

## REFLECTION ON CRITICISMS OF CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

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October 2021

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English text. Published version in Spanish.

*Geopolítica(s): Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*

ISSN: 2172-3958

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/geop.78616>

<https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/GEOP/article/view/78616/4564456558891>

### ABSTRACT

The book *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* was first published twenty-five years ago. In this article, I briefly discuss the geopolitical and intellectual sources of inspiration for the development Critical Geopolitics as a distinctive approach within Anglo-American political geography. In doing so, I distinguish it from other concurrent critical approaches to International Relations and the world-system within English-speaking Geography at this time. Thereafter I consider four lines of critique of Critical Geopolitics. The first is the argument that the approach is too political. A subsidiary argument considers its relationship to violence. The second is the argument that it neglects embodiment and everyday life and that, consequently, a Feminist Geopolitics is needed as a necessary corrective. The third is that claim that the approach is too textual and operates with a flawed conception of discourse, one that neglects practice. The fourth critique is that Critical Geopolitics has an undeveloped conception of materiality and neglects more-than-human agency. In discuss these criticisms, I make an argument for a continuity of concern with latent catastrophism in Critical Geopolitics from the danger of nuclear war in the mid-nineteen eighties to the climate emergency of today.



The critical study of geopolitics did not begin with the publication of the book *Critical Geopolitics* a quarter of a century ago. The book, however, constituted a decisive break from previous approaches within Anglo-American geography to geopolitics. These either condemned and ignored the subject (the Hartshorne strategy) or else recoded it as the task of revealing the objective geographical foundations of the politics between states in a divided world (the approach of Saul Cohen and a well-worn path). My own pathway to critical geopolitics was shaped by the geopolitics of the Second Cold War.<sup>1</sup> The Euromissile crisis in transatlantic relations in the late seventies and early eighties as well as US military interventionism in Central America and the Caribbean were part of this dangerous and violent time. Both issues deepened tensions between the two nuclear armed superpowers and their allies. Decrepit leaders rationalizing the runaway militarism of the Second Cold War with stale dogma and vacuous soundbites highlighted a massive generational disconnect. The world we were inheriting was poised on the brink of nuclear war, and environmental catastrophe from radioactive fallout and nuclear winter. How was this possible, normal, even ignored by most in everyday life? Knowledge of our nuclear hair trigger condition was not empowering nor liberating: it was terrifying. The song 'Two Tribes' by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, released in June 1984, captured the 'plague-on-both-your-houses' mood among some young Europeans at this time.

Critical geopolitics was also shaped by the ascendant theory within academia at the time. Althusserian Marxism was out of fashion while the works of Michel Foucault, Edward Said and, to a much lesser extent, Jacques Derrida were decidedly in among ambitious graduate students in the social sciences. My early thinking, however, was probably most influenced by E.P. Thompson, both as an advocate of anti-militarism and the campaign for nuclear disarmament, and as an anti-Althusserian Marxist historian and theorist.<sup>2</sup> He spoke at our university in Ireland in the early eighties, and I had the opportunity to chat with him then and more than a decade later in the US. For me his 1980 essay "Notes on Exterminism, The Last Stage of Civilization" underscored Marxism's failure as a mode of explanation for the irrationality of the Second Cold

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*. (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

War was beyond its categories.<sup>3</sup> There was no capitalist class in control of history ‘in the last instance.’ Instead, history was drifting dangerously towards nuclear war between the superpowers. On both sides, “a collocation of fragmented forces (political and military formations, ideological imperatives, weapons technologies)” were interlocked in antagonism.<sup>4</sup> The messy inertia of two military-industrial complexes locked in competition created the preconditions for a potentially catastrophic war. Fortunately, our world got lucky with Gorbachev, the course of events, and the concerted diplomatic effort thereafter to diffuse this dangerous situation and its geopolitical architecture.<sup>5</sup> Politics was in control. Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which I read when it was first published, made this clear theoretically for the Left.<sup>6</sup> Arms control treaties and previously unimaginable geopolitical changes on the continent of Europe made history.

Inevitably, my own journey to critical geopolitics was also shaped by Irish history and post-colonial critiques of the imperial histories of academic disciplines like Geography and Anthropology. It is, of course, noteworthy that the two figures most often discussed in the founding of critical geopolitics, Simon Dalby and me, are both Irish. Simon too was shaped by anti-nuclear politics particularly protests against proposed Irish nuclear power plants at Carnsore Point in Wexford.<sup>7</sup> Simon left for graduate study in Victoria Canada in 1979 while I left for Illinois in the United States in 1982. Growing up in a post-colonial small state on the edge of Europe, one not coveted by superpower but sharply divided within itself, probably made developing a critical stance on both superpowers easier even though Ireland was and remains a country with deep ties to the United States. The dark internecine violence on the island of Ireland made potential catastrophic violence on the global scale less abstract. The bonds of civilization are thin. Conflicts can easily get out of control.

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<sup>3</sup> The essay first appeared in the journal *New Left Review* 121 (May-June 1980). It is part of the collection E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Just how lucky we all were became apparent in 2015 when it was revealed that NATO’s Able Archer exercise in November 1983 triggered Warsaw Pact forces to initiate war preparations by loading planes with nuclear weapons and placing their nuclear forces on high alert.

<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Simon Dalby.

The Anglo-American discipline of Geography we entered in the nineteen eighties was already developing lines of critical thought on geopolitics. The edited collection *Radical Geography* had two essays by David Harvey and one by Yves Lacoste that hinted at what was possible.<sup>8</sup> Lacoste's essay on 'geographical warfare,' however, was an isolated example of Francophone geographical research registering inside Anglo-American Geography yet having little appreciable impact on research.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the pioneering work of Claude Raffestin was unknown to us.<sup>10</sup> Anglo-American geography worked within a parochial linguistic bubble yet, ironically, many of its major intellectual sources of inspiration were male French thinkers (Lefebvre, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze).<sup>11</sup> The violent experience of Latin America with geopolitics in the seventies was also filtering through.<sup>12</sup> Most impactful to students of our generation were three intellectual traditions of thought. The first was world-systems theory. Peter Taylor was its intellectual promoter and creative developer within Anglo-American Geography. I was fortunate enough to study with Pete in the mid-eighties during my time at the University of Illinois and for part of my time at Syracuse University. Indeed, he was the person who coined the term 'critical geopolitics' as editor of *Political Geography*. He later wrote two brilliant and underrated critical geopolitical books, one on Churchill's political strategy at the end of the Second World War, the second a creative account of hegemonic powers that deepened what this meant within the terms of world-systems theory.<sup>13</sup>

The second tradition of thought was Marxist political economy. Here again I was fortunate to study with John Agnew at Syracuse University. Together with Stuart Corbridge and later on his

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Peet, ed., *Radical Geography*. (Chicago: Maaroufa Press, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> On the history of this article see Gavin P. Bowd and Daniel W. Clayton, "Geographical Warfare in the Tropics: Yves Lacoste and the Vietnam War." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103, 3 (2013): 627-646.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Raffestin, *Pour une géographie du pouvoir*. (Paris: Litec, 1980); Juliet Fall, "Lost geographers: power games and the circulation of ideas within Francophone political geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 31, 2 (2007): 195-216.

<sup>11</sup> Juliet Fall, Stéphane Rosière, "On the limits of dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone political geography," *Political Geography*, 27 (2008): 713-716.

<sup>12</sup> Leslie Hepple, "Geopolitics, generals and the state in Brazil," *Political Geography*, 5, 4 (1986): S79-S90. See also David Slater, *Geopolitics and the Post-Colonial: Rethinking North-South Relations*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Peter J. Taylor, *Britain and the Cold War: 1945 as Geopolitical Transition*. (London: Pinter, 1990); Peter J. Taylor, *The Way the Modern World Works: World Hegemony to World Impasse*. (Chichester: John Wiley, 1996).

own, Agnew wrote some of the most influential works of Anglo-American Political Geography on geopolitics in the last three decades.<sup>14</sup> As most know, he was crucial to the development of critical geopolitics.<sup>15</sup> The third tradition was what was then known as 'dissident International Relations theory.' My introduction to this was through David Sylvan then in the Political Science Department at Syracuse University. On a fellowship at University of Southern California in 1988, I had the opportunity to meet some of the leading figures in this field, including Richard Ashley, Rob Walker (Simon Dalby's academic adviser), Michael Shapiro, James Der Derian and David Campbell.<sup>16</sup> Richard Ashley was particularly generous in his support. In sum, there were already many creatively critical lines of thought about geopolitics as world politics well before the book *Critical Geopolitics*.

For better or worse, the critical geopolitics that Simon and I began to articulate was defined more as an approach than as a developed theoretical system, a set of critical aspirations rather than clearly specified concepts and methods.<sup>17</sup> In keeping with its deconstructive ethos, we adopted a tactical response to hegemonic geopolitical narratives rather than a more strategic response through the development of critical geopolitics as a distinct school of international relations theory. A persistent difficulty within critical geopolitics, partially due to the multiple referents of geopolitics as a sign and partially to the sociology of knowledge production within Anglo-American academia, was the challenge of specifying the parameters of the approach. Was it narrow or broad? Was it focused on intellectuals of statecraft, on the geographical politics of great power practices, on cultural popular geopolitics, or on how geopolitics shaped

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<sup>14</sup> John Agnew, Stuart Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy*. (London: Routledge, 1995); John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*. (London: Routledge, 1998); John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*. Second edition (London: Routledge, 2003); John Agnew, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> John Agnew, "The Origins of Critical Geopolitics," in K. Dodds, M. Kuus and J. Sharp, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 19-32.

<sup>16</sup> See James Der Derian, Michael J. Shapiro, eds. *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989); Michael J. Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> See G. Ó Tuathail, "The Language and Nature of the "New" Geopolitics: The Case of US -El Salvador Relations." *Political Geography Quarterly* 5, 73-85; Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War*. (London: Pinter, 1990); G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby, eds., *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

everyday life? Was it, indeed, just a synonym for thinking critically about space and international affairs writ large, or even just space and politics at multiple scales? Was it just another name for political geography or international relations? None of these questions were ever resolved in any definitive fashion.

Nevertheless, functioning simply as a rupture from past strategies and approaches, critical geopolitics opened up a vast field of research possibilities for young scholars within largely English speaking political geography and enabled them to pursue their interests under its broad banner.<sup>18</sup> Many did so and developed critiques that sought to supplement, revise and replace the approach. Symbolic accumulation within the academy incentivized proliferating declarations of newer and newer forms of geopolitics, a hyperinflation of the term that is now somewhat absurd.<sup>19</sup> Others more sympathetic to classical geopolitical thinking also developed critiques, with one prominent figure, in a burst of BREXIT Colditz fantasy, even going so far as to describe critical geopolitics as an “internment camp” that needs to be escaped.<sup>20</sup> The literature one might describe as critiques of critical geopolitics is now quite large. In this short essay, I reflect briefly on four of these critiques.

## 1. THE POLITICS OF CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

It is a seemingly clever retort to declare that critical geopolitics is itself a form of geopolitics. Defenders of the classical tradition go further and suggest this geopolitics is a radical anti-Western kind that is dangerous and contrary to common sense. Critical geopolitics is

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<sup>18</sup> See Klaus Dodds, Merje Kuus and Joanne Sharp, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> For critiques and reflections see “Review Symposium: Gearóid Ó Tuathail, (1996) *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) *Political Geography* 19 (2000): 345-396; Martin Müller & Paul Reuber “Empirical Verve, Conceptual Doubts: Looking from the Outside in at Critical Geopolitics, *Geopolitics*, 13 (2008): 458-472; F. Ciută, and Ian Klinke, “Lost in Conceptualization: Reading the ‘new Cold War’ with Critical Geopolitics.” *Political Geography* 29 (2010): 323-332; Simon Dalby, “Recontextualising violence, power and nature: the next twenty years of critical geopolitics?” *Political Geography* 29 (2010): 280-288; Koopman et al, “*Critical Geopolitics/critical geopolitics 25 years on.*” *Political Geography* 90 (2021): x-xx. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102421>

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. xv.

hypocritical because it condemns classical thinkers for being political advocates while it does the same.

The situatedness of critical geopolitics as a form of knowledge, its tacit biases and blind spots, certainly deserves debate. Key figures within critical geopolitics are left of center progressives with connection to anti-nuclear and environmental social movements. Distrustful of the power structures of major states, critical geopolitics never saw itself as part of a tradition providing 'advice to the prince.' Rather, it tended to be anti-statist in disposition, with advocates of varying left-of-center positions in their political sympathies.

This brought criticism. In his book on geopolitics the historian Jeremy Black, for example, detected a "rush to judgement on political terms" and "a general tendency to adopt a politically partisan approach to the present rather than to attempt to engage with the complexities of a long-term historical dimension." Furthermore, "the related but different risk in the replacement of common sense by a particular jargon or discourse, as well as of self-referential and self-reverential patterns of verification and endorsement within their own fields."<sup>21</sup>

Critical geopolitics is a form of geopolitics in the broadest sense. It is a social scientific enterprise committed to speaking truth to power in international affairs. It seeks to avoid the traps of national chauvinism, collective stereotypes and racial hierarchy that characterize most all geopolitical cultures. Inevitably, this left it on the side of broadly liberal values in cultural and intellectual disputes, closer to cosmopolitanism than nationalism. But its practitioners are located within certain geopolitical cultures, and it is not surprising that this shapes how they practice critical geopolitics. There are likely to be significant differences between how scholars see critical geopolitics as forms of scholarship and advocacy for alternative ways of thinking geopolitics. While I consider it anti-imperialist and anti-militarist, I do not see this as necessarily leading to a pacifist position toward violent conflict in international affairs.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Black, *Geopolitics and the Quest for Dominance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 10.

My own research and writing lead to implicit advocacy for forceful intervention by the United States and its NATO allies in Bosnia-Herzegovina to end territorial aggression, violent forced displacement ('ethnic cleansing') and acts of genocide like those that unfolded around Srebrenica in July 1994. This position was not shared by others. My graduate school colleague and dear friend Paul Routledge, for example, hold a clear *anti-geopolitics* position. This asserts permanent independence of the state, and its foreign policy, no matter who is in power.<sup>22</sup> Other figures like Nick Megoran adhere to moral pacifism -- violence by states, no matter the end, is wrong – and he developed an impressively comprehensive critique of my own positions on violence and war.<sup>23</sup>

I believe the arguments for moral pacifism are flawed and require unnecessary suffering if not sacrifice in the face of physical violence. Further, the case for strategic pacifism – that non-violence is the best way to achieve social and political change – is subject to confirmation bias, that is wishful liberal thinking. Andreas Malm presents a compelling discussion of these issues today within the context of our climate emergency. Carbon fuel capitalism, the messy inertia that is leading us toward a runaway hothouse earth, is deeply entrenched and unlikely to reform sufficiently to stop this. As he argues “we find ourselves between two scissor blades: on the one hand, unbending business-as-usual, taking emissions ever higher and confounding hopes for mitigation; on the other, delicate ecosystems crashing down – the extraordinary inertia of the capitalist mode of production meeting the reactivity of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> Time is running out to do something. The scientific terms of the crisis have been known for decades yet emissions have only grown. It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the ruling classes of the carbon fuel complex giving up their power, position, and privilege. In his

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<sup>22</sup> In the mid-nineties Routledge asked Simon Dalby and me to put together a reader textbook on geopolitics. I recruited Paul into the project and made the case that he could write a section under the title anti-geopolitics. I had in mind a geopolitical version of the concept of antipolitics by György Konrad, a writer I read when first visiting Hungary in 1990. Routledge give the notion his own distinctive imprimatur. See George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987); Paul Routledge, “Part Five: Anti-Geopolitics” in Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge, *The Geopolitics Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); Paul Routledge, “Anti-Geopolitics,” in John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell and Gerard Toal, eds., *A Companion to Political Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Nick Megoran, “Militarism, Realism, Just War, or Nonviolence? Critical Geopolitics and the Problem of Normativity”, *Geopolitics*, 13 (2008): 473-497.

<sup>24</sup> Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. (London: Verso, 2021), p. 86.

fictional drama of the near future *The Ministry of the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson plumbs the dramatic terms of this condition.<sup>25</sup> Violent ecoterrorism and sabotage against carbon fuel infrastructure are part of the repertoire of response.

We cannot avoid the geopolitical; it is a constitutive horizon of our world. There is no hypocrisy in critical geopolitics being political. Knowledge production is situated but it is not reducible to politically partisan politics. As an intellectual endeavor before anything else, critical geopolitics must engage the empirics of situations and events. In original mode it asks how events are framed and by whom to what end. It does risk “the replacement of common sense” as Black put it but this is the point of critical thought. What a culture thinks it knows, about a conflict or a region or place, may not be so. The great value of critical geopolitics is that it asks questions that should be asked of common sense. It seeks not to affirm conventional wisdom but to question it and the power that enabled it to be considered such. In this sense, critical geopolitics is quite compatible with the many geopolitical cultures where debate and arguments are valued. It is at home in a culture questioning its imperial past, its gendered and racial hierarchies, its structures and institutions of power. Critical geopolitics is not innately radical and may even be appropriated. It depends on the context of its production. It is situated knowledge after all.

## 2. FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS AS A CRITIQUE OF CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

The relationship of critical geopolitics to feminist geopolitics deserves more attention than I can give it here. Feminist geopolitics, to a certain extent, was first articulated in reaction to certain perceived blind spots within the original articulations of critical geopolitics. It emphasized three important themes: embodiment, the constitution of the political, and everyday geopolitics. None of these themes, to my mind, were absent or precluded from critical geopolitics. Dowler and Sharp’s concede as much when they write that “the intentions of critical geopolitics are

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<sup>25</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*. (New York: Hachette, 2020).

similar to those of feminism and postcolonial theory which want to point to the hidden and insidious workings of power throughout the structures of everyday life."<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a clear feminist critique of critical geopolitics which they and others articulate. Sharp suggested that critical geopolitics was another disembodied form of knowledge focused on a pantheon of heroic great men and making political claims in the name of an unexamined universal 'we' that disguises the same old white male privilege.<sup>27</sup> Others argued that any focus on the high politics of statecraft, or subcultures of defense intellectuals, risked marginalizing the role of women in the everyday reproduction of geopolitical knowledge and power. Those unseen ranged from the women clerical staff that were vital to the functioning of national security bureaucracies to the 'home front' wives and mothers making geopolitical power projection possible, to peace activists challenging gender relations in conflict contexts. Feminist geopolitics challenged critical geopolitics to rewrite the actions of women back into geopolitical thought, to understand the bodies as sites of the performance of geopolitics and be attentive to the exclusions that characterize articulations of the political in certain domains and contexts.<sup>28</sup>

The feminist geopolitics critique dovetails with other critiques concerned with local and everyday life. The Finnish geographer Anssi Paasi, for example, criticized critical geopolitics for its focus on great power grand strategy and competition at the global scale. These are remote from the struggles and suffering of ordinary people and far from the contested meaning of territories, borders and identities in their everyday lives.<sup>29</sup> Nick Megoran made a somewhat

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<sup>26</sup> Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp, "A Feminist Geopolitics?" *Space and Polity* 5: 3 (2001), p. 167.

DOI: 10.1080/13562570120104382

<sup>27</sup> Joanne Sharp, "Remasculinising geo(-)politics? Comments on Gearóid Ó Tuathail's Critical Geopolitics." *Political Geography* 19 (2000): 361-364. Also see Joanne Sharp, "Still masculinist after all these years." *Political Geography*

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, "The question of 'the political' in critical geopolitics: Querying the 'child soldier' in the 'war on terror.'" *Political Geography* 29, 5 (2010): 247-255;.

<sup>29</sup> Anssi Paasi, "Review of *Rethinking Geopolitics*," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18 (2000): 282-284; Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996).

similar case.<sup>30</sup> New coinages elaborated critiques and positioned research. Sidaway argued for the study of *banal geopolitics*.<sup>31</sup> My contribution to the rampant hyperinflation was *localized geopolitics*.<sup>32</sup> Smith and Pain organized research on fear and the war on terror around a notion of *everyday geopolitics*.<sup>33</sup> Koopman describes the practices of non-violent communities as an *alter-geopolitics*.<sup>34</sup> Sharp argued for a *subaltern geopolitics* that focuses on geopolitical thinkers from the global South.<sup>35</sup> *Intimate geopolitics* and *affective geopolitics* are other coinages associated with feminist research on how geopolitical dynamics are embodied in everyday life.<sup>36</sup>

There is no doubt that this research has expanded and enriched the critical study of geopolitics. I do have two minor reservations. First, early articulations of feminist geopolitics created a convenient caricature of critical geopolitics to make their case. The critical versus feminist geopolitics dichotomy is understandable given the practical sociology of academic knowledge production but it is misleading if seen as an opposition. Second, many academic researchers study popular geopolitics, everyday geopolitics, and intimate geopolitics because their research sites and subjects are much more accessible than elite ones. Studying the practice of statecraft is difficult and strongly claimed by other fields like Political Science, History, Journalism and Communications. But the critical study of everyday geopolitics can end up being overly localized and narrow. What happens at the national, regional and global scales matters a great deal. Providing a rich account of the dynamics at different scales and the complex relations between scales is hard work. I have endeavored to do this in my two book length studies, with somewhat

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<sup>30</sup> Nick Megoran, "For Ethnography in Political Geography: Experiencing and Re-imagining Ferghana Valley Boundary Closures." *Political Geography*, 25 (2006): 622-640; Nick Megoran, .

<sup>31</sup> James D. Sidaway, "Iraq/Yugoslavia: Banal geopolitics." *Antipode* 33 (2001): 601-609;

<sup>32</sup> Gerard Toal "Localizing Geopolitics: Disaggregating Violence and Return in Conflict Regions." *Political Geography* 29, 5 (2010): 256-265

<sup>33</sup> Susan Smith and Rachel Pain, eds. *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Sara Koopman, "Alter-geopolitics: other securities are happening." *Geoforum*, 42 (2011): 274-284.

<sup>35</sup> Joanne P. Sharp, "Subaltern Geopolitics and "Geopolitics at the margins? Reconsidering genealogies of critical Geopolitics." *Political Geography* 37 (2013): 20-29;

<sup>36</sup> Two terrific recent examples are Sara Smith *Intimate Geopolitics: Love, Territory, and the Future on India's Northern Threshold* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019) and Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor, "Affective Geopolitics: Anxiety, pain, and ethics in the encounter with Syrian refugees in Turkey." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38, 7-8 (2020): 1237-1255.

mixed results (that others can evaluate better than me).<sup>37</sup> Again, I turned out another coinage to make the case for what can come from this in public discourse, sketching a vision of a *thick geopolitics* that is neither a localized nor overly great power-centric understandings of geopolitics but an account that can combine scalar perspectives. The ability to talk in multiple scales is a comparative advantage that professional geographers enjoy and should cultivate further as it allows us to speak broader truths to multiple audiences. Through the media of dedicated newspaper blogs (like *The Monkey Cage*), social media posts and even tweets, political geographers can contribute to the public sphere with relevant knowledge, insight and argument.

### 3. EXCESSIVE TEXTUALISM, EXCESSIVE AGENCY

Critical geopolitics was accused of giving excessive attention to texts and images at the expense of other processes. Centering geopolitics around discourse privileged the analysis of processes of inscription and representation. To some, this inscription focus marginalized many 'little things' that amounted to a lot. The material infrastructure of geopolitical power, everything from archives to military bases, was neglected. Further, a mere focus on words risked missing the context of utterances, and the performative details – intonation, emotive force, hesitations, fleeting expressions – that were vital in communicating meaning. For some the critique of excessive textualism becomes a larger critique of the overly representational focus of critical geopolitics and other post-structuralist inspired aspects of social science. What this neglected, according to critics, were non-representational or extra-representational features of human action as well as the whole question of more-than-human agency.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gerard Toal, Carl Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and its Reversal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest for Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Nigel Thrift, "It's the little things." In Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson, eds., *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 380-387.

One version with elements of this critique is by Muller.<sup>39</sup> Equating critical geopolitics with social constructivism, he argued that critical geopolitics has an “agency concept of discourse.” The problem with this is that “in the majority of writing in the area of critical geopolitics would point us towards a paradigmatic framework where the agency/structure dualism has been resolved in favor of agency through the primacy of the autonomous subject.”<sup>40</sup> He continues: “much of geopolitical writing starts from the assumption of the autonomous subject who has control over texts, knits them into narratives, and thus turns them into a vehicle through which it exercises power.”

This reading is a creative invention by Muller. It ignores the much more sophisticated conception of discourse in much critical geopolitical writing in favor of a caricature. Studying, for example, the ways in which politicians work to craft certain frames and storylines around political crises, how they practice discursive entrepreneurship, is not to endorse the epistemological stance that subjects fully control discourse. In effect, Muller ignores critical geopolitical studies of actual practice in favor of his caricature, a texts-versus-practice dichotomy. “Critical geopolitics’ traditional concern with texts at the expense of practice, however, has all but vitiated a holistic conceptualization of identity in its fullness...”<sup>41</sup> Muller has the charge but not the evidence. He has difficulty substantiating his argument and ends up, via a detour through border studies, reiterating arguments already made within feminist geopolitics. “It is especially within the enactment of identities by ordinary people and in micro contexts that a concept of discourse as language and social practice can draw our attention to the little things that have too often been overlooked”<sup>42</sup> I am fine with attention to the ordinary, micro and little, and have researched this in Bosnian towns and Caucasian secessionist regions over the last two decades. But, as I noted above, this should not come at the expense of inattention to or retreat from the elite, the macro and the grand.

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Muller, “Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: Towards discourse as language and practice.” *Political Geography*, 12 (2008): 322-338.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 326.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 332.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 335.

#### 4. THE NEW MATERIALISM CHALLENGE

The 'new materialist' turn in social science is a welcome development that has raised important questions about the status of materiality in critical geopolitics. New materialism scholars argue that prevailing conceptions of matter in social science fail to appreciate its capacity for agency and our ineluctable entanglement in forces well beyond 'our world.'<sup>43</sup> Challenging a prevailing anthropocentrism in social science, scholars point to the more-than-human relationships that made independent human agency seem possible, relations with animals, ecosystems and geophysical processes that are taken for granted.<sup>44</sup> Scholarship founded on distinctions between nature and culture, the geophysical and the human world rests on artificial foundations. New emphasis is placed on vitality, entanglement, relationality and assemblages as heuristic for critical social science, including critical geopolitics.<sup>45</sup>

The most developed articulation of the new materialist challenge to critical geopolitics is by Squire.<sup>46</sup> She argues that critiquing the determinism of classical geopolitics led to an overinvestment in the representational, cultural and interpretative in early critical geopolitical work. This, she suggests, "may have impeded a more general redefinition of the field of critical geopolitics in relation to 'the materialist turn'".<sup>47</sup> At the same time, she recognizes how early and later critical geopolitical research did engage with forms of materiality, including affect, embodiment and geophysical processes associated with climate change.<sup>48</sup> Her account is less critique that reflection on how critical geopolitics might "reconfigure the analytical tools with

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<sup>43</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Ben Anderson and John Wylie, 'On Geography and Materiality', *Environment and Planning A*, 41 (2009): 318–35; Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Poststructuralist Rejoinder.' *Review of International Studies*,

<sup>45</sup> Jason Dittmer, 'Geopolitical Assemblages and Complexity' *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014): 385–401.

<sup>46</sup> Vicki Squire, "Reshaping Critical Geopolitics? The Materialist Challenge." *Review of International Studies* 41 (2015): 139–159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.

<sup>48</sup> Simon Dalby, *Security and Environmental Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

which it operates” in order to engage new materialism.<sup>49</sup> She argues for fresh engagement with the dynamic materiality of physical systems and makes the case for a series of conceptualizations to realize this. These involve thinking about how heterogeneous elements work together to co-produce multiple environments, and how these can fall apart. Squire wants to sensitize researchers to the heterogeneous elements that go into the making of spaces, to the contingency of boundary making practices and environments, and the diversity of potential enactments of geopolitics. The materialist feminist theory she draws upon to make this case, however, is its own reality of jargon (Black’s barb on this point wasn’t entirely wrong I will concede). The aspiration is clear though and worthy: to incorporate a more-than-human perspective into critical geopolitics, to push for a non-anthropocentric critical geopolitics. She ends with a call for “a reinvigorated understanding of the role of geographical features for political analysis.”<sup>50</sup>

This latter call is music to the ears of defenders of classical geopolitics. They, of course, make very different arguments about the failure of critical geopolitics to address the materiality of the earth. In a widely downloaded but infrequently cited paper, Haverluk, Beauchemin and Mueller, geographers at the US Air Force Academy, argued that geography as natural environment has “direct causative impacts on population, per capita income, wealth creation, European mortality and power capabilities” of states.<sup>51</sup> Many geographic factors explain why some states are perpetually weak and manipulated by larger powers: “their location, climate, topography, and biome are as much a cause of underdevelopment as lack of education, debt burden, poor institutional infrastructure, corruption, income disparity, and neo-liberal economic exploitation by the “North.””<sup>52</sup> What matters, they argue, is that physical geography matters. Okay. Critical geopolitics never argued otherwise but I accept that it did not say so enough.

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<sup>49</sup> Squire, “Reshaping,” p. 147.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159.

<sup>51</sup> Terrence W. Haverluk, Kevin M. Beauchemin, and Brandon A. Mueller, “The Three Critical Flaws of Critical Geopolitics: Towards a Neo-Classical Geopolitics.” *Geopolitics*, 19 (2014): 19–39. I am uncertain about the meaning of the term ‘European mortality.’

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

For others, the geography that really matters in world politics is spatial positionality. In another well-read critique, Kelly argues that geopolitics is the study of the “relative spatial positions of countries, regions and resources” and how these affect the foreign policies and actions of states.<sup>53</sup> For him power defines realism whereas spatial position defines geopolitics. “Certain countries and regions have predominated because they possess special advantages rendered by geography. Geopolitics advises policy makers about how to utilise position and resources to the best advantage for all assortments of countries, the powerful and the less influential.”<sup>54</sup> Critical geopolitics does not engage these structuring material facts of geography because, Kelly suggests, it operates at a different level of analysis, focus on the decision-making level not the international structure.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to others, Kelly sees potential complementarity between classical and critical geopolitics as approaches to the study of the role of geographical factors in world politics.

## CONCLUSION

At the time of the publication of *Critical Geopolitics* a quarter of a century ago, I frankly did not know what to expect in terms of its impact and influence. We now know that the approach, perhaps distinct from the book, appealed to many young researchers across the world and thrived because of this. Undoubtedly the two editions of *The Geopolitics Reader* helped with this.<sup>56</sup> Criticism has inevitably followed, and this has spurred on the extension, deepening and reorientation of critical geopolitics as it has adjusted to address the territorial conflict, great power competition, transnational dangers and climate emergency that now define our time.

Critical geopolitics, however, still suffers from a dearth of core concepts. It has never been elaborated as a distinct theory of international relations when it is one. In a forthcoming work I

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<sup>53</sup> Phil Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics: A New Analytical Model* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Phil Kelly, “A Critique of Critical Geopolitics.” *Geopolitics* 11 (2006): 24-53. Cite is p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, Paul Routledge, *The Geopolitics Reader*. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2006).

seek to make the case for this through a renewed dialogue with the writings and life of Halford John Mackinder.<sup>57</sup> In doing so I also address the emergence of global warming as the most pressing existential crisis of our time, something my colleague and friend all these years Simon Dalby has done consistently over the decades.<sup>58</sup> Critical geopolitics is redundant because the problematics that it addresses are still very much alive. The existential threat that E. P. Thompson outlined forty years ago has not disappeared but deepened. A deeply entrenched messy inertia of diverse collocational elements, a global carbon combustion complex, is accelerating past planet boundaries toward irreversible tipping points.<sup>59</sup> The generational disconnect, between complacent veteran leaders and justifiably angry teenagers, feels even sharper today than then. The late French philosopher Michel Serres described this a decade later using Francisco Goya's painting *Duelo a garrotazos*. A pair of enemies knee-deep in mud fight each other with sticks:

With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don't notice the abyss they're rushing into; from outside, however, we see it clearly.<sup>60</sup>

From this Spanish master, from another era of geopolitical struggle, we have a visual allegory of our contemporary condition. In the foreground is the heat and passion of great power struggle, the threatening weapons, the strategic competition for relative advantage. Cold War, redux.<sup>61</sup> But both are doomed by their earthly situation, by preoccupation with their mutual struggle to the neglect of the common danger they share. Can we loosen the dead grip of a hydrocarbon modernity that is pulling us to the abyss, an irreversible condition of 2.5 degrees Celsius global warming from which we cannot escape? Alternatively, are we sentenced to merely see this all-too-obvious tragedy unfold helplessly as great power competition continues to dominate the

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<sup>57</sup> Gerard Toal, *Oceans Rise Empires Fall: Geopolitics on an Earth in Crisis*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023)

<sup>58</sup> Simon Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Johan Rockstrom, Owen Gaffney, *Breaking Boundaries: The Science of Our Planet* (New York: DK Publishing, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Legvold, *Return to Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity 2016).

action agenda in world politics? We all are no longer where we were at the end of the Cold War, the fortunate generation that dodged the potential catastrophe of a nuclear war. We are now witnesses to the fraying of the Holocene climate that created the conditions for human civilization. We are all sinking as we flail at each other.