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## Geopolitics

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## The Task and Responsibility of Geopolitical Analysis

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I was both honoured and surprised to be invited to contribute to this roundtable in honour of the late Professor Les Hepple. Honoured, because of his reputation and achievements; surprised, because unlike the other contributors, I did not know him personally (the nearest I came to him was when we both contributed to the same centennial retrospective on Halford Mackinder's 1904 'Geographical pivot of history' paper, organised by Klaus Dodds and James Sidaway).<sup>1</sup> However, whilst I was not individually acquainted with him, his appreciation of the task and responsibility of geopolitical scholarship has informed my thinking, and issues a continuing challenge to the practice of our discipline. It is these twin aspects of his work on which I will focus in this brief reflection.

### TASK

First, Professor Hepple's sense of the scope and *task* of geopolitical analysis – as the thorough and detailed uncovering and explication of geopolitical thinking in multiple contexts, and the tracing of the links between these contexts – marked his work in this field. Although he did not, to my knowledge, use the expression, he was concerned to trace the 'social life' of geopolitical ideas: how they 'travel' between places, how they are adapted, contextualised and repoliticised through specific tactical deployments or denouncements. Prerequisites for this were his clear articulation of what geopolitical thought is (crucially, both explicit and implicit manifestations), and his ability to painstakingly trace its development in specific settings: a combination of "both theoretical development and detailed regional specialization."<sup>2</sup> His articles on these topics ably demonstrate how this could be done, particularly in the contexts of the USA and Latin America.

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This sense of task played a role in inspiring a new generation of scholars to engage in regional analysis of geopolitical traditions, both his own students and those, like myself, who engaged with his work through his publications rather than his teaching. During the course of my doctoral research, a relatively gentle project to investigate the cultural politics of memory in the Ferghana Valley was turned upside down by violent Central Asian regional reconfigurations and reterritorialisations. My supervisor, Alan Ingram (who guided me after the death of my first supervisor, Graham Smith), wisely pointed me to the literature on geopolitics, including that of Professor Hepple. Alongside the work of Agnew, Dalby, Dodds, Ó Tuathail, and others, Professor Hepple's writing illuminated the confusing processes that I was studying in Central Asia, in a context in which the formal language of geopolitics was rarely invoked. This body of work also helped me locate myself within a disciplinary framework of geography/geopolitics that was to guide subsequent career choices, as up until then I had been equally invested in area studies and social anthropology.

Much progress has been made since his identification of the task of geopolitical analysis in his germinal 'revival of geopolitics' article, and its restatement in his response to its revisiting in the 2001 'classics in human geography revisited' forum,<sup>3</sup> with a steady stream of scholarship on the non-Anglophone world. More would be welcome, as significant parts of the world remain largely absent from this analysis. However, a crucial and perhaps underappreciated aspect of Professor Hepple's work is his tracing of the social life of particular geopolitical theories as they travelled between places. His Latin American research highlighted not simply the occurrences of geopolitical discourse, but also the routes by which Mackinder's Heartland theory reached Latin America. For example, he identified the work of particular American scholars (notably Lewis Tambs), and a group of Brazilian army officers who emerged as geopolitical thinkers in the 1950s and previously had fought alongside US troops against Italians during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> One of the great advances in geopolitical scholarship in the past twenty-five years has been the movement from a preoccupation with how the ideas of Mackinder and others were borne out or not in 'the course of events', to detailed biographical and wider historical studies of the contexts in which they emerged. Early twentieth-century Anglo-American-German geopolitical thinkers have been subjected to sustained biographical investigation. Nothing like that scholarship has been conducted in relation to those who used and developed their ideas in other contexts. Professor Hepple's work points us in this direction.

Professor Hepple demonstrates too how geopolitical theory was adapted as it moved location. He shows how Mackinder's oft-cited dictum of 1919:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World-Island commands the World.

became in the writings of Lewis Tambos:

Who rules Santa Cruz commands Charcas.  
 Who rules Charcas commands the heartland.  
 Who rules the heartland commands South America

It is relatively simple to identify and critique geopolitical discourse in discrete contexts, and is a necessary first step to producing a fuller map of global geopolitical thinking. To trace how it reached them and thereby adapted and mutated along the way is a more demanding and painstaking task, a path that far fewer scholars have thus far been able to follow Professor Hepple down.

### RESPONSIBILITY

Second, if Professor Hepple was able to articulate clearly the task of geopolitical analysis, he also held a strong sense of its *responsibility*. Whilst it must be undertaken with academic rigour, geopolitical analysis, of necessity for Professor Hepple, went beyond intellectual activity. It entailed a clear responsibility to challenge “dangerously misleading geopolitical doctrines and policies.”<sup>5</sup> Such a general statement could, in a sense, be seen simply as the duty of any concerned citizen in a participatory democracy. However, Professor Hepple was thinking more specifically than this, honing a distinct *disciplinary* responsibility. His own research was not on the ‘classical’ origins of geopolitical thought from the late nineteenth to the early-mid twentieth centuries, yet building on the work of others he argued that as geographers had, during this period, played a key role in instigating this body of thinking, they inherited a responsibility to continue to engage with it in its revival. He put this memorably in his 1986 article: “Having helped set the ship afloat, geography has some responsibility for the voyage and duty towards the human crew aboard!”

This memorable call for engagement has characterised the field of critical geopolitics, conceived of by Ó Tuathail as one of the “cultures of resistance to Geography as imperial truth, state-capitalized knowledge, and military weapon.”<sup>6</sup> From considerations of the Cold War and post-Cold War worlds as seen from the USA and its allies, to explorations of multiple conflicts around the world, critical geopolitics has insisted upon the political and moral imperative to uncover and contest the ways in which geopolitical reasoning contributes to intensifying, rather than mitigating, violence. Some of the finest writings produced by political geographers in recent times have arguably been critical engagements with just that geopolitical drama that has dominated and colonised discourses of international relations in recent years, the so-called ‘war on terror’.

However, Professor Hepple's call for responsible engagement was not merely that of critique, vital though that is. It was also a challenge to geographers to take responsibility for encouraging the development of foreign policy along more desirable alternative paths. It is telling that he stated this more clearly in his 2001 retrospective, contending that "the work of geographers needs to confront and *infiltrate* active geopolitics" (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> Critical geographers have admirably risen to the challenge of confronting active geopolitics; yet the task of infiltration is one that we have been less forthcoming in reflecting upon. This is a more demanding task because of the work and risk involved in articulating concrete alternatives in an unpredictable and ambiguous world. Returning to Professor Hepple's nautical imagery, as Francis Bacon put it, 'It is easier to sink a ship than to raise it'.

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to consider the reasons for this disparity in expenditure of energy, but Professor Hepple suggested one factor in his 2001 commentary. Using the example of Lacoste to comment favourably on the French intellectual tradition, he observed that French radicals are frequently able to integrate commitments to nation and national identity with radical politics. He contrasted this with anglophone critical geopolitics, suggesting that the difficulty we have in this regard may be because our model of cosmopolitanism makes us too unsympathetic to issues of reconstructing national community that he saw as integral to geopolitical imaginations.<sup>8</sup> I am not sure how sufficient this answer is, but the problem that Professor Hepple highlighted is one that the critical geopolitical community still needs to confront in order to foster a fuller sense of responsibility.

That Professor Hepple's sense of responsibility was an inherently geographical and multi-scalar one is evidenced by his commitment to his native Tyneside. To conclude on a biographical note, in December 2005 I moved to Newcastle. Although my paternal ancestors were Tynesiders, it was an area largely unfamiliar and somewhat bewildering to my family and myself. The first source that I turned to for some orientation, which I discovered in my local library, was Professor Hepple's 1976 *History of Northumberland and Newcastle upon Tyne*.<sup>9</sup> Lucid and engaging yet admirably concise, it is marked by the keen eye of a historical geographer. Professor Hepple's work has assisted me in locating myself both within the space of geography and the place of his nativity – testimony to a scholar of diverse capabilities with a clear sense of the task and responsibility of geographical endeavour.

## NOTES

1. See the special issue 'Halford Mackinder and the "Geographical Pivot of History"', *Geographical Journal* 170 (2004) pp. 291–383.

2. L. Hepple, 'The Revival of Geopolitics', *Political Geography Quarterly* 5/4 (1986) pp. S21–S36.

3. L. Hepple, 'Classics in Human Geography Revisited. Author's response', *Progress in Human Geography* 25/3 (2001) pp. 428–430.
4. L. Hepple, 'South American Heartland: The Charcas, Latin American Geopolitics and Global Strategies', *Geographical Journal* 170/4 (2004) pp. 359–367.
5. L. Hepple, 'The Revival of Geopolitics,' *Political Geography Quarterly* 5/4 (1986) pp. S21–S32.
6. G. Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge 1996) p. 256.
7. L. Hepple, 'Classics in Human Geography Revisited. Author's Response,' *Progress in Human Geography* 25/3 (2001) pp. 428–430.
8. *Ibid.*, 2001, p. 430.
9. L. Hepple, *A History of Northumberland and Newcastle upon Tyne* (Chichester: Phillimore 1976).