



## Guest Editorial

## Neoclassical geopolitics

In May 2009 Robert Kaplan wrote an article for *Foreign Policy*, entitled, “The revenge of geography” (Kaplan, 2009). He argued that in spite of “globalisation”, geography still matters in world politics, and indeed will come to matter more so in the future as environmental pressures and resource scarcities destabilise weak majority-Muslim states in Asia. Although there was nothing original about this thesis, it is noteworthy that it appeared in a journal that is widely read within the Washington based academic/policy/media community and beyond. More striking was his evocation of Halford Mackinder as prophet of geographical determinism. For Kaplan, Mackinder is the wise “Victorian” sage to whom we must at last return having recognised the enduring relevance of his insights as the heady promises of post-Cold War neoconservative politics and neoliberal economics are buried in the wreckage of the Iraq debacle and global financial collapse.

For geographers, Kaplan’s article makes dismal reading. It removes Mackinder from his social context, fails to acknowledge his political project, and displays no cognizance of the flaws and contradictions of his corpus. Recent systematic analysis of Mackinder and the early twentieth-century classical geopolitical tradition appears to have passed Kaplan by. His article is a painful reminder to political geographers of the need to take neoclassical geopolitics seriously. In this editorial I suggest that, whilst focusing on “contemporary conservative geopolitics”, we have generally omitted to provide a sustained critique of “neoclassical geopolitics”.

That is not to say that we have failed to confront the multiple traces of geopolitical thinking, especially as deployed in support of right-wing politics over the past two decades. Critical geopolitics itself was born in reaction to the framing of militarised Soviet–American competition in stark geographical terms. It subsequently jostled with what Ó Tuathail and Dalby memorably termed the “new blockbuster visions of global space” (1998: 1) – Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” (1993), Barnett’s “gap” (2004), and the like.

What critical political geographers have done can be understood by distinguishing between three strands of geopolitical thinking. We have firstly disarmed the *classical geopolitical* thinkers (chiefly Mackinder, Haushofer, and Spykman) by demonstrating how bound their supposedly timeless truths were to their contexts (Ó Tuathail, 1992), and how their visions were contested by competing contemporary alternatives (Kearns, 2009). Secondly, we have debunked *contemporary conservative geopolitical* Cold War and post-Cold War “blockbuster visions of global space”. However, in so doing, we have failed to pay sufficient heed to, thirdly, the twenty-first rise of *neoclassical geopolitics*.

Neoclassical geopolitics is not the envisioning of global space espoused by Huntington, Barnett, *et al.* Indeed, these schemes have little affinity with the core spatial concepts underlying classical geopolitics, which is why they are here distinguished as “contemporary conservative geopolitics.” Mamadouh (1998: 238) defines neoclassical geopolitics as “the effects of geographical location and other geographical features on the foreign policy of a state”, but this lacks specificity. Rather, by “neoclassical geopolitics” is meant ways of thinking about the effects of geography on international relations that explicitly locate themselves within the Mackinder–Haushofer–Spykman tradition, but which creatively rework it with reference to changed social, economic, political and cultural factors.

One example is Everett Dolman’s *Astropolitik*, which he describes as “classical geopolitics in the space age”. Arguing for a vision of space like that which Mahan had for earth, he believes that war will eventually only become redundant when the whole world embraces democracy. Until that time, he sees realism as a way to defend democracy, and advocates an *astropolitik* for the USA. This he acknowledges as an explicit reference to Haushofer’s *geopolitik* that was committed to using geographical knowledge to further the military and political fortunes of a state. For Dolman, such an *astropolitik* would involve renouncing the 1967 Outer Space Treaty (outlawing the militarisation of space), deploying a space-based ballistic missile defence system, and establishing a high-level US government department to promote space exploration and militarisation. Explicitly locating himself within the Mackinder/Spykman tradition, he creates a pithy epithet to sum up *astropolitik* based on Mackinder’s dictum about the importance of controlling Eastern Europe:

Who controls low-Earth orbit controls near-Earth space.  
Who controls near-Earth space dominates Terra;  
Who dominates Terra determines the destiny of mankind  
(Dolman, 2002: 8).

Another recent example of neoclassical geopolitics is James Bennett’s concept of “the Anglosphere”. Bennett follows geographers such as Castells (1997) in proclaiming that we live in the “Information Age” of rapid communications and financial transactions that readily transgress international boundaries. However, he argues that we are not in a “borderless world”: economic activity is less bordered, but states remain vital (Bennett, 2004: 2). Within this web of state and para-state activity, he identifies the “Anglosphere Network Commonwealth” as a “network civilisation” – a trading, economic and military sphere. The Anglosphere is English-speaking, but also adheres to

a common political culture characterised by values such as the rule of law, the liberty of the individual, the bill of rights, and the sanctity of private property (Bennett, 2004: 178–179). The Anglosphere is not state bound, having, for example, dense nodes in parts of Africa and India.

Being a dynamic Network Commonwealth does not, however, mean that the Anglosphere is non-geopolitical. Far from it, argues Bennett: humans remain what he terms “amphibious”, living in both internet and material spaces (Bennett, 2004: 285). The Anglosphere is an “offshore island” detached from Eurasia’s “World Island”. Based on a chain of island continents and bases ringing the World Island, it is thus able to deny hostile forces access to its home maritime areas (Bennett, 2004: 286). This geopolitical basis to the Anglosphere is clearly a development of Mackinder’s “Heartland”/“World Island” and Spykman’s “Rimland” theories. However, whereas Mackinder was concerned about Britain and Spykman about the USA, Bennett organically conjoins them. He imbues his putative Anglosphere with a messianic political mission. If the nineteenth century was a “British Century” that abolished slavery, and the twentieth an “American Century” that ended totalitarianism, then the twenty-first may be the “Anglosphere century” that can abolish “singularity”, or the habit that states have of acting alone. This “dream” can only be fulfilled by the conscious effort of making institutions to create this reality (Bennett, 2004: 288–289).

We can thus recognise affinities between classical and neoclassical geopolitics. Both share a realist understanding of international relations, are politically conservative, seek to formulate policy advice to politicians, and see the cause of world democracy as ultimately coincident with the interests of the USA/UK. Both exhibit certain generic representational qualities that are attentive to public and policy audiences – drama, generalization, simplification, and a powerful “take home message”. In these respects, both classical and neoclassical geopolitics also overlap with the academic and representational concerns of contemporary conservative geopolitics.

Unlike contemporary conservative geopolitics, however, neoclassical geopolitics draws explicitly on the Mackinderian Heartland tradition. It also shares with classical geopolitics a vision of geography not as absolutely determining international politics, but as setting the framework within which it must occur – a framework that thereby demands a responsibility for political action to shape human futures.

Although neoclassical geopolitics is a direct descendent of classical geopolitics, in some important respects it exhibits discontinuities with its forbear. For example, although race must haunt any discussion of an Anglosphere, Bennett’s geopolitics is not marked by the same anxiety to fix racial boundaries that excited classical geopolitics. Thus membership of his Anglosphere is not explicitly bound by geography, race, or religion, incorporating as it does nodes amongst peoples from whom Mackinder strove to insulate “Englishry”. Neoclassical geopolitics readily adapts the Heartland thesis to technological and social changes that have occurred since the era of classical geopolitics. Thus Dolman has updated it to incorporate space flight, and Bennett identifies post-colonial deterritorialised social networks that technological change has facilitated. For neoclassical geopolitics, it is not that the heartland thesis was negated by technology, the rise of the USA, or other supposed flaws of Mackinder’s original scheme. Rather, the Heartland thesis is seen as dynamic: just as Mackinder produced three iterations of it, neoclassical thinkers see themselves as doing nothing different.

Neoclassical geopolitics is arguably an influential discourse, but its spheres of influence are highly localised and concentrated. For example, it has proliferated amongst scholars and analysts of

the international relations of Central Asia (Megoran, 2004). The term “Anglosphere”, championed by its originator’s so-called “Anglosphere Institute”, has established itself as an important concept within the politically conservative blogosphere in countries such as the UK, the USA, and Australia. Thus the *New Statesman* described it in 2000 as “the next big right-wing political idea” (Lloyd, 2000), and a Google search in June 2009 returned over a third of a million web hits. However, I am not aware of a single case of a geographer engaging with the topic in publications.

This indexes a general failure amongst political geographers to engage with twenty-first century neoclassical geopolitics (for an exception, see MacDonald, 2007). This is reflected in both research, and the teaching textbooks that summarise that research. The most recent such text divides the study of geopolitics into “classical” and “critical”/“anti-geopolitical” traditions (Painter & Jeffrey, 2009, chap. 9), classical geopolitical thinking concluding with Isaiah Bowman. This reflects the state of a field of research that has not readily engaged with neoclassical geopolitics.

It is beyond the scope of this discussion to account for this weak engagement with neoclassical geopolitics. However, I suggest it bespeaks complacency that the successful institutionalisation of critical geopolitics in geography departments has vanquished neo/classical geopolitics. As the contemporary resonance of neoclassical geopolitics attests, this is clearly not the case. Neoclassical geopolitics illustrates the enduring lure of classical geopolitical thinking, and in its present iterations it remains wedded to conservative and militarised foreign policy agendas of powerful states. These need to be evaluated and challenged, in popular and policy spheres as well as in scholarly publications. However, neoclassical geopolitics cannot simply be dismissed by revisiting the arguments against classical geopolitics, as (in some cases, at least) it presents new intellectual challenges that demand serious responses.

In 1986 this journal published Hepple’s landmark call for geographers to critically engage with what he called “the revival of geopolitics” (Hepple, 1986). Geographical scholarship rose to that challenge, interrogating both the traces of classical geopolitical thought and the subsequent rise of contemporary conservative geopolitics. Kaplan’s article likewise illustrates that we have both a disciplinary and a political duty to engage with the latest revival of classical geopolitics, that of neoclassical geopolitics. As MacDonald argues, “the legacies of Mackinder and Mahan live on, and radical critique is as urgent as ever” (2007: 609).

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