



Critical Geopolitics

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Introduction

Critical geopolitics investigates the geographical assumptions and designations that enter into the making of world politics (Agnew 2003:2). It seeks to illuminate and explain the practices by which political actors spatialize international politics and represent it as a “world” characterized by particular types of places (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992:190). This strand of analysis approaches geopolitics not as a neutral consideration of pre-given “geographical” facts, but as a deeply ideological and politicized form of analysis. Eschewing the traditional question of how geography does or can influence politics, it investigates how geographical claims and assumptions function in political debates and political practice. In so doing, it seeks to disrupt mainstream geopolitical discourses: not to study the geography of politics within pre-given, commonsense places, but to foreground “the politics of the geographical specification of politics” (Dalby 1991:274). Critical geopolitics is not a neatly delimited field, but the diverse works characterized as such all focus on the processes through which political practice is bound up with territorial definition.

This essay reviews critical geopolitics as a subfield of human geography: its intellectual roots, trajectories, internal debates, and interactions with other fields of inquiry. Its goal is to situate critical geopolitics in the study of international affairs and to highlight its contribution to that study. To underscore the spatiality of world affairs is *not* to add a token “geographical” perspective to international studies. It is rather to insist that a critical inquiry into the spatiality of world affairs must be central to the study of politics. All analyses of international affairs make geographical assumptions, whether acknowledged or not. Critical geopolitics seeks to make these assumptions visible so as to submit them to analytical scrutiny.

The essay proceeds in four steps. The next section (“Geopolitics and its Discontents”) briefly situates critical geopolitics in the scholarship that preceded it and lays out the principal theoretical and empirical concerns of this subfield. The following two sections discuss some key strands of and debates within critical geopolitics in more detail. Thus, the third section (“Locating Critical Geopolitics”) addresses the debates over the “location” of critical geopolitics in two senses of the term. It first discusses the location of that scholarship within human geography and the social sciences more broadly, and then addresses its geographical scope. The subsequent section (“Geopolitics and Agency”) tackles questions about who produces geopolitical discourses. In particular, it foregrounds the substantial work on intellectuals of statecraft, popular geopolitics, feminist geopolitics, and resistance or antigeopolitics. In so doing, the section seeks to illuminate the role of human agency (capacity to act) in geopolitical practices. The final section (“Critical Geopolitics as the Fragmented Mainstream”) summarizes the position of the field within human geography today. Throughout, the focus is not only on studies that are self-consciously “critical geopolitical,” although these are central to the essay. Rather, the essay takes a broader look at geographic



analyses on the spatiality of international affairs, regardless of whether they are commonly labeled as critical geopolitics.

Geopolitics and its Discontents

To understand the intellectual and political concerns of critical geopolitics, we must briefly consider the troubled relationship between academic geography and classical geopolitical thought. Classical geopolitics, taken to mean the statist, Eurocentric, balance-of-power conception of world politics that dominated much of the twentieth century, is closely bound up with the discipline of geography. This is an association of which geography unfortunately cannot be proud. It goes back to the birth of self-consciously geopolitical analysis in the nationalism and imperialism of the fin-de-siècle Europe. From the beginning, geopolitics was intimately connected to the competitive ambitions of European states (G. Parker 1998; Heffernan 2000). For example, Friedrich Ratzel's ideas of living space grew out of the widespread anxiety about the position of Germany in European politics, and Halford Mackinder's heartland theory reflected similar anxieties in Britain (Ó Tuathail 1996b). For many writers inside and outside academic geography, geopolitics promised a privileged "scientific" perspective on world affairs. It appeared as an objective science, a detached "god's eye" view of the material (or geographical) realities of world politics (Ó Tuathail 1996b). This so-called classical geopolitics conceptualized politics as a territorial practice in which states and nations naturally vie for power over territory and resources quite similarly to evolutionary struggles. As such, it served to justify interstate rivalry throughout the twentieth century (Atkinson and Dodds 2000; Agnew 2003). In the 1930s and 1940s, geopolitics acquired an association with the intellectual apparatus of the Third Reich, in part because of the works of the prominent German geographer Karl Haushofer. This episode was subsequently used in American geography and political propaganda to vilify the whole field of geopolitics and to treat it as synonymous with Nazi expansionism (even though there is no evidence of the far-reaching influence on Hitler that Haushofer was said to have had). Geopolitics became one of the most controversial terms in the modern history of the discipline (Atkinson and Dodds 2000:1).

Because of its negative image in the decades after World War II, academic geographers virtually ignored geopolitics. Geography's way of dealing with the troubling baggage of the term was to exclude it from the discipline's historiography (Livingstone 1993). Of the numerous books and articles on geopolitics during the Cold War, most have little to do with the discipline of geography. Geopolitical writing of that time was an explicitly strategic analysis closely bound up with foreign and security policies of core states (Ó Tuathail 1986; 1996b; Hepple 1986; Parker 1998). Its assumption of state-based bipolarity dovetailed neatly with the statism of the postwar social sciences more generally (Herb 2008). Although the tradition of "classical" geopolitics had been discredited by its (presumed) connection to the Nazi regime, the everyday use of the term geopolitics treated geography as a stable given – an independent variable of sorts. To speak of geopolitics was to speak of seemingly natural realities. The rhetorical power of geopolitical claims stems in significant part from their link to such supposedly self-evident "geographical" facts.

The end of the Cold War, which had been the containing territorial structure of political thought for over forty years, fueled anxiety about the spatial organization of power (Agnew and Corbridge 1995). It spelled trouble to the analyses that were analytically premised on superpower rivalry within the state system, brought increased interest in the spatiality of power across the social sciences, and rejuvenated the sub-discipline of political geography (Hepple 1986; Agnew 2003; Herb 2008). Geographic work concentrating explicitly on geopolitical thought and practice was not long in coming.

This new work was an integral part of a broader rethinking of power in the social sciences. In geography as well as other disciplines, it grew out in particular of the wide-ranging interest in Foucauldian genealogy. This work approaches power not only as coercive and disabling but also as productive and enabling. It contends that power relations are not imposed on already existing subjects: rather, it is within and through power relations that political subjects come into being. Such processes of subject-making are among the key themes of analysis in that broadly Foucauldian scholarship.

In geography, this relational and anti-essentialist work produced a marked interest in the discursive construction of political space and the role of geographic knowledge in this process. Approaching geographical knowledge as a technology of power – both the result and a constitutive element of power relations – it pushed geography out of the illusion of political neutrality and fueled a critical examination of the discipline itself. Whereas traditional geopolitics treats geography as a nondiscursive terrain that preexists geopolitical claims, critical geopolitics approaches geographical knowledge as an essential part of the modern discourses of power. Thus, the 1990s produced numerous analyses of the complicity of geography and geographers in colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and Cold War superpower enmity (Livingstone 1993; Gregory 1994; Ó Tuathail 1996b).

Many of these early analyses were historical. They traced geopolitical theorizing to the emergence of European geopolitical imagination during the Age of Exploration (Gregory 1994; Agnew 2003; Heffernan 2007). They showed how geopolitical thought – the god's eye view of world as a structured whole that can be captured and managed from one (European) viewpoint – emerged as a part and parcel of European exploration and colonialism. Highlighting that many of the key territorial assumptions of international politics have European origins – often more specifically northern European origins – this work showed that the history of geopolitics is also the history of imposing these concepts inside and outside Europe. It also reexamined the key writers of classical geopolitics, illuminating the role of geographical knowledge in legitimizing the balance-of-power politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Holdar 1992; Crampton and Ó Tuathail 1996; Ó Tuathail 1996b).

The critical work on geopolitics was further fueled by the increased popularity of explicitly geopolitical claims in mainstream political analysis. The term critical geopolitics was first coined by Simon Dalby (1990) in his analysis of the representational strategies of the Committee on Present Danger (a conservative foreign policy interest group) in the 1970s and 1980s. By the late 1990s, after numerous articles and several further books (e.g. Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Ó Tuathail 1996b; Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998), critical geopolitics was a clearly discernible and rapidly growing strand within political geography.

Much of this early self-consciously critical work tackled the legacies of the Cold War. It highlighted the ways in which the Cold War and international politics in general were informed by entrenched geographical and territorial assumptions about East and West, freedom and unfreedom, development and underdevelopment. It showed that these supposedly universal concepts were highly parochial, coming out of a particular corner of Western intellectual and political circles. This early work also situated critical geopolitics in other strands of the social sciences, including International Relations (IR) theory, as well as feminist and postcolonial theory (Dalby 1991; Ó Tuathail 1996b). At the same time, critical geopolitics also differentiated itself from political theory by its more sustained engagement with political economy and the materiality of power more generally.

Although one can tentatively trace critical geopolitics back to the early 1990s, as has been done here, it has never connoted a clearly delimited or internally coherent research program. It is rather a set of approaches that borrow particularly, but not

exclusively, from poststructuralist strands of social theory. It is distinct from other themes in political geography not by its empirical focus but by its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. In broad terms, critical geopolitics does tend to differ from other strands of critical scholarship, such as Marxism, by its explicitly Foucauldian underpinnings. Like much of poststructuralist analysis, it pays greater attention to micro-level capillaries of power than to macro-level or global economic developments. However, there is no neat distinction between poststructuralist and other critical approaches. Thus, the subfield includes a range of works that explicitly address economic structures and/or utilize Marxist perspectives, among others (e.g. Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Herod et al. 1997; Agnew 2005b). The key trait of critical geopolitics is that it is not a theory-based approach – there is no “critical geopolitical” theory. The concerns of critical geopolitics are problem-based and present-oriented; they have to do not so much with sources and structures of power as with the everyday technologies of power relations. The field’s key claim is that although (classical) geopolitics proclaims to understand “geographical facts,” it in fact disengages from geographical complexities in favor of simplistic territorial demarcations of inside and outside, Us and Them. Critical geopolitics seeks to destabilize such binaries so that new space for debate and action can be established. Conceptualizing geopolitics as an interpretative cultural practice and a discursive construction of ontological claims, it foregrounds the necessarily contextual, conflictual, and messy spatiality of international politics (Herod et al. 1997; Toal and Agnew 2005; see also Campbell 1993). In so doing, it offers richer accounts of space and power than those allowed within mainstream geopolitical analysis. Geography in that conceptualization does not precede geopolitics as its natural basis. Rather, claims about geographical bases of politics are themselves geopolitical practices.

Nearly twenty years later, critical geopolitics has influenced every strand of geographic scholarship. From its beginnings as a primarily historical investigation informed by poststructuralist political theory, it has fanned out to virtually all aspects of human geography. The field is prominently represented in major political geographic journals like *Political Geography* and *Geopolitics*. There are now several textbooks that take an explicitly critical geopolitical position as their starting point (Agnew 2003; Dodds 2005; Ó Tuathail et al. 2006). Given the diversity of critical geopolitics, it is difficult and indeed pointless to catalogue its main themes and arguments. Any such themes are subject to voluminous internal debate. With these caveats in mind, and in an effort to nonetheless offer a tentative guide to the field, the essay proceeds to highlight some key clusters of work and lines of debate.

Locating Critical Geopolitics

Spatiality and Subjectivity

A substantial part of critical geopolitics seeks to unpack the rigid territorial assumptions of traditional geopolitical thinking. Thus, numerous analyses dissect post-Cold War geopolitics to reveal the continued reliance on binary understandings of power and spatiality, on notions of East and West, security and danger, freedom and oppression. More recently, geographic scholarship has foregrounded how the “war on terror” works with these same binaries (Agnew 2003; Gregory 2004; Gregory and Pred 2006).

In particular, much of critical geopolitics problematizes the statist conceptions of power in social sciences – a conceptualization that John Agnew (e.g. 1999) calls the “territorial trap.” Along with political geography more generally, critical geopolitics argues that spatiality is not confined to territoriality, either historically or today (Murphy 1996). It advances the drift away from rigidly territorialized understandings of politics

toward more nuanced understandings of the complex spatialities of power (Agnew 1999; 2005b; Dalby 2002; Elden 2005; Sparke 2005). State power, it shows, is not limited to or contained within the territory of the state; it is also exercised nonterritorially or in space-spanning networks (Kuus and Agnew 2008). It is applied differentially in different spheres and to different subjects (Gregory 2006; Painter 2006; Sparke 2006). The argument is not that geography or borders no longer matter. In fact, the celebrations of borderless world also equate spatiality with state territoriality, mistakenly taking the transformations of state power for the “end of geography” (Agnew 2005b). This applies not just to popular writers like Thomas Friedman (for a critique, see Sparke 2005). Proclamations of the transnational governmentality termed Empire by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) also betray insensitivity to the intricate topographies of power (Sparke 2005; Coleman and Agnew 2007). Critical geopolitics argues that the emerging forms of global governance do not “flatten” space; to the contrary, they increase spatial differentiation globally (Albert and Reuber 2007:550). In terms of the state, the key questions to address are not about the “real” sources, meanings or limits of state sovereignty in some general or universal sense, but, more specifically, about *how* state power is discursively and practically produced in territorial and nonterritorial forms (Kuus and Agnew 2008; Painter 2008). The task is to decenter but not to write off state power by examining its incoherencies and contradictions (Coleman 2005:202). Such investigations must also be mindful of the increasing complexity of regional integration and differentiation (Agnew 2005a). Regionality here does not refer to any pre-given constellation, such as the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It rather refers to the multilayered socioeconomic and cultural processes through which “regionness” is produced and sustained (Sidaway 2002; Albert and Reuber 2007:551).

This drift away from state-based analysis of world politics links up with interest in subjectivity and identity across the social sciences. For the assumption that international politics is a fundamentally territorial (as distinct from spatial) politics of states is closely bound up with the notion that states are the basic subjects of international politics (Kuus and Agnew 2008). Critical geopolitics departs from both of these assumptions. It does not examine the identities or actions of pre-given subjects; it rather investigates the processes by which political subjects are formed in the first place. It shows that the sovereign state is not the basis for, but the effect of, discourses of sovereignty, security, and identity. Put differently, state identity and interest do not precede foreign policy, but are forged through foreign policy practices. The enactments of state interest and identity are therefore among the key themes of critical geopolitics. The principal object of this scholarship is not the state as an object but statecraft as a multitude of practices (Coleman 2007:609).

As a part of this interest in political subjectivity and subject-formation, there has been tremendous interest in identity politics, that is, in the geographical demarcation of Self and Other, “our” space and “theirs.” This strand of work has been so voluminous that critical geopolitics is sometimes accused of overvaloring culture and identity at the expense of economic issues (e.g. Thrift 2000). Much of this “cultural” work has focused on the construction of national spaces and the geopolitical cultures of particular states (e.g. Campbell 1998; Sharp 2000; Toal 2003; Jeffrey 2008). It shows that geographical claims about cultural borders and homelands are central to narratives of national identity. There is also an extensive literature on bordering practices (Paasi 1998; 2005a; Newman 2006; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Agnew 2007b; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008). It argues that international borders are best viewed not as lines representing already existing political entities called states or nations. Rather, these entities themselves are constituted through bordering practices. In John Agnew’s (2007b:399) succinct formulation, “borders [...] make the nation rather than vice



versa.” It is indeed at borders first and foremost where these entities are defined: where the inside is demarcated from the outside and Self is differentiated from the Other. This process is not only about exclusion. It is also about borrowing and adaptation – for example, of the concepts of statehood and nationhood. Borders thus have multiple functions: they serve as barriers, but they must also necessarily allow movement across in order to reproduce the entities they supposedly contain. Statecraft is being activated and transformed at multiple scales at and far away from borders (Coleman 2007). Borders do not simply differentiate space. They are spaces where both different *as well as* similar conceptions of citizenship and belonging are operationalized. State borders are becoming markedly more porous in some spheres and for some groups, while being securitized for other flows of goods, people, and ideas (Sparke 2006).

These processes of geopolitical subject-making are not limited to nation-states. On the supranational level, region-building processes, such as the processes of European integration, are deeply geopolitical exercises in the same way (Moisio 2002; Kuus 2007). European integration, for example, may well overcome nationalist narratives of territory and identity, but it entails powerful claims about Europe as a territorial and cultural unit (Bialasiewicz 2008; Heffernan 2007). This process is a particularly fascinating geopolitical project because it explicitly moves beyond the state-centered understandings of space. The power of the EU is the governmentalized power of technical and political standards. There is an emerging literature that explores the intricate reworking of political, economic, and juridical borders inside and around the EU. This reworking is richly illustrative of processes of regionalization and the respatialization of borders today (Agnew 2005b).

Given the large-scale violence engendered by the “war on terror,” the scholarship on subject-making includes substantial work on militarization. It seeks to analyse the current period of militarization without uncritically reifying the role of the state in this process (Flint 2003; Kuus 2009). It focuses not so much on military institutions and military conflict – although these issues are undoubtedly important – as on the *structures of legitimacy* on which military force depends. For as Enloe (2004:220) points out, most of the militarization of social life, a process in which social practices gain value and legitimacy by being associated with military force, occurs in peacetime. To understand the dynamics of this process, then, we need to look at the civilian rather than the military. Critical geopolitics documents the explicit glorification and implicit normalization of military force and military institutions throughout society (Hannah 2006; Cowen and Gilbert 2007; Flusty 2008; Gregory 2008; Sidaway 2008; Pain and Smith 2008). It also exposes the intellectual apparatus of militarization; for example, an integral part of academic geography is the development of the US military-industrial complex (Barnes and Farish 2006). This work is part and parcel of the growing work on security as a key concept and trope in political life today. The “war on terror” has clearly fueled (uncritical) geopolitical analysis that operates with explicitly militaristic and imperialist language (Retort 2005; Dalby 2007). This analysis maps some parts of the world in an imperial register as spaces in need of military pacification; understanding that process requires that we first unpack such maps (Gregory 2004; Dalby 2007). Geographers were latecomers to the critical study of security, but there are now a number of specifically geographic studies on the processes of securitization. They flesh out the inherent spatiality of these processes – the ways in which practices of securitization necessarily locate security and danger (e.g. Dalby 2002; Gregory 2004; Kuus 2007; Dodds and Ingram 2009).

Although the bodies of work above do not make up one set of literature, they all investigate the processes by which people are socialized as members of territorial groups, be it at subnational, national, or broader regional level. Their focus is not simply on what various actors think or believe. It is rather on the discursive construc-

tions of ontological claims – the ways in which material reality of politics is problematized within geopolitical discourses (Toal and Agnew 2005). The argument in that work is not that objects cannot exist externally to thought or that they are not produced through material forces. The contention rather is that objects cannot be represented as outside any discursive formation (Campbell 1993:9).

Geographical Scope

Much of critical geopolitics focuses empirically on the core states of the West, especially the US. This is not surprising given that US foreign policy, scholarship, and popular culture have been hegemonic in the exercise of geopolitics for over sixty years now. As Agnew points out (2007a:138), much of what goes for geopolitical writing involves projecting US context and US interests onto the world at large. Geographers have therefore looked closely at the geographs of American political elites and popular culture, as well as the processes through which these are projected onto the world at large.

In parallel, there has been substantial interest in broadening critical geopolitics empirically outside the core states. If critical geopolitics is to disrupt commonsense geopolitical narratives, it must first undermine the tacit assumption of American (or Western) universalism that underpins these narratives. Furthermore, numerous other countries have rich geopolitical literatures. There are now substantial literatures on key states such as Britain, Germany, France, and Russia (see Hepple 2000; Ingram 2001; Dodds 2002; Bassin 2003; O'Loughlin et al. 2005). In addition to these obvious cases, and perhaps more interestingly, there are also numerous studies of geopolitical traditions of smaller and historically more peripheral states (see Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998; Dodds and Atkinson 2000; see also Berg and Oras 2000; Megoran 2005; Sidaway and Power 2005; Kuus 2007). This work amply demonstrates both the consistency and diversity of geopolitical thought. In terms of the former, for example, claims of national exceptionalism or external threat are extraordinarily consistent throughout the twentieth century. As for diversity, geopolitical practices are deeply rooted in the specific political circumstances of particular countries. They involve not only the predictable right-wing tradition of geopolitical analyses, but also a critical and radical tradition of geopolitics, as for example in the pages of the French journal *Herodote* (Hepple 2000). Some claims are repeated, but their specific political functions and effects vary considerably. By highlighting such variation, critical geopolitics shows that there is no single tradition of geopolitical thought or practice. There are, rather, different geopolitical cultures owing to specific geographical contexts and intellectual traditions.

These case studies notwithstanding, critical geopolitics still tends to concentrate on North America and Western Europe. This narrow focus has been pointed out repeatedly since the 1990s (Dodds and Sidaway 1994; Dowler and Sharp 2001; Chaturvedi 2003; Kuus 2004), but it is still relevant today. The case studies of other countries, as valuable as they are, have not shifted the center of gravity of the subfield as a whole. They tend to be cited mostly as examples of particular empirical contexts rather than as instances of broader geopolitical theorizing. The subfield in this sense mirrors the focus on the Anglo-American realm in human geography more broadly (Paasi 2005b). This is a problem because it impoverishes our understanding of the very geographical complexities that critical geopolitics seeks to foreground. If critical geopolitics is about geographical context, then it must be empirically and theoretically firmly grounded in contexts outside North America and Western Europe. Ideas move and their political uses and functions change in the process (Agnew 2007a). Disrupting the hegemonic status of certain geopolitical claims requires that we show their empirical flatness as an integral part of their conceptual primitivism.

This is not simply a matter of cataloging distinct geopolitical cultures: British, Russian, Estonian, and so on. Such glamorization of local knowledge would be as problematic as the assumption of geopolitical universals. Rather, in addition to tracing the geopolitical traditions of different countries, and perhaps more importantly, we must also examine the power relationships between centers and margins of dominant geopolitical discourses. For example, as Sergei Prozorov (2007) compellingly shows, contemporary Russian geopolitical thought has as much to do with Russia's relations with the West as it has with any quintessentially Russian identity or interests. At the same time, although Russians work with hegemonic concepts from the West, they do not necessarily adopt these concepts at face value. Geopolitics is not simply written in the concert of great powers and then handed down to the smaller, relatively marginal, states. Geopolitical discourses in central locations, such as North America and Western Europe, are not only constitutive of such discourses elsewhere, but are also in part constituted by these "other" discourses.

This foregrounds the role of political actors on the margins – outside the main power centers of the US and Western Europe. These actors do not simply bear witness to dominant geopolitical discourses; they also appropriate these discourses for their own purposes. Put differently, these actors do not only consume geopolitical concepts; they also produce these concepts. We therefore have to unravel the maneuvers of relatively marginal actors vis-à-vis the dominant narratives of the center, and vice versa (Kuus 2004). Concepts are not misinterpreted, but they are interpreted in particular ways. For example, the work of Mackinder or Samuel Huntington has been utilized for particular nationalist goals in a variety of contexts (for examples, see Ingram 2001; Moisiu 2002; Dodds and Sidaway 2004; Megoran 2004; Kuus 2007). What functions as state-of-the-art geopolitical thinking in particular social contexts has as much to do with such appropriation as it does with the original objects of appropriation. In the Central Europe of the 1990s, for example, these were not simply "Western" views, but a very narrow range of Western views that were influential there. These views did not present themselves to the people in the marginal states; they were translated, literally and figuratively, by local intellectuals of statecraft. For example, to say that Huntington's thesis of civilizational clash is influential in Central Europe tells us little. We need to understand how specifically it has been made influential locally. Huntington's thesis would not be as influential in Central Europe if it was not actively promoted by influential individuals in the region. The Huntingtonian arguments of these individuals, in turn, were legitimized by Huntington's prestigious position at the center of the Western security establishment. The reverse flow of information and influence is at play as well. Local intellectuals of statecraft are often the main sources of the so-called local insight to Western scholars and journalists. They are key players in mapping places for Western scholars and diplomats alike. Hegemonic discourses of the center are so powerful in part because they are bolstered on the margins. In terms of Huntington, then, being cited at a putative civilizational faultline like Central Europe has greatly enhanced the standing of Huntington's thesis in the West itself. Both sides – the center and the margin – need each other for the Huntingtonian narrative to work (Kuus 2007: ch. 3).

This example underscores the need to examine how broad politically charged categories, such as security, identity, and geopolitics, are problematized and used by different groups in different circumstances. In particular, it shows that this process has to do not only with the substance of the ideas but also with the power relationships among the actors who promote them. The task is not only to look at more actors – not only the United States but also Hungary or Morocco, for instance – but also to unpack the *power relationships* among these actors. In other words, we need to look not at "marginal perspectives" as such, but to flesh out the relationships between centers and margins (Paasi 2005b; Parker 2008). We need to analyze how some Western

views become “state of the art” while other views do not even reach political debates in the margins – and vice versa. To do so is not to romanticize “local knowledge” but to acknowledge the complexity of knowledge production.

This highlights the need to investigate the practitioners of geopolitics – from presidents and foreign ministers, through a wide range of journalists, government officials, leaders of nongovernmental organizations, and activists, to the so-called average people. Arguments about the discursive construction of social reality remain flat unless they illuminate how this process is shaped by specific political agents. The agency or capacity to act of all these actors is the realm of numerous debates in critical geopolitics. This is the subject of the next section.

Geopolitics and Agency

Intellectuals of Statecraft

Geopolitics is traditionally conceived as a highbrow matter – too important and too specialized for a lay person. An aura of dignity sets off the statesman from the politician (Kuklick 2006). Foreign policy is in substantial measure a realm of elite-level pronouncements and well-established state institutions. Although the practices of modern state are highly diffuse and operate throughout social life, foreign policy has remained a relatively concentrated realm of specialized elites. These elite circles extend beyond elected and appointed officials; they include academics, journalists, and various analysts and pundits who gain social acceptance for their (presumed) expertise in international affairs. Located within the government apparatus as well as universities and think tanks, these intellectuals of statecraft explain international politics to the domestic audience and translate (figuratively and sometimes literally) national debates to foreign audiences. They offer a map of the world as a collection of particular kinds of places, and they narrate the dominant story of the nation’s place in that world.

Not surprisingly, a substantial part of critical geopolitics has focused empirically on intellectuals of statecraft – the academics, politicians, government officials and various commentators who regularly participate and comment on the activities of statecraft. This is the case especially with the early work, which indeed defined geopolitics in terms of that group of professionals – as the study of how intellectuals of statecraft represent international politics (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992:193). In order to unpack the influence of that group in more detail, that work loosely divided geopolitical reasoning into formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. In this division, formal geopolitics denotes formal highbrow analysis, practical geopolitics refers to the reasoning of politicians, pundits and specialized journals, and popular geopolitics encompasses the ways in which world politics is spatialized in popular culture. The three levels are closely intertwined (as will be elaborated below) and none should be treated as primary. This notwithstanding, practical geopolitics – the realm of intellectuals of statecraft – is particularly effective because it combines the clout and authoritative tone of formal geopolitical reasoning with commonsense metaphors from popular culture. Critical geopolitics has thus paid close attention to the production of geopolitical knowledge in these elite circles. Even today, a large share of the critical scholarship focuses on the cultural and organizational processes by which foreign policy is made in states. It investigates the geographers of elected and appointed government elites as well as popular commentators like Robert Kaplan, Samuel Huntington, Thomas Friedman or Thomas Barnett. In one sense, this work dovetails with critical analyses of intellectuals of statecraft within IR (e.g. Campbell 1998; 1999). Yet it also differs from these other critiques by focusing explicitly on the spatial assumptions underpinning their arguments (Roberts et al. 2003; Sparke 2005; Dalby 2007).

The point of this scholarship is not to uncover what the “wise men” think. It rather dissects the assumptions that enable and constrain elite geopolitical practices. True, even a cursory investigation of geopolitical practices quickly reveals that these assumptions are not homogeneous. Disagreements and power struggles among different state institutions, think tanks, news organizations or schools of scholarship are well known (for geographical analyses, see Dalby 1990; Flint 2005; Gregory 2006). Indeed, as Gertjan Dijkink (2004) points out, a great deal of geopolitical writing is penned by elites who are frustrated with received wisdom (see also Coleman 2004). However, although intellectuals of statecraft do not work in the same end of the political spectrum, they tend to draw on and embellish a loosely coherent set of myths about nature, culture, and geography (Gusterson and Besteman 2005:2). As a result, vigorous debates are often contained in simplistic unexamined assumptions about geography and territoriality (Campbell 1999; Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005).

A problem with this emphasis on intellectuals of statecraft is that it focuses on a very narrow range of geopolitical actors. In response, recent work has paid greater attention to geopolitical practices outside state structures (and these strands of work will be discussed below). In addition, there have also been attempts to analyze state bureaucracies in more detail. Especially in the context of increased state power in the realms of security, state institutions require renewed scrutiny as sites of geopolitical practice (Agnew 2005b; Coleman 2005; Retort 2005). This attention to the fragmented and articulated institutional structures of geopolitics links up with analyses of policy. For policy impinges on all aspects of self and society. It shapes not just societal outcomes but, more importantly, the processes that produce these outcomes. To study policy is to investigate not a ready-made blueprint but a dynamic and unpredictable process. In geography as well as other social sciences, there is today a growing recognition of the need for utilizing ethnographic methods to understand policy (Megoran 2006; see also Mitchell 2005; Agnew 2007a; Neumann 2007). Ethnographic work is especially helpful for dislodging studies from the stereotype that policy professionals merely execute pre-given political and juridical blueprints without any significant agency of their own.

Ultimately, this closer focus on policy procedures is about sensitivity to specific geographical contexts. Such contexts include the personal backgrounds, interests, and identities of the individuals who actually articulate geopolitical claims. Intellectuals of statecraft are not synonymous with the state and we cannot assume that they merely voice some pre-given state interest. Rather, their geopolitical practices need to be carefully contextualized in their specific societal settings. For example, we cannot understand American geopolitics of the Cold War era without considering the personal anticommunism of some of the leading writers – in some cases because of their personal contacts among Russian émigré circles (Crampton and Ó Tuathail 1996; Ó Tuathail 2000). We likewise cannot comprehend the culturalist flavor of Central European geopolitics without considering the arts and humanities backgrounds of many of the region’s leading politicians (Kuus 2007:ch. 5). In that example, humanities backgrounds give these individuals special legitimacy to speak in the name of culture and identity. The culturalist narratives of foreign policy in Central Europe – for example, the “return to Europe” narrative – points to the need to carefully unpack such cultural resources.

In addition to adding nuance and color to analyses, there are at least two further reasons why a close examination of agency in geopolitics must include in-depth studies of intellectuals of statecraft. The first reason has to do with their influence. Other actors undoubtedly contest the dominant geopolitical discourses, but their arguments are still positioned in relation to intellectuals of statecraft. Over the long run, the institutional and cultural resources available to them serve to systematically push the game in their direction. As James Scott (2005:401) puts it, even though the dominant



arguments do not reach the ground uncompromised, “can there be much doubt about which players in this [. . .] encounter hold most of the high cards?” The “war on terror” has further highlighted the crucial importance of a few state agencies, particularly those connected to the national security apparatus, in mainstream conceptions of world affairs (Gregory and Pred 2006; Coleman 2007; Dalby 2007). It is easy to say that we need to look beyond elites and beyond the state. Yet this process of producing hegemonic norms outside the sphere of the state is still heavily influenced by state elites.

The second reason why we need more studies of these professionals has to do with their diversity. Simply speaking of power discourses can overlook the conscious manipulation of (geo)political claims by specific well-placed individuals. If we broaden our definition of geopolitics from the narrowest circles of officials in the highest echelons of the state apparatus, we need to analyze more diverse settings of policy. These settings include immigration, trade and aid policies, as well as international and supra-national institutions – and all of these in addition to locations like foreign ministries. The study of geopolitics must not be limited to the handful of men at the key nodes of state power, but neither should it exclude these men. Given the relatively closed nature of foreign policy, challenges to dominant geopolitical narratives come as much from the inside as from the outside of policy structures (see Ó Tuathail 1999; Dijkink 2004). The challenge, then, is not to bypass intellectuals of statecraft, but, to the contrary, to offer more nuanced accounts of them. There is no easy way around the methodological difficulties (e.g. access) in attempting such accounts, but they should be pursued nonetheless. Critical geopolitics is indeed increasingly engaged with fieldwork in diverse empirical settings (Megoran 2006; see also Pain and Smith 2008).

To argue for a closer engagement with intellectuals of statecraft is not to imply that we should try to uncover their “identities” in some abstract sense disconnected from their social context. It is likewise not an attempt to uncover some “real story” in the corridors of power. It is rather to argue for a closer examination of the interconnections between geopolitical practices and the agents of these practices (Agnew 2007a). It is to more closely consider the daily production of geopolitical knowledge – the mundane repetition of claims not just in official speeches, but also around the coffee machine (e.g. Neumann 2007). This would help us to bring into focus the multiple structures of authority and legitimacy through which geopolitical arguments work.

Popular Geopolitics and Anti-geopolitics

The same air of power and secrecy that seems to set geopolitics apart from “normal boring” politics also feeds popular fascination with it. Although explicitly geopolitical arguments evoke exclusive expertise, the categories of security and danger, community and enmity, Us and Them on which these claims rely are formed at the popular level. The “expert” statements would not hold if they were not legitimized at the popular level. This duality, whereby security and geopolitics excite popular fascination and play on popular beliefs, and yet the authority to speak on them is relatively limited, is a necessary part of geopolitical arguments. To be effective, these arguments need both sides.

Not surprisingly, then, in addition to the scholarship that draws empirically on the rhetorical strategies of intellectuals of statecraft, there is also a rich body of work on popular geopolitics – that is, the geopolitical narratives that circulate in popular culture. Investigating various cultural products as well as their producers and audiences, it offers insights into a range of locations and agents of geopolitics outside the realm of the state: popular magazines, newspaper reporters, cartoonists, film directors, and social activists of various kinds (see Power and Crampton 2005). Thus, there is



extensive literature on the narratives that animate James Bond films (Dodds 2003; 2006), the Captain America comic strip (Dittmer 2005; 2007), or the *Readers Digest* magazine (Sharp 2000). There is also a substantial popular geopolitics scholarship on the “war on terror.” This work situates the spatiality of everyday life and popular culture specifically in the current period of militarization and political violence (e.g. Toal 2003; Falah et al. 2006; Flusty 2008; Pain and Smith 2008; Dodds and Ingram 2009). In that effort to understand current political violence, geographers are also paying more attention to the linkages between religion and geopolitical thought (e.g. Agnew 2006 and the special issue it introduces). Much of this work analyzes the structure of the texts and the techniques used to make them credible: the metaphors, the repetitions, the claims of authority and authenticity. It thereby brings into relief the broader cultural milieu in which particular geopolitical claims thrive.

One part of this inquiry into popular culture and everyday life is the work on resistance geopolitics or anti-geopolitics. Paul Routledge (2006:234) defines anti-geopolitics as “an ambiguous political and cultural force within civil society that articulates forms of counter-hegemonic struggle.” By civil society, Routledge means those institutions that are not part of either material production in the economy or the formal sphere of the state. By counter-hegemonic, he means resistances that challenge the material and cultural power of dominant geopolitical interests or states and their elites (2006:234). The work focusing explicitly on resistance geopolitics is still relatively slim, but there are studies of activist groups (Routledge 2008; Slater 2004: ch. 8), journalists (Ó Tuathail 1996a; Dodds 1996), as well as the so-called average citizens (Mamadouh 2003; Secor 2004) who challenge dominant geopolitical representations.

A key challenge in this scholarship, as in resistance studies more broadly, is to avoid glamorizing resistance and the civil society in general: to show the diversity of resistance, the entanglements of domination and resistance, and the futility of looking for the “self-evidently good” (Sharp et al. 2000; Kuus 2008). For elite discourses are not only resisted but also reproduced by nongovernmental organizations in the civil society. Moreover, resistance involves much more than conscious overt dissent. In today’s society it is increasingly difficult to stand heroically on the edge of the system of power one opposes and to practice dissent as an overt, conscience-driven rejection of an official practice. Rather, we need to look at passiveness, irony, and anonymity as resources for resistance. To do justice to the entanglements of domination and resistance, critical geopolitics increasingly foregrounds the practices that “pursue a certain anonymity, prefer tactics of evasion and obfuscation over those of repudiation and confrontation, and seek a loose or vague or superficial rather than definitive, weighty or substantial identity” (Bennett 1992:152–3).

Feminist Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics emerged out of the same postpositivist and anti-essentialist intellectual ferment as feminist work. It undermines the “view from nowhere” of the traditional geopolitical reasoning by offering more situated and embodied accounts of power. Yet ironically, the initial wave of critical geopolitics in the 1990s focused empirically almost exclusively on male intellectuals of statecraft at the centers of state power. In part, this focus has to do with its subject matter – Cold War superpower politics was a heavily male dominated affair. However, the effect of studying such a small group of individuals was not only to describe but also to tacitly prescribe geopolitics as a narrow field of male practice and analysis. From early on, feminist research has sought to broaden the conception of agency in critical geopolitics beyond such a narrow field of inquiry. There is now a discernible subfield of feminist geopolitics.

This work – and feminist political geography of which it is a part – argues that the



focus on policy elites implies an untenable conceptual division between the public sphere of international relations and the private sphere of everyday life. As a result, even though critical geopolitics compellingly challenges the power relations embedded in dominant geopolitical narratives, it still tends to offer a disembodied “spectator” theory of knowledge (Hyndman 2004:6; see also Dowler and Sharp 2001; Gilmartin and Kofman 2004; Staeheli et al. 2004). In other words, despite the subfield’s avowed critical stance toward power structures, critical geopolitics to some extent reproduces the view from the center that it critiques.

Feminist geopolitics aims to rectify this gap by engaging closely with actors and locations outside the formal sphere of the state (Hyndman 2007). It takes the central tenet of feminist work – that the personal is also political – to posit that the personal is also geopolitical (e.g. Sharp 2005). Approaching the so-called average people as political subjects, it seeks to understand “how political life plays out through a multiplicity of alternative, gendered political spaces” (Hyndman 2000; Secor 2001:192). By highlighting the geopolitical practices of those located outside the top echelons of the state apparatus, it brings into focus the institutional structure through which the illusory division between political and “nonpolitical” spheres, or the realm of “geopolitics” and “normal” or “domestic” politics is constructed (Hyndman 2004; Sharp 2005). As a body of work, feminist geopolitics shifts the focus from the operations of elite agents to the constructions of political subjects in everyday political practice (Kofman and Staeheli 2004). It thereby links up with the broader efforts to produce more embodied accounts of power (e.g. Marston 2003; Pratt 2003; Mountz 2004; Staeheli et al. 2004). This strand of work is relatively new and there are few empirical investigations to follow up on its theoretical exposés (but see Secor 2004; Hyndman 2007; Sundberg 2009). However, feminist geopolitics is clearly one of the growing fields of inquiry within critical geopolitics.

Critical Geopolitics as the Fragmented Mainstream

This essay charted the development of critical geopolitics as a subfield of human geography since the 1990s. It highlighted the field’s intellectual roots as well as its engagements with other strands of inquiry within and beyond geography. To discuss critical geopolitics as a distinct subfield is not to essentialize or to homogenize it. To the contrary, perhaps the principal conclusion of the essay is that we should resist temptations to delimit critical geopolitics by subject matter, theoretical concerns or methodology. Such limitations would create an illusion of internal coherence and external differentiation that this work does not possess or claim. Critical geopolitics is concerned not with power in general but with the operation of power relations in particular places. To treat critical geopolitics as a subfield of human geography is rather to foreground the sustained engagement in geography with the spatiality of power and politics on the global scale.

The essay also highlighted some ongoing debates on the geographical scope and theoretical reach of critical geopolitics. In particular, it has been argued that more work still needs to be done to illuminate the diversity of geopolitical arguments in different countries and in different spheres of social life. Debates on agency in geopolitics – that is, questions about the capacity of various groups to participate in and influence the production of geopolitical discourses – form an integral part of that effort. There has been indeed a discernible shift toward a more explicit analytical emphasis not just on political processes, but, more specifically, on political agency within these processes (Albert and Reuber 2007:553). The various strands of work on agency all problematize the notion of pre-given political subjects to investigate the processes of subject-making. They all share the sustained attention on nonstate and



nonelite actors in the spatialization of world politics. As a field, critical geopolitics has engaged more closely with not just formal and practical geopolitical reasoning but also with the prosaic and mundane geopolitics of everyday life. This line of inquiry requires considerable methodological diversity, as well as sensitivity to the geography of knowledge production (Agnew 2007a).

The heterogeneity of critical geopolitics is central to its vibrancy and success. This field is not about producing core texts but about questioning the assumptions that underpin geopolitical claims. Through such efforts, critical geopolitics has emerged from its roots in the poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial critique of traditional geopolitics to become an integral part of mainstream human geography. To study geopolitics within the discipline of geography today is to study it critically. Even treatments that are not labeled “critical” as such draw from various anti-essentialist non-positivist approaches to power, be it various strands of Marxism, feminism, or postcolonial work, or world systems theory (e.g. Flint 2005; Cowen and Gilbert 2007). These analyses may not necessarily seek the label of critical geopolitics, but this is not because they are not critical but because their critical stance can be taken for granted. The debate in geography has moved beyond critiquing mainstream geopolitics; it is now about how specifically such critique can be combined with effective visions for alternative political spaces.

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