



Review essay

What's the purpose of teaching political geography?

Political Geography, Igor Okunev. Translated by Maria Ananyeva, Natalia Panich and Nikolay Simakov. Peter Lang, Oxford (2019).

Political Geography: A Critical Introduction, Sara Smith. Wiley Blackwell, Oxford (2020).

That political geography is thriving in higher education is attested by the plethora of new textbooks that have been published in recent years. In this essay I consider two of these to pose a question about the purpose of instruction in the subdiscipline at university: is it to teach students *how* to think, or to teach them *what* to think?

The texts under review each have the same title – *Political Geography* – and were developed from their authors' teaching of the subject at the University of North Carolina (Smith, 2020) and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO; Okunev, 2019). They begin with roughly similar definitions of the title matter: “understand[ing] how power is manifest in and through space” (Smith, 2020, p. 4) and being “concerned with the spatial dimensions of politics” (Okunev, 2019, p. 19). But stylistically the two books are worlds apart.

Okunev writes in a genre that is now rare in Anglo-American geography, that of the gazetteer. Over 450 pages he takes the reader through 188 sequentially numbered sections divided between 9 chapters, covering topics ranging from “capitals and centers” and “states” to “global geopolitics systems” and “international and internationalized entities.” It is a fascinating read, designed to familiarise students with what Okunev views as the contours of the world's political geographical systems. The breadth of this book is its strength, and it makes it a valuable reference source. For example, the overview of territorial leases (pp. 220–221) is extremely informative, as it points to creative ways to address territorial disputes. Chapter 3, “integration groups,” has what appears to be an unnecessarily long typology of visa-free zones, preferential trade areas, free trade zones, customs unions, currency unions, and common markets. But, given the years of tortuous post-Brexit negotiations over the UK's future relationship with the EU, I wish someone had made this chapter required reading for every UK member of parliament.

This breadth, though, perhaps inevitably, is also the book's major weakness. Proceeding at breakneck speed through so many topics leaves little space for discussing alternative explanations or understandings. Real people (with gendered and racialised bodies) are virtually absent from the neat typologies: references to gender and race are notably missing from the index. Theory is discussed in places but takes a back seat, and the space for exploring examples is limited. This leads to a descriptiveness that becomes frustrating at times. For example, Okunev devotes an unusually long section (3 pages) to vexillology but does not

go beyond the morphology of flags. This is a reasonable beginning, but as political geographers there are many other interesting things to be said about flags: their roles in nationalist struggles, their suppression by repressive regimes, their iconographic exclusion of colonised peoples, and their use as counter-hegemonic protest symbols. In short, the major drawback of the book is that there is little room for critical reflection.

The same could not be said for Smith's text, whose very subtitle is *A Critical Introduction*. From the start we experience a text written in an entirely different idiom. The introduction is structured around a discussion of arguments about race and monuments on her university's campus and draws to a close with a large textbox about her own research and her personal reflections on race. Smith explains that she writes in the first person to enable the reader to realise that “all knowledge is generated by real people who are located in a particular time and place” – that is, “situated” (p10). To this end, most chapters conclude with a “Geographer at work” box in which individual scholars introduce themselves and discuss what drives their work.

Over 13 chapters the book covers a range of familiar themes including citizenship, nationalism, power, states, borders, geopolitics, and social movements. Through all these chapters Smith weaves in a broad range of theoretical perspectives and examples, giving the book a feeling of originality and freshness. A particularly impressive chapter is that on “biopolitics and life itself.” It begins by asking “Have you ever made a New Year's Resolution?”, an arresting start that immediately engages the reader. Smith goes on to relay the answers some of her students have given over the years, using their responses as a segue into Foucault's ideas of biopower; from there, she explores topics as diverse as prostitution in British-controlled India, obesity, airport security checks, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The final chapter is on political geography in an age of climate change, a topic that is strikingly absent from Okunev's book. Concluding with the evocatively titled section, “Can Anthropocene futures be abundant?”, Smith encourages students not only to understand what is happening, but also to ask what role they will have in the changes that are needed.

Although these two books differ widely in approach, pedagogically they are closer than a superficial glance might suggest. From my perspective as a British academic, it appears that each of them is located in a particular political cultural/national scholarly tradition, but neither is sufficiently explicit or reflexive about this to enable students to critically interrogate it.

For instance, post-Soviet “flagship” universities generally operate in top-down management environments with limited institutional autonomy and academic freedom in illiberal national political contexts (Chankeliani, 2022). Okunev's book derives from a course for students of one such institute, the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs' prestigious MGIMO. Many MGIMO graduates go on to work for the Russian foreign ministry. The book sets out what they need to know in a state-centric environment. As the appendix on the “List of political and

geographical names to be memorized” explains, upon completing the course “the student is supposed to locate” a range of polities including UN member states, disputed territories, straits, mesoregions, and exclaves on the map (p. 449). Instead of debates or different interpretations based on where people stand in relation to power structures, we have a supposedly impartial, relatively disembodied gaze over the world map.

Likewise, Smith’s text is located within a particular political cultural/national scholarly trajectory, the US tradition of radical and critical human geography. This can be further mapped onto what James Hunter (1991) terms the ‘progressive’ (liberal/left) side in the country’s “culture wars” (that is, contentious political struggles about morality and identity in US public life). Gender, indigeneity and particularly race dominate the examples that appear in the book. The text is heavily inflected by US perspectives and draws on examples that will likely be familiar to US-based students, and most of the spotlighted “Geographers at work” are from US institutions. This, in itself, is fine, and I suspect that most of us who teach in the Anglophone academy will broadly share many of its views. However, the text generally does not demonstrate an awareness of this situatedness in a way that enables the reader to better understand its limitations and implications. As Ruth Behar (1996, p. 13) points out, reflexivity must go beyond the gesture of stating our positionality. Ideally, we should demonstrate a keen awareness of how we, as authors, self-filter our understandings of the topics being discussed, allowing the reader to recognise the limitations of our perspectives. Smith tells students that “This book is intended to give you the lay of the land, so that you may figure out which ideas and concepts help you to better understand the world” (p. 10), but it only presents a particular “lay of the land” within the specific national/cultural contours of the US academy.

An example of the drawbacks of this can be seen in the section on sexual citizenship and gender identity (pp. 22–25). This is an important and timely topic that is lacking in Okunev’s text. However, given that Smith builds her approach to political geography in relation to US-context specific dynamics, instructors outside the US may struggle to use the book effectively. It discusses “the struggle for transgender rights” in relation to access to public space and frames voices that would question this as part of a “backlash” against trans people “seeking to prevent the protection of their rights.” This references US political struggles over specific issues, including how sexuality is taught in state schools, the access of transgender youth to medical services, and their participation in school sports. Smith assumes that the reader understands this background and therefore does not set out the terrain of the relevant debates and the range of arguments made by different sides. Nor does she fully acknowledge that political contexts and discussions might be different elsewhere. In my context of teaching in the UK, for instance, where trans rights are recognized, however imperfectly, there have been wide-ranging debates about issues related to transgender rights and public space involving (amongst others) feminists and women’s activists, public health policy professionals, elite-sports’ governing bodies, and prisoners’ rights groups. Some of these debates overlap with those in the US, but public discussion in the UK overall does not fall along the same lines as that in the US. Smith’s book would be less useful at helping UK students understand the debates and issues as they have played out here. As a reflection of a very specific kind of political geography located at a particular moment of time in a unique political cultural/national scholarly tradition, the qualities that make it such a powerful account of one strand of the sub discipline in the USA could make it difficult to utilize in teaching elsewhere.

Although these texts adopt quite particular approaches to political geography, they could complement each other well in a classroom environment. An example of this is how they discuss borders. In a chapter on “Borders and cleavages,” Okunev explains international boundaries using his favoured pedagogic method of identifying

typologies, distinguishing between what he views as their physiographic principles and functions, and clearly explaining important terms like delimitation and demarcation. He argues that borders are about “the opposition to alien *them*” in contradistinction “to relatively homogenous *us*”, but the chapter is otherwise short on recognising the politics of borders. Thus, in a section on “separation barriers”, he observes the prevalence of such barriers in “Southern Europe, where the policy of separation is to cut down on illegal immigration.” This statement cries out for a theoretical reflection on the politics of race, the construction of what counts as “illegal,” the origins of the EU’s violent border policies, and whether border controls are even ethical at all.

It is here that Smith’s book excels. Borders are the focus of her chapter on “Security,” which explores how migration controls work alongside prisons in a racialised geopolitical system of “global apartheid.” But the chapter lacks clear explanations of important terms, the historical origins of borders, and their relationship to international boundaries. It concludes with a forthright articulation of the case that migration is a human right and that border controls should be abolished. But this leaves many questions not only unanswered, but unasked. Is unrestrained free movement compatible with resisting settler colonialism, protecting the environment, controlling the spread of infectious diseases, building welfare-based deliberative democracies, and interdicting people-smuggling? The case for abolishing migration controls is one that I largely agree with. Yet there are many counterarguments to border abolition from a variety of perspectives, including the liberal cosmopolitan tradition that has notable advocates in the US academy. Smith’s book, however, does not present them as options for students to take seriously.

In my own teaching on boundaries and borders I take my students through the type of background that Okunev offers, into the theoretical and political literatures that Smith introduces, and then beyond into alternative perspectives, concluding with a lively class debate on whether borders should be abolished. I couldn’t imagine teaching the topic without reference to the two traditions that these books represent, but nor could I imagine teaching it from within just one of them. That is because, to answer my own question, I regard my responsibility as a teacher of political geography as being to teach students *how* to think about the intersections of space and power, not *what* to think.

We cannot easily transcend our contexts, but we can critically reflect on how they influence what we do. This opens our students and ourselves to the exhilarating and unsettling encounters with different perspectives that bring both intellectual humility and deeper understandings of our world. Alone, neither of these books does that. Their benefit as classroom texts is to demonstrate to students that there is a politics and geography to political geography: the times and places in which political geographers work indelibly mark the type of political geographical work that we produce. If used carefully in dialogue with each other, these books can help students understand our world and think critically for themselves about it. They will both be on my student reading lists next year.

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