Introduction:
Geopolitics and its Critics

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Introduction

Geopolitics, as an intellectual field, enjoys a mixed reputation. Lionized by some as an insightful guide into the geographical study of strategic relations between states, it has been castigated by others for being an accomplice of authoritarianism and fascism. For the American geographer, Richard Hartshorne, it was an intellectual poison and thus best avoided for the scholarly health of the unwary (Hartshorne 1954; Dodds and Atkinson 2000). While it possible to chart a pre-history to geopolitics, most agree that its genesis lies with a particular conflagration of social Darwinism and late nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle Europe (Parker 1985; Heffernan 2000). Coined by the Swedish legal jurist, Rudolf Kjellén, geopolitics was infused with a social Darwinist preoccupation for the survival prospects of societies and states. When combined with ongoing imperial rivalries, alongside the institutional development of geography as a university subject, geopolitical studies attracted a corpus of influential writers including Halford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan and Friedrich Ratzel. Their insights into the modern world-system, the role of geographical factors such as resources and location, and the prospects for great powers such as Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and challengers have proven remarkably durable, even if they have also attracted critics and critique alike (for recent reviews, see Kearns 2009; Dodds 2010).

Before embarking on a discussion of contemporary writings on geopolitics, and specifically the literature associated with critical geopolitics, this introduction offers a brief survey of what has been termed classical geopolitics. We tease out the earliest writings, which self-consciously engage with ideas and practices later to be considered emblematic of a ‘geopolitical tradition’. As part of that initial tour d’horizon, we highlight how and why the term ‘geopolitics’ attracted opprobrium, especially in the period leading up to the Second World War and thereafter. Understanding the chequered history of geopolitics is essential for the second section of the introduction, because that explains some of the core concerns of critical geopolitics, a body of work that is overtly questioning of classical
The earliest classical geopolitical writings were informed by imperial preoccupations and social Darwinist anxieties about the survival of states and empires. Writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the German writer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) expressed some of the dominant trends in classical geopolitics including racial and environmental determinism. Distinguishing between settled and nomadic communities, Ratzel argued that the settled Aryan races in particular were vulnerable to the marauding and thus hyper-mobile Ural–Altaic races. As a consequence of this perceived vulnerability, the Aryan races were the earliest to develop state-like structures designed to organize defence against mobile and, in all probability, threatening others. Ratzel contended that contemporary Germany should strive to secure additional land and resources so that it was better able to secure the survival of the nation-state in the face of eastern races and their traditions of mobile existence. The term *Lebensraum* (living space) is particularly associated with the writings of Ratzel as a consequence of his interest in the interrelationship between environment, state and culture.

While Ratzel’s writings were infused with racial and environmental indices, the British writer Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) highlighted another aspect of classical geopolitics, namely a concern for grand strategy. Mackinder, a reader in geography at Oxford University and director of the London School of Economics, was primarily worried about Britain and the British Empire (Blouet 1987; Kearns 2009). Mindful of gathering imperial competition, Mackinder warned that traditional sea powers such as Britain were under threat from new land-based powers that might, with the help of new transport technologies such as the railway, be able to mobilize their populations and resources in a decisive manner. Intrigued by the historic significance of migrant empires such as the Mongols, Mackinder divined a future possibility based on new great powers (such as the latter day Soviet Union) using what he termed the ‘heartland’ to project power over the European continent. Vast quantities of coal, oil, gas and other minerals, transported by railways, would quite literally empower those who controlled the heartland. In his famous epithet, Mackinder warned his readers that ‘who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World’ (Mackinder 1919). As a keen observer of global political machinations, Mackinder feared that either Germany or Russia might emerge as a global power in charge of a resource-rich fortress in the...
middle of the Euro-Asian landmass. This prediction was subsequently picked up by American-based Cold War observers and embedded in ‘containment’ policies and strategies (Dodds 2007).

These vignettes of two classical geopolitical writers highlight the dominant strands of classical geopolitics – on the one hand, social Darwinism and environmental determinism and, on the other hand, imperial rivalries and great-power projection. In the case of the former, the earliest geopolitical writers were overwhelmingly informed by racial and environmental determinism. Most contributors were eager to warn their political masters and the wider public about the challenges facing their societies from competitor races and states, both past and present. Geopolitics was, and for many authors still is, the study of statecraft and the divination of patterns of global politics. If geopolitics has an intellectual value, it lies in a capacity to uncover the challenges facing the state and empire and display a willingness to use force if necessary to protect vital interests. As with the earliest realist writers in the discipline of international relations (IR), there is plenty of evidence of scepticism towards the capacity of international mechanisms and bodies such as the League of Nations to cement pacific relations between states (for a review, see Brown and Ainley 2008). In an uncertain and highly competitive world, it was judged to be far better to prepare for the worst rather than hope that international law and treaties would regulate effectively the competitive instincts between states and societies.

**Intellectual poison**

The controversial reputation inherited by geopolitics owes much to a particular moment in the inter-war period when the subject became linked with more widespread fascist and authoritarian strands of thought in Germany, Italy and Japan. With its focus on territorial and resource-related factors, geopolitical thought attracted the interest of writers such as the German military officer and professor of geography at the University of Munich, Karl Haushofer. In 1924 he founded the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, a journal that was to explore how Germany might recover from the humiliating loss of the First World War and the sorts of geographical strategies need to stimulate revival. Geopolitics, according to Haushofer, should be an accomplice of the state and encourage an expansion of Germany, possibly leading to leadership of the Euro-Asian landmass in alliance with Russia and Japan. Combining the global strategizing of Mackinder with social Darwinist insights including the state as a living organism, a geopolitical perspective armed with maps and statistics was believed to be an indispensible part of the state and its intellectual armoury. As with Fascist Italy, this academic interest was supplemented by popularizing trends with a new generation of school children being instructed on the spatial extent of a Greater Germany and Italy (Atkinson 1995). Under this worldview, the state needed to expand into new territory and acquire new resources in order to restore itself to health.
Haushofer’s personal connection to Hitler’s trusted friend, Rudolf Hess, ensured that geopolitics became a poisoned chalice. For American-based geographers, including refugees from Nazi Germany, geopolitics was at best a ‘pseudo science’ and at worst a ‘Nazi science’. Either way it stood accused of acting as a willing accomplice to the worst excesses of territorial domination and spatial expansionism. With the onset of the Second World War, this jaundiced view of geopolitics hardened. American and European geographers such as Isaiah Bowman, Derwent Whittlesey, George Kiss and Jean Gottman warned that geographers should steer clear of the subject matter and concentrate their energies on developing a scientific political geography (as noted in Dodds 2010). While this alleged association between Hitler and geopolitical scheming was perhaps not as straightforward as implied by the critics, it did prevent the Roosevelt administration from commissioning a special study of German geopolitics in order to consider its resonance and influence amongst Hitler’s cabal. Senior geographers such as Karl Haushofer, while hardly bystanders, did not share Hitler’s preoccupation with race and hatred of Jewry. They were, however, eager to put forward proposals for Germany to restore its proper place in the world and supportive of the idea that the country needed to expand into new territories. Popular magazines such as Reader’s Digest played their part in warning international readers that the Nazis created a shadowy Institute of Geopolitics in Munich and that there were a ‘thousand scientists behind Hitler’ using charts, maps, statistics and plans to facilitate further expansion and conquest (on Reader’s Digest more generally, see Sharp 2000). Ironically, given the academic voices of disapproval, the US government considered creating a Geopolitical Institute in 1940, and established a Geopolitical Section of the Military Intelligence Service with the explicit purpose to ‘study physical, economic, political and ethnological geography in order to advise on measures of national security and assurance of continued peace in the post-war world’ (cited in Kearns 2011: 613).

Accused of being an accomplice to Nazism, geopolitics became an academic field best avoided for many geographers in the USA and Europe. The end result was twofold. First, there was a general reluctance to use the term ‘geopolitics’ explicitly and, second, attention turned to seeking a new social scientific language based on modelling and testing that would replace any notion that the state was a living organism. For much of the post-1945 period, explicit references to geopolitics were limited in number and scope even if well-known figures such as George Kennan were to talk and write about continental powers, the Euro-Asian landmass and resource potential of regions. As Richard Hartshorne reminded his readers: ‘We may have produced no atom bombs in political geography, but the field is nonetheless strewn with dynamite – it is no place for sophomores to play with matches’ (cited in Kearns 2011: 614).

Cold War revival and beyond

Henry Kissinger is famously credited with making geopolitics respectable again in US policy-making and academic circles (1979). In the early 1970s geopolitics
became a short hand for highlighting great power rivalries and associated regional dimensions, especially in the Middle East and South-East Asia. As National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford administrations, Kissinger was well placed to survey the global political scene and ruminate on the geopolitical consequences and implications, more often than not involving military force and assertion. As Leslie Hepple reminds us, Kissinger’s geopolitics was often fuzzy and vague, even if it had as its basis an interest in superpower rivalries and the global stage (1986). Other contemporaries such as President Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, also used geopolitical language to promote his view that control of the ‘heartland’ (a point of view articulated by Mackinder some 70 years earlier) was critical to the future patterns of global politics. As Brzezinski noted, ‘whoever controls Eurasia dominates the globe. If the Soviet Union captures the peripheries of this landmass … it would not only win control of vast human, economic and military resources but also gain access to the geostrategic approaches to the Western Hemisphere – the Atlantic and Pacific’ (1986: 22). For the USA to retain its global prominence, it would need, by force if necessary, to ensure that vital resource supplies and territorial access were secure. Moreover, as US covert support for anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s suggests, it would require investment in opportunities that might disrupt any attempt by the Soviet Union to project further its domination of the Eurasian landmass.

The implication of this resurrection of interest in geopolitics in the 1970s was to remind us why geopolitics continues to inspire a great deal of interest and, as noted earlier, distrust. If there was a revival (acknowledging the established interest in the field in the former Soviet Union and Latin America), then it was based on a predilection for global perspectives; scepticism about international diplomacy and law; an understanding of power relations as a zero-sum game; a belief in the importance of resources such as oil, gas, coal and minerals; a stark contrast between land- and sea-based powers; and finally a willingness to urge intervention (or sometimes non-intervention) where national security interests were at stake (for a critique, see Kearns 2011).

The net result is to consolidate a particular version of geopolitics in which a global view of the world is essential. Thus, the USA and its rivals such as China recognize that an interconnected and highly globalized world means that everywhere is potentially of interest to superpowers. Notwithstanding the global dimension, the world is also a dangerous place and one in which a new generation of post-Cold War writers such as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis have warned is composed of rival civilizations and faiths that are antithetical to the Christian West (e.g. Huntington 1997).

Questioning the persistence of this sort of geopolitics has become the leitmotif of critical geopolitics (Jones and Sage 2010). Recognizing that many so-called geopolitical writers were mobilizing simplistic understandings of places and their networks, critical geopolitical scholarship challenged those preoccupations, highlighting for example the resilience of earlier imperial, nationalist and racist strands of geopolitical thinking. Critics also highlighted the lack of understanding of geography in the intellectually suspect propositions of ‘inevitable’ spread of
political ideology or behaviour as a result of spatial form of proximity (falling like dominoes or spreading like disease) so that pre-emptive action could be posited as a defensive re-action. Postcolonial writers such as Edward Said became intellectually influential in critical geopolitics precisely because of his questioning of Western colonial discourses and perspectives on regions such as the Middle East and South-West Asia. Critical geopolitics is, in very substantial measure, a reaction against those geopolitical strands while acknowledging the need to carefully contextualize earlier geopolitical engagements in Europe, and elsewhere in the world. This does represent a substantial challenge because classical geopolitical writing remains in robust health in terms of its popularity and exposure in media and policy-making circles.

**Critical geopolitics**

Sustained critique of mainstream geopolitical reasoning emerged at the end of the Cold War to challenge the strategic doctrines of that era and their legitimizing intellectual apparatus. The end of superpower rivalry, which had been the containing territorial structure of (geo)political thought for over 40 years, further fuelled interest in the spatiality of power in geography and indeed throughout the social sciences. It was in the context of the rethinking of power that this critique gained pace and gradually acquired the label ‘critical geopolitics’ (Dalby 1990; Ó Tuathail 1996). As a sub-field of human geography, critical geopolitics investigates the geographical assumptions and designations that enter into the making of world politics. It does so by examining the practices by which political actors spatialize international politics and represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places (Agnew 2003: 2; Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 190). In counterpoint to the conventional state-centred and often state-sponsored ‘strategic analysis’, this critical work approaches geopolitics not as a neutral consideration of pre-given ‘geographical’ facts, but as a deeply ideological and politicized form of analysis. It shows that geographical claims are necessarily geopolitical, as they inscribe places as particular types of places to be dealt with in a particular manner. Conversely, all international politics is also geopolitics as it necessarily involves geographical and spatial assumptions about people and places. These assumptions are not abstract images floating above political interest but form an integral part of how interests and identities come into being. The aim of critical geopolitics is not to describe the geography of politics within pre-given, commonsense places, but to examine the politics of the geographical specification of politics (Dalby 1990). In so doing, the field seeks to offer richer accounts of space and power than those allowed within mainstream geopolitical analysis.

Although critical geopolitics evolved into a vibrant sub-field of human geography during the 1990s, it has never connoted a clearly delimited or internally coherent research programme. The field is distinct from other strands of political geography not by its empirical focus – although a great deal of this work does take
international affairs as its object of analysis – but by its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. These borrow particularly from poststructuralist strands of social theory whilst eschewing any neat distinction between poststructuralism and other critical approaches such as Marxism, feminism or postcolonial theory. Critical geopolitics has no single theoretical canon or set of methods. It rather advances decidedly diverse critiques of, and alternatives to, conventional analyses of international affairs. The concerns of critical geopolitics lie not with the sources and structures of power in some general sense but with the specific sites and technologies of power relations. Its analytical focus is not on any set of territories, borders or actors – however diverse – but rather on the processes by which these categories are produced. Conceptualizing geopolitics as an interpretative cultural practice and a discursive construction of ontological claims, critical geopolitical analyses prioritize the contextual, conflictual and messy spatiality of international politics (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992; Ó Tuathail, Dalby and Routledge 2006). In this manner, critical geopolitics directly challenges the conventional demarcations of foreign and domestic, political and non-political, state and non-state.

**Spatiality and subjectivity**

In parallel with its diversity, critical geopolitics does have a core set of concerns. In broad terms, those revolve around enriching our understanding of spatiality and subjectivity in world affairs. In terms of spatiality, the field advances the shift from primarily territorialized understandings of politics toward more nuanced understandings of the complex spatialities of power. In terms of subjectivity, critical geopolitics broadens the analysis of geopolitics from state actors located in formal institutions, such as government ministries, universities or think tanks, to non-state actors and everyday life. The two moves are linked: if the state is no longer the principal site and agent of geopolitics, then statesmen (and they are mostly men in conventional accounts) are no longer the principal practitioners of geopolitics. The field is open, then, to thinking more carefully and imaginatively about who are the practitioners of geopolitics and how their practices produce particular spatial relations.

A substantial part of critical geopolitics concentrates on unpacking the rigid territorial assumptions of mainstream analyses in an effort to offer more flexible accounts, which are better attuned to the societal realities of our time: for example, dissecting the continued reliance on binary understandings of power and spatiality in geopolitical writing – East and West, security and danger, freedom and oppression – in many government agencies, think tanks, ‘strategic analysis’ and much of the mass media. While it is often claimed that this binary thinking offers a hard-nosed analyses of ‘geographical facts’, it in fact disengages from geographical complexities in favour of simplistic territorial demarcations of inside and outside – an us and them imagination. Critical geopolitics lays out why such simplifications are inadequate and how we can conceptualize and practice politics.
differently. Through such rethinking, it seeks to establish new spaces for political debate and action.

In particular, much of critical geopolitics challenges the statist conceptions of power in the social sciences. It argues that spatiality is not confined to territoriality, either historically or today. The analytical task is to investigate and explain spatial practices in their territorial as well as non-territorial forms. This broadens the analysis beyond the state, so that the state is no longer the primary or pre-given unit of analysis, without denying the substantial material power of state institutions. The key question is how state power is discursively and practically produced in territorial and non-territorial forms rather than the ‘real’ sources, meanings or limits of state sovereignty in some general or universal sense (Campbell 1998; Kuus and Agnew 2008). The investigation becomes more open-ended as a result, enabling an analysis that does merely take the state as its point of departure and can thereby offer more flexible accounts of the transnational spatial practices of our time. It also links up with border studies, development studies and various forms of critical and constructivist international relations (Dalby 2010; Larner and Walters 2004; Newman 2006; Sharp 2011; Slater 2004).

Another destabilizing and de-centering move in critical geopolitics tackles the view that implicitly takes the Global North as the seemingly natural vantage point of geopolitical analysis. Critical work shows that much of what goes for mainstream geopolitical writing today involves the projection of the context and interests of a few states, most notably the USA, onto the world at large. A better analysis of world affairs requires a sustained critique of these ‘doubtful particularisms’ (Agnew 2007). True, a large part of critical geopolitics focuses empirically on the core states of the West, especially the USA – not surprising given the postwar global hegemony of US foreign policy, scholarship and popular culture. Geographers have therefore looked closely at the geo-graphs of US political elites and popular culture as well as the processes through which these are projected onto the world at large. However, their explicit effort is to contextualize US power rather than naturalize it. Their conceptual lens does not privilege the key role of the USA as somehow natural, pre-given or stable; it rather brings into focus the inherent instability of US power. Such a denaturalizing move is needed especially in the current context of militarization; that is, the social processes and ideological habits through which military solutions to political problems gain elite and popular legitimacy, throughout the Global North (Gregory and Pred 2006; Ingram and Dodds 2009; Kirch and Flint 2011).

Simultaneously with countering the presumed centrality of the USA, critical geopolitics also broadens research empirically outside the core states. This is necessary both analytically and politically: if the field is to disrupt commonsense geopolitical narratives, it must first undermine the tacit assumption of US (or Western) universalism that underpins these narratives. There are now substantial literatures on key states like Britain, Germany, France and Russia as well as smaller and historically more peripheral states (see Dodds and Atkinson 2000; Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998). This work amply demonstrates both the consistency and diversity of geopolitical thought. In terms of continuity, claims of national exceptionalism or external threat, for example, are extraordinarily consistent since
the emergence of modern nationalism. As for diversity, geopolitical practices are deeply rooted in the specific political circumstances and political cultures of particular countries. These practices involve not only the predictable right-wing tradition of geopolitical analyses but also critical and radical strands of analysis (Kuus 2010). 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 around the world.

This is not simply a matter of cataloguing presumably distinct geopolitical cultures or traditions: British, Russian, Estonian or whatever. The glamorization of some predominantly local knowledge or culture would be indeed as problematic as the assumption of geopolitical universals. The effort of critical geopolitics is to examine the power relationships between places, in all their local and transnational complexities. The charge is twofold: to analyse places much beyond the capitals of northern countries and to examine sites outside state institutions in all these places.

This consideration of the multiple spaces and sites of geopolitics also raises new questions about its agents. It highlights the need to investigate the practitioners of geopolitics inside and outside formal political institutions, from presidents and foreign ministers through a wide range of journalists, government officials and activists to the so-called average people. This move away from state-based accounts of ‘wise men’ to a more diverse set of practitioners is linked with subjectivity and identity across the social sciences. Critical geopolitics does not examine the identities or actions of pre-given subjects; rather, it investigates the processes by which political subjects are formed in the first place. Early on, this scholarship often focused empirically on ‘intellectuals of statecraft’ – the academics, politicians, government officials and various commentators who regularly participate in and comment on the activities of statecraft (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 193). Very soon, however, there emerged bodies of work around popular culture and everyday life. For example, there is now a diverse set of studies, loosely labelled ‘popular geopolitics’, that investigates various cultural products as well as their producers and audiences. It offers insights into a range of locations and agents outside the realm of the state – popular magazines, newspaper reporters, cartoonists, film directors and social activists of various stripes (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dittmer and Sturm 2010; Sharp 2000). This strand of work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of informal political practices beyond the formal politics of state institutions. It illuminates the many ways in which popular culture both subverts and reifies mainstream geopolitical narratives. A sustained effort in this scholarship is to avoid glamorizing civil society: to show the diverse entanglements of domination and resistance and the futility of looking for the ‘self-evidently good’ (Sharp et al. 2000). This too involves more than adding token ‘other’ subjects to pre-existing theoretical and theoretical frameworks. It rather involves a sustained rethinking of subject-formation and agency (capacity to act) in geopolitical environments (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Pain and Smith 2008).
Feminist theory is particularly influential in this context. Critical geopolitics as a whole and feminist geopolitics in particular take the central tenet of feminist scholarship – that the personal is also political – to posit that the personal is also geopolitical. 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’ (Secor 2001: 199). 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 ‘non-political’ spheres, or the realm of ‘international’ or ‘domestic’ politics is constructed (Hyndman 2004). This goes to the heart of fundamental questions about how we define politics.

The broader shift here is toward a greater sensitivity to specific geographical contexts and settings. Today, the field offers sustained analyses of a range of actors hitherto not considered sufficiently ‘geopolitical’: actors like non-governmental organizations, professionals such as journalists or artists and a host of everyday actors and activists. As a logical extension of this interest in everyday life, there has also occurred a methodological shift toward analytical tools: most notably broadly ethnographic methods, that enable more agent-centred or peopled accounts of political practice. In that too, critical geopolitics has moved much beyond the celebration of a few statesmen, intellectuals and pundits to a more inclusive consideration of a wider range of geopolitical practitioners and agents. Such contexts include the personal backgrounds, interests and identities of the individuals who actually articulate geopolitical claims. The study of those contexts is linked with similar methodological trends toward more explicitly ‘peopled’ scholarship in international relations (Kuus 2010; 2011; Megoran 2006).

The fragmented mainstream

Critical geopolitics has grown from its roots in the poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial critique of traditional geopolitics to become an integral part of mainstream human geography. A body of ‘critical geopolitics’ research has developed independently of the classical form of geopolitics it initially emerged in response to, meaning that it can now be considered a field in itself. The field has retained a sustained focus on the spatiality of international politics, but it has also become a part of a broader theoretical and methodological trend within human geography toward a closer study of everyday life. As such, critical geopolitics has also retained close links with cognate fields in the academic fields of international relations (IR), cultural studies and postcolonialism. The heterogeneity of critical geopolitics is central to its vibrancy. The central effort in the field is not to produce authoritative or canonical texts but to question the assumptions that underpin such texts and their attendant practices. To discuss critical geopolitics as a distinct sub-field is not to suggest internal coherence and external differentiation that it does not possess or claim. To treat critical geopolitics as a sub-field of human geography
is rather to foreground the sustained engagement in geography with the spatiality of power and politics on the global scale.

Outline of the book

This collection does not simply seek to map the existing conceptual terrain of critical geopolitics. While the chapters provide a critical reflection on the tradition of critical geopolitics, this collection also considers this approach to be dynamic and changing, and so chapters also look outwards to influential ideas and theorists and forward to emerging trends. The book is divided into three parts, ‘Foundations’, ‘Sites’ and ‘Agents’.

Foundations

The first part of the book, provides a series of engagements with the ways in which critical geopolitics emerged as a challenge to taken-for-granted approaches to the relationships between space and power in conventional geopolitics as outlined above. Importantly, this was not the task of one discipline: while critical geopolitics as a label is now closely associated with human geography and thus foundational theorists such as John Agnew, Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, its early incarnations drew much from debate with critical international relations theory which was being produced by figures such as James Der Derain, Richard Ashley, Michael Shapiro and William Connolly (e.g. Walker 1993).

The initial site of critical geopolitics was firmly within the formal spaces of politics: the speeches and writings of intellectuals of statecraft, the actions of states and regional and other supra-state institutions. However, with interventions from theorists concerned with the sociology (and geography) of knowledge production and from feminists who sought to challenge disciplining boundaries, much critical geopolitics has come to regard the sites of geopolitical knowledge as being multiple.

Sites

The second part offers critical engagement with the different locations of geopolitical knowledge creation. We use ‘site’ loosely, addressing the geographical and institutional locations from which geopolitical knowledge is produced and the spaces and places considered to be most significant by geopolitical practitioners, both academic and popular.

Perhaps the most common critique levelled at critical geopolitics as an approach is that it has tended to privilege geopolitical texts over wider questions of geopolitical agency. Some of the most recent developments in critical geopolitics have sought to conceptualize practices and performances in the (re)making of geopolitics.
Agents

Grounded in particular sites and places, agents – whether individuals or organizations; acting consciously as resisters or not – reproduce accounts of the world which reinforce or interrupt the operation of dominant geopolitical visions. Moreover, many of these challenges come from political perspectives with a commitment not only to offer critical reflection on the state of the world but also to find ways of intervening and changing it for the better.

While the organization of the book would appear to impose an evolutionary structure on the brief intellectual history of critical geopolitics, we want to end this introduction with a cautionary note. While in critical academic circles, classical geopolitics have been resigned to the past, this is most certainly not the case within policy and journalistic discourse where some of the imperialistic and commonsensical forms of reasoning still dominate.

Most notably, neoconservative intellectuals such as Richard Perle and David Frum were widely cited as the intellectual inspiration of the Bush administration’s (2001–2009) ‘war on terror’. Geopolitics, in this cultural–political context, becomes a way of highlighting difference and danger, especially in a world where international diplomacy and law may prove inefficacious. A warning, which echoes earlier geopolitical writers such as Mackinder and the predictions he made on behalf of his readers. Geopolitics is, thus, said to stand as a cautionary tale to idealists who would invest their faith in international conventions and diplomacy – dangerous states and peoples do not negotiate or if they do will always seek to maximize their own interests and long-term advantage.

The revival of interest in geopolitics in the USA, Europe and elsewhere is also empowered by a sense of manifest destiny and exceptionalism (Dodds 2007; Jones and Sage 2010; Kearns 2011). Many writers who adopt the geopolitical mantle still want to ‘advise the prince’ and stir the passions of domestic audiences with their dramatic maps and dazzling predictions. While states need to secure their resource bases and recognize the fundamental differences between land- and sea-based powers, they also have an opportunity to project their values and practices. US and UK presidents and prime ministers whether talking about Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya frequently argue that their interventions are motivated not by territorial ambition but rather by the need to project universal values such as democracy, liberty and market-led global capitalism. Geopolitics lives on in political, policy and media forms: if the future of critical geopolitics is to maintain the intellectual contribution, dynamism and relevance demonstrated in the last 20 years, then it must continue to address these themes.
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References


