideas associated with 'postcolonialism' looms for critical geopolitics.

More studies which carefully trace the connections between popular and formal 'sites' of geopolitics would be worthwhile. In these ways too critical geopolitics 'comes home' to investigate further how the local and the national are themselves

(2) In a subsequent exchange, Ó Tuathail (1994a) suggested that Slater does not go far enough in recognising the precariousness of geopolitical identities and a psychoanalytic logic evident in Western visions of the Third World. Slater's (1994) response highlights some important issues: the importance of historising Western claims to development and civilisation, stressing that care is needed when emphasising merely fluidity and flow within the world-system (and not ignoring the persistent presences such as states), and the underspecified potential of psychoanalytical theories for critical geopolitics.
constituted through the experience and imagination of the foreign (Campbell, 1992; 1993; Dodds, 1994d). Furthermore, initial appeals to the feminist literature (as in this issue) need to be consolidated by critical geopolitical writers. One possible way forward is to consider how the work of Rose (1993) and Jackson (1991) on the politics and geographies of masculinity might be employed by critical geopolitical writers, given earlier comments about the geopolitical gaze and the transcendental observer. Finally, we need further reflection on what critical geopolitics is seeking to achieve, including issues of audiences, pedagogy, and the construction of credible alternatives to the contemporary world (dis)order.

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