

Political Geography

D. Storey, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

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Introduction

Political geography as a systematic branch of human geography has a long, but not always distinguished, history. Like other branches of the discipline a precise definition is elusive with the nature of political geography, the issues explored, the approaches adopted, and the methods utilized displaying considerable breadth and variety. The nature of the subdiscipline has changed over time and its fortunes have waxed and waned for a variety of reasons. While being mindful of oversimplifying, it could be said that political geography is concerned with the interface between politics and geography. To be more precise, there is a focus on the spatial dimensions of power and with political phenomena and relationships at a range of spatial scales from the global down to the local. Another way of viewing this is to see it as revolving around the intersections of key geographical concerns of space, place, and territory on the one hand and issues of politics, power, and policy on the other. From this it follows that contemporary political geography encompasses a wide variety of themes. Rather than rigidly defining political geography it is perhaps best to think in terms of geographical approaches being brought to bear on a wide range of political issues. For some the study of spatial political units is central, for others there is an emphasis on major processes such as colonialism, while for still others it is concepts such as territory, state, or nation that are key. The diversity of issues and approaches means that it is more meaningful to talk of political geographies rather than a single unidimensional political geography.

Changes in themes, approaches, and methods have occurred in response to intellectual and methodological developments within the broader discipline and in academia more generally. However, they have also reflected broader social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental changes. The blurring of boundaries within the subdisciplines of human geography (and indeed the blurring of disciplinary boundaries more generally) means that some research that might be regarded as falling within the ambit of political geography is carried out by people who would not necessarily describe themselves as political geographers. Indeed they might not even regard themselves as geographers at all.

Evolution

In the late nineteenth century political geography was effectively synonymous with human geography. While physical geography was concerned with delineating regions on the basis of climate and topographical features, human geography was concerned with political divisions. Hence we still have a basic distinction between maps indicating physical features and those indicating 'political' features. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the discipline evolved political geography became a more clearly defined arm of human geography running alongside commercial and colonial geography. Subsequently, and reflecting divisions within the broader social sciences, we can see political geography coexisting alongside social and economic geography.

Over the years the main preoccupations of political geography have changed. One hundred years ago key practitioners such as Halford Mackinder in the United Kingdom were concerned with international relations in what was then a colonial world. During the mid-part of the twentieth century, the key focus became the state and its associated geographical characteristics most notably territory and borders. To a considerable extent this phase was strong on description of political phenomenon but weak on analysis. The last few decades of the twentieth century, however, saw something of a rebirth of the subdiscipline as a consequence of the introduction of more radical and politically engaged perspectives. More recently still, elements of social theory have been incorporated both deepening and broadening its conceptual base. There is now a much more critical approach and a more diverse one being brought to bear on a subject matter that extends well beyond the realms of the state. While much contemporary political geography maintains a focus on what might be seen as 'big' politics (states, governments, etc.), there has been an increased concern with 'small' politics (local issues, gender, ethnicity, social identities). In this way, a whole swathe of topics have been added to the more traditional interest in territory, borders, and states.

Ideas and Developments

The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel has been attributed with the first major work to include political geography in its title – *Politische geographie*, published in 1897. Ratzel likened the state to an organism which needed further space or *lebensraum* in order to expand. This organic theory of the state could be said to reflect two main characteristics of much late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century political geography. First, it employed ideas derived from biology and other physical sciences and applied these to politics and society. Second, it reflected the view of Ratzel and others that geography and other branches of academia should be put into the service of the state. Ratzel was a supporter of German imperialism and his theories and his politics went hand-in-hand.

In the UK perhaps the most famous political geographer of the era was Halford Mackinder. He has been credited with attempting to shape the nature of geography in Britain in the early twentieth century and argued that the discipline should have objectives which were not just academic and educational but which should also serve the needs of politicians and business people. This vision of geography was a reflection of his own political views and he was at one time an MP and served as a British government advisor at the Versailles conference at the end of World War I. Mackinder is most remembered for his heartland theory or geographical pivot of history in which he suggested that, while sea power had served Britain well, technological changes, most notably the expansion of railways, meant that control over major land masses was of crucial importance. He argued the Eurasian landmass (essentially Russia) was of crucial significance and containing Russian expansion was of the utmost importance for Britain in its wish to maintain political prominence. Mackinder, like Ratzel, wrote from what can be seen as an imperial point of view. For all these ‘imperial’ political geographers their ideas were bound up with the influence of both physical features, such as mountains and rivers, and human geographical considerations on politics and their role in affecting the strategies of states. Their task, as they saw it, was the devising of practical geostrategies which could be utilized by political leaders.

Like his European counterparts, the US geographer Isaiah Bowman was an adviser to the government. Following World War I, he played a role in the redrawing of European borders in his capacity as a member of the US delegation at Versailles. While Bowman tended to see his contributions as detached and objective, his view of the world was mediated through the lens of US geostrategic interests. With his anticommunist views he endeavored to fashion a political geography reflective of US interests. At about the same time the German geographer Karl

Haushofer utilized and developed Ratzel’s ideas of *lebensraum*. Hitler’s subsequent use of the concept as justification for German territorial expansion meant that both Haushofer and his ideas were heavily criticized. The subsequent significant decline of geopolitics has been at least partly attributable to this tainted episode in its history.

In the 1930s and 1940s the American geographer Richard Hartshorne attempted to delineate the field of geography. More specifically he also sought to outline the sphere of political geography as a subdiscipline. He saw political areas, most obviously the state, as a central concern, which dovetailed with his broader view of geography as an idiographic discipline in which the region was the central object of study. The discrediting of geopolitics and the retreat of geography into a largely descriptive regionalizing phase meant that for much of the mid-part of the twentieth century political geography became preoccupied with the study of states and their borders. Issues of natural and artificial borders and theories of state evolution which likened these human creations to ‘natural’ phenomena were devised. While it would be simplistic to dismiss all of the work produced at this time, it has been seen as largely descriptive and politically conservative in its ‘naturalizing’ of the role of the state.

Recent decades have seen a significant rebirth of political geography stimulated by a number of methodological and theoretical developments. The dawn of a more quantitative approach in the 1960s saw political geographers work much more extensively with large volumes of data. This is most obviously reflected in the development of an electoral geography which cast light on such things as the importance of place and locality in voting patterns and the intersections of national issues with more local concerns. In exploring voting patterns attention was drawn to the ways in which neighborhood effects cross-cut broader political issues to produce particular spatial patterns.

Geography’s radical revolution brought about two key political geographic changes. Firstly it saw the introduction of more overtly structuralist perspectives into political geography and secondly it resulted in a very politicized geography. In the first instance a range of human geographical phenomena were analyzed within a broader framework. The impact of overarching social, economic, and political processes on people and places was emphasized. An example of this is the application of Wallerstein’s world systems theory in the work of Peter Taylor. Here, rather than seeing states in isolation, there is an emphasis on the complexities of an interstate system and the connections between long-term cycles of economic change and state stability and state structure.

The radical revolution within geography saw an intense politicization of the discipline. The 1960s saw the

promulgation of the idea that everything is political and hence all areas of geographic inquiry were infused with political connotations. Radical geographers began asking intensely political questions about the distribution of wealth and power, control over resources, issues of discrimination, development and so on, while advocating radical political change in order to eradicate inequality in its various guises. Territorial social justice became a key concern, while the idea of academic objectivity and neutrality was eschewed in favor of a politically committed geography designed to radically transform the unjust structures which resulted in gross inequities. This development reflected broader social and political turmoil in an era of US involvement in Vietnam, struggles against racism in various parts of the world, and the growth of the women's movement and environmental concerns. The resurgence of interest in political geography and the emergence of politicized geographers were reflected in the launch of the journal *Political Geography Quarterly* in 1982. This has subsequently increased its annual output and is now known simply as *Political Geography*.

More recently the influence of social theory in its broadest sense can be detected in some branches of research. Some geographers have explored aspects of everyday life and the ways in which political processes impact on people and inform their sense of identity. It is clear that politics affects us all in a myriad of ways. While older political geographies tended to focus on the world of formal politics and happenings in the 'corridors of power', more recent versions explore the everyday consequences of power and challenges to it. There has been a growing emphasis on the politics of identity, whether framed in terms of nationality, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or other divisions. Alongside this, and closely connected to it, a postmodern influence has focused attention on the discourses employed by different groups in relation to political space. There is an emphasis on diversity and allowing different voices to be heard. This has helped bolster earlier concerns with those at the receiving end of unequal power relationships. Similarly, using the ideas of Foucault and others, there have been explorations of the ways in which power operates and diffuses across geographic scales.

Major Themes

While political geography now embraces a wide range of concerns some core themes can be identified. Chief among these are:

- Territory and territoriality.
- State.
- Geopolitics.
- Nation.

- Identity and citizenship.
- Electoral geography.
- Environment.

These themes are not discrete and they cross-cut the more general geographic themes of space and place. As noted earlier the themes examined and the approaches adopted owe a lot to shifting paradigms within the broader discipline. The regionalist, empiricist, structuralist, and postmodern perspectives in particular are all apparent within the work produced within the past 50 or so years. By the same token, the scales of analyses have varied from the global through the national and regional down to the local. More recently, the interconnections between different scales of analysis have been emphasized. The local impacts of more national or global political processes or policies are one example.

Territory and Territoriality

Territory refers to a bounded geographic space with territoriality referring to the attempts to control that space. Traditionally 'formal' political territories (most obviously states) were the main concern of political geographers but more recently territory at a more informal level has come in for scrutiny. Thus, we can think not only of territory defined by the borders between countries but also reflected in everyday life when we are confronted with signs saying 'authorized personnel only', 'keep out', 'no trespassing', 'strictly no admittance', and so on. The idea of the home as private space and territorial divisions in the home based on divisions between adult and child space or on gendered divisions of labor are examples of more micro-scale territoriality.

Some strands of thought have 'naturalized' territorial behavior as something innate in humans. In this view the claiming of geographic space is seen as natural and defense of territory is seen as a biological urge. Others have viewed this in more social terms and, utilizing the ideas of Robert Sack, have seen territory as a key organizing device and territorial behavior as a means of retaining or resisting political power. From a political geographic perspective, territorial behavior might be viewed as a geographic and political strategy designed to achieve particular ends. In this way, the control of geographic space can be used to assert or to maintain power, or to resist the power of a dominant group. It follows from this that territories, whether, states, regions, counties, workplaces, the home, are not natural entities but the outcomes of a variety of social practices and processes in which space and society are linked. It is easy to regard territories as spatial containers but they are much more than that. They serve to convey messages of authority, power, and control. Issues of territory and territoriality are seen to be key underpinnings for many political geographic issues.

Geopolitics

Geopolitics is sometimes defined as the geographical dimensions of power (and hence seen as synonymous with political geography). It has tended to be concerned with international relations and in particular with the geostrategic concerns of major powers. The work of Ratzel and Mackinder are early examples of geopolitical writing with an emphasis on the geographic bases of political strategy. Different geopolitical eras can be identified characterized by changes in hegemonic power from the colonial era dominance of the likes of Britain and France, through the USA–USSR rivalry of the Cold War, to the current military dominance of the United States. As well as examining the geopolitical strategies of states and political leaders, geographers have pointed to the role of maps and mapping, together with ideas of environmental determinism (closely linked to scientific racism) as mechanisms through which colonialism was facilitated and justified. Within the Cold War there are clearly demonstrable geostrategic elements within US thinking. These included the invoking of the Monroe Doctrine (with the Americas as the US sphere of influence), the propounding of domino theory (that once one country fell to communism others would follow), and territorial strategies of containment (prevention of communism spreading beyond its existing ‘borders’).

Much traditional geopolitical writing tended not just to be written from the perspective of a particular geographical and ideological standpoint but also from an assumption of inevitability. The development of a more critical geopolitics through the work of people like Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby has created a more politically challenging perspective on global political issues. Here the emphasis on *realpolitik* is challenged by a view which refuses to accept the inevitability of current power relations and which affords the possibility (and desirability) of radical change. A strand of this is exploring the geopolitical discourses used by governments and political leaders. The ways in which places and regions are reduced to their strategic significance within global power politics is reflected through the use of particular terminology. For example in the 1980s former US President Ronald Reagan referred to the then USSR as an ‘evil empire’. In a similar vein, the current Bush administration in the US conjured up an ‘axis of evil’. These constructions and others such as some Islamic fundamentalist characterizations of a ‘decadent’ West can be read as geopolitical discourses designed to frame events in particular ways. The current ‘New World Order’ has been viewed in various ways ranging from Samuel Huntington’s famous (and somewhat reductionist) exposition of a ‘clash of civilizations’ to David Harvey’s political-economy perspective in which current US geopolitical strategy is seen to be driven by territorial

and capitalist imperatives and closely linked to resource control.

As well as the more obvious discourses emanating from politicians, geopolitical discourse has also been explored through film and other media. The ways in which events such as the Vietnam War have been framed by filmmakers or the worldview refracted through publications such as *Reader’s Digest* are examples of the ways in which people, places, and events are represented and through which particular ideologies (often using simplistic representations of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ and particular constructions of concepts such as ‘freedom’) are disseminated and reproduced.

State

The division of the world into bounded political units, commonly referred to as states, is the best-known example of formalized territories and of political–territorial organization. As a consequence, the state has long been a central element in political geography with a focus on various facets of the state including their origins, spatial development, key properties, roles, and functions. Traditional approaches in political geography have tended to take the state for granted. However, while it may be the dominant form of political territorial organization in the contemporary world, it has not always been so. Nevertheless, the state has been naturalized in much political geography. Geographers such as Ratzel developed ‘organic’ theories of the state which likened it to a natural entity which needed living space. Others devised theories of state growth in which it was argued states evolved through phases from youth to maturity, similar to rivers. These ideas can be seen as part of the broader trend of devising theories of political behavior analogous to natural processes. Ideas of state stability or instability were often linked to state size in terms of either land area or population and the extent of internal regional differences, whether physical, economic, or cultural. These centrifugal or centripetal pressures would help to determine state stability or instability.

Conflicts between states, especially border disputes, have also been a focus of attention. While earlier consideration of borders tended to explore distinctions between natural boundaries (such as rivers) and artificial boundaries (lines of latitude or longitude, for example), more recent perspectives have broadened to examine borders, not just as lines dividing territories, but as social and discursive constructs which can have important ramifications in people’s everyday lives. They may have a profound impact on people’s ability to travel and on a whole range of ‘ordinary’ activities. For some, such as nomadic groups, borders may be irritants that disrupt their social practices. Some borders are more significant than others; the French–Spanish border is less significant

than the Polish–Russian one as the former separates two member states of the European Union (EU) while the latter marks the Union’s eastern boundary. The collapse of communism led to a weakening of the borders of the Eastern European states many of which are now incorporated into the (theoretically) borderless EU. The Italian–Slovenian border became relatively open with the accession of Slovenia to the EU, an event symbolized by the removal of the border fence separating the Italian town of Gorizia from its Slovenian counterpart Nova Gorica (**Figure 1**). Alongside the easing of border controls within the EU there has been an increased hardening of its external perimeter. Various measures have been implemented making it more difficult for migrants to get into the EU, particularly those attempting to enter from African countries. Similarly, while the US–Mexico border is relatively permeable for those traveling South, it remains a sizeable barrier for Mexicans heading North.

Geographers have also been instrumental in exploring the role and functions of the state. While some have concentrated on the visible role of the state as regulator and service provider, others have delved into political theory to explain its functions. Questions about the relationship between state, society, and the role of the state within a capitalist economy have been addressed. Ideas of the pluralist state as a neutral arbiter between various competing interests have been challenged by those who see its role intimately bound up with a capitalist system. Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony have been used by some to indicate the role the state plays in reproducing dominant ideologies.

The various processes sometimes conflated under the generic heading of globalization have led some to herald

the end of the state as a meaningful political entity as a world of demarcated political spaces is replaced by increased flows of capital, labor, information, etc. It is suggested that the state’s role as the sovereign authority over its own territory is much diminished. Contemporary political trends have focused attention on the ways in which sovereignty is asserted and contested whether through global processes, secessionist nationalism or supranational institutions such as the EU leading some to predict the end of the state as a viable political–territorial entity. However, others argue that, far from disappearing, the state will continue to play a key role. At the time of writing, the US (a state) has recently invaded Afghanistan, Iraq and, appears to be contemplating the invasion of another, Iran, with a view to reshaping these in a way that suits its geopolitical ambitions. This hardly signals the demise of the state as a territorial phenomenon.

Recent decades have also seen the ‘rolling back’ of the state in many countries as public services have been increasingly privatized. In countries such as the United Kingdom, this has been accompanied by an emphasis on partnership arrangements between various statutory and nonstatutory bodies, alongside an apparent attempt to involve community groups in decision making. This reflects what some see as the fragmentation of authority from the central state and has led to a shift in emphasis in research from government to governance reflecting the increasing range of organizations involved to a greater or lesser extent in service delivery and decision making. While this has resulted in more diffuse patterns of service provision it does not in itself diminish the role of the state as an arena of political socialization or as a regulator of economic (as well as social and cultural) activity.



Figure 1 Wire fence separating Gorizia and Nova Gorica.

While the state remains a central object of study within political geography, it is now recognized that states are historically contingent, they are dynamic, and they reflect processes through which territory (and those living in that territory) are controlled. More recently there has been a move away from the more traditional 'taken-for-granted' view of the state. More structuralist approaches have focused on the broader context in which states exist. Here the incorporation of world systems theory by Peter Taylor has focused attention on an interstate system and the interactions of states. The complex web of power relationships within which states are embedded led some such as John Agnew to be wary of state-centered thinking and he cautions against falling into what he has termed the 'territorial trap'.

Nation

Alongside a focus on the state, geographers have also explored ideas of the nation, national identity, and the political-territorial ideology of nationalism. A nation can be seen as a collection of people bound together by some sense of solidarity, common culture, shared history, and an attachment to a particular territory or national homeland. While history (whether actual or 'invented') is central to the nation's being, its right to exist usually rests on claims to a particular national space and, within this, particular places and landscapes often assume a symbolic importance. In exploring the connections between place and nation, three different levels can be identified. First, we can see the connections in allusions to the 'generic' territory of the nation. References to the national soil, the area of land seen to belong to the national 'imagined community', abound within such discourses. In this way fighting for, or even dying for, the land are seen as supreme acts of patriotism, ensuring that the land does not fall into 'foreign' hands.

The second territorial element is the importance attached to generic features which acquire huge symbolic significance. In this way particular landscape features such as rivers, lakes, or mountains, take on a much deeper meaning. Otherwise 'ordinary' landscapes are imbued with huge symbolic meanings to the extent that they come to be seen as emblematic of the nation.

A third territorial component of relevance to discussions surrounding the nation is the significance attached to particular places, not just generic features. In this way, the White Cliffs of Dover come to symbolize England (and, by extension, Britain) thereby acquiring a meaning which extends well beyond their geographical location. In some instances this can have quite serious ramifications with particular places seen as worth defending due to their national symbolism. For example, Kosovo has assumed almost mythical status for many Serbs as it is seen as a region central to Serbian territory

and identity. In this way its loss would be likened to a rupturing of Serb identity. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s witnessed the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing justified under the guise of purging 'others' from land seen as being 'Serb' or 'Croat'. This can be seen as an attempt to 'purify' places and territories of those not seen as possessing the appropriate ethnonational identity.

The territorialized manifestations of national conflict are not just about the nation's macro-territory but also about its micro-level outcomes. In this way the geographies of ethnic division, such as the religious divides which run through Northern Ireland, become important objects of study along with the territorial markers which signify those divisions. The proliferation of 'peace walls' and of wall murals in the religious and politically divided city of Belfast signifies territorial defense and separation from the 'other side' (Figure 2). Equally support for secessionist nationalism is reflected in the landscape through political graffiti in places such as the Basque country where slogans and posters in the Basque language call for independence from Spain (Figure 3).

Identity and Citizenship

Geographers have also been interested in changing notions of citizenship and the relationships between individuals and the state. Established ideas of rights (granted by the state) and duties (obligations to the state) have been extended to encompass broader questions such as relationships, duties, and obligations to those beyond the borders of the state (distant others) or to the environment. Similarly questions have been raised, not just about individual rights, but collective rights in respect of particular groups (such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, sexual minorities) and attention has been drawn to the ways in which political structures, processes, and policies impact on such groups. Rather than the traditional notion of the relationship between the individual and the state, geographers and others have begun to explore the contested spaces of citizenship.

Overt discrimination against particular groups denies them 'real' citizenship and these divisions in terms of social identity are often manifested spatially. Some forms of discrimination are overtly obvious such as apartheid in South Africa from the 1950s through to the early 1990s with its designation of particular spaces for racially defined groups. Some lead to extreme outcomes as with ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia designed to secure territory for specific ethnonational groups or the massacres of Rwandan Tutsis by the majority Hutu in 1994. Religious identity (closely intertwined with political affiliation) in Northern Ireland has created highly segregated social spaces with well-defined residential divisions separating Protestants from Catholics (see above). The *banlieues* of Paris are both physically separate



Figure 2 'Peace wall', Belfast.



Figure 3 Graffiti calling for Basque independence, Bilbao.

and socially distant from the heart of the city, cut off by a ring road (the *périphérique*) from the center and isolated from each other. Urban riots in the poorer *banlieues* on the edge of Paris in 2005 spread to other French cities. In these areas of high unemployment younger residents, many of North African immigrant origin, gave violent expression to their feelings of social and spatial alienation.

A concern with social identities and with minority groups has intersected with broader political questions of

the relationship between the state and those who live within its borders. If citizenship relates to ideas of democracy and participation then legitimate questions can be asked about the barriers or constraints placed on some groups limiting the extent to which they can participate. Such concerns overlap with a heightened interest in questions of identity, social movements, and diversity. Cultural geographies, influenced by a post-modern emphasis on difference and diversity, have focused attention on both the multitude of social identities



Figure 4 Anti-war march, London.

and the unstable, contingent, and relational nature of these identities. Groups have arisen with the aim of highlighting concerns over the attainment of particular goals linked to equality and esteem. Quite often these are identities which have been suppressed or largely ignored whether sexual, ethnic, or religious. The ways in which groups negotiate the political landscape or create political spaces are of interest. The emergence of gay spaces such as the Castro district in San Francisco or West Hollywood in Los Angeles has both enhanced the political power of sexual minorities through place-based politics and may also have served to diminish the negative perspectives of others toward these groups. That the emergence of such gay spaces is also associated with commercial factors (and forms of gentrification) may have mixed benefits.

Within this there is a risk of promulgating essentialized or fixed ideas of identity rather than a recognition of multiple or many-layered identities. A person may be French, black, gay, and the relative importance of these to the individual may vary from time to time and from place to place, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Ideas of more active citizenship have been encouraged by government through what might be seen as 'approved' channels, such as Neighbourhood Watch schemes in the UK or through involvement in community groups. The emphasis placed on community development, partnership working, and local capacity building reflects this. However, other versions of active citizenship may be less welcome by governments. Political protests in the form of such things as anti-war marches, anticapitalist protest,

and attempts at reclaiming private space from commercial development are less likely to enjoy government support (**Figure 4**).

Increasingly, citizenship is seen as multilevel and as not just national but both supranational (through attempts to create a sense of Europeaness, for example) and international (such as promotion of ideals of global citizenship with responsibilities for those beyond our own borders). Rather than a state-centered view of citizenship, there are attempts to view it at spatial scales both below and beyond the state.

Electoral Geography

Probably the strand within political geography which most overtly followed a quantitative approach has been electoral geography. Within the geographical study of elections three broad concerns can be identified. These are the geographies of elections (forms of transfer of power), of representation (types of electoral system), and of voting (spatial patterns of voting behavior). The first explores the ways in which power is transferred, whether through elections or through more 'irregular' processes such as a military coup. Geographies of representation examine such things as the nature of electoral systems (e.g., first past the post or proportional representation), the existence of centralized or federalized systems, and the construction of electoral boundaries and associated issues such as gerrymandering. Ideally electoral boundaries should be constructed in such a way as to ensure roughly equal numbers of voters. However, population changes may render this difficult and political parties

may have vested interests in maintaining levels of over- or under-representation in certain cases.

It is perhaps the study of voting behavior where geographers have raised the most interesting questions. Spatial analysis of voting patterns has revealed that voting behavior is not just a function of party allegiance and ideological disposition. There are neighborhood or locality influences which may reinforce or override other factors. Events such as the closure of a local industry or the reputation of a candidate and her family in an area may be strong determinants of voting behavior. Ron Johnston and colleagues have examined the shifting geographies of voting in the United Kingdom where broader national trends intersect with more local factors. In Worcestershire in England, the election of an independent MP campaigning against the downgrading of a local hospital in UK elections in 2001 and 2005 is an example of the potential impact of local factors. More broadly the extent to which some parties have a broad national appeal while others have a more local or regional support is also of interest. This is particularly evident in countries such as Italy (with a north-south split) and Belgium (with an entrenched linguistic division) where some political parties have an explicit sub-national focus.

Environmental Politics

Growing environmental concerns of recent decades have prompted interest among some political geographers in a variety of themes. These include issues of conflicts over resources and the role that resources such as oil or indeed water may play in generating political conflict whether at regional or global scales. A concern with global issues such as climate change and global warming has emerged alongside a consideration of such things as campaigns against road-building programs in parts of Britain. While these latter might be seen as local place-specific issues they can also be viewed as part of broader environmental campaigns bringing together issues of pollution, landscape esthetics, and the preservation of biodiversity.

The growth of green politics has led to the study of environmental organizations, their nature, composition and tactics, and the environmental discourses used by various groups (including both campaigners and political parties). Other areas of interest include political events such as the Earth Summits and the subsequent filtering down of environmental policies to regional and local authorities, the general rise of green political parties, and the incorporation of green concerns into the policies of mainstream parties. Policies such as those of the French state in carrying out nuclear tests in its Pacific territories rather than in mainland France combine a set of issues linked to environment, place, and politics.

A good example of an issue in which a range of political arguments can be seen to coalesce and which links places together and is multiscalar in nature concerns plans by the Shell Oil Company to bring natural gas onshore at Rossport in the west of Ireland for processing via a high-pressure pipeline. The plans, which enjoy the support of the Irish government, have met with popular local resistance with overlapping concerns related to land ownership (some local farmers have been faced with compulsory purchase orders by the state), health, and control of resources. Local opposition is linked to broader national arguments within Ireland over who benefits from the exploitation of national resources (Shell is a multinational company and the Norwegian state company Statoil has a stake in the gas field) and to environmental campaigns outside the country. In addition, links have been forged with Nigerian activists where Shell has been a focus of opposition due to its activities in Ogoniland and elsewhere in the Niger delta (referred to below). In this example issues of local and national politics intersect with questions of place, resources, and environment.

Politics of Geography

Another take on political geography is to examine the interventions made by geographers into 'live' political issues. It should be obvious from what has already been said that much political geography is far removed from the model of detached academic neutrality much touted in various circles. Instead, the imperialist leanings and political biases of the likes of Mackinder, Ratzel, and Bowman have been obvious. The ways in which political geographers have interacted with those in the world of 'real' politics have varied over time. It could be said that many geographers, particularly in the past, saw their role as supporters of those in power and their work as serving clear political ends. More recently many geographers have seen their role more as one of a critical observation and a questioning of accepted orthodoxies rather than a willing subservience to power. Among other things this has involved focusing attention on the complicity of geography in colonialism, for example, and casting light on the political agendas underpinning some geographical research and the ideological nature of much 'objective' research.

Here are three relatively recent examples of geography and politics intersecting in a very direct way:

Shell in Nigeria

Throughout the Niger Delta region the activities of Shell have proved controversial in terms of allegations of environmental damage and human rights abuses. In the region of Ogoniland local activists and environmental campaigners have argued that Shell brought little if any

benefit to local people and that their activities were detrimental to the environment. The execution of nine Ogoni activists (found guilty of hotly disputed murder charges) by the Nigerian government in 1995 precipitated a debate among members of the Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers (the body to which many professional geographers belong). Shell was a corporate sponsor of the organization and debate centered on whether a learned society or professional body should continue to accept sponsorship from Shell. Those opposed felt that the company's environmental record and its questionable benefit for the people of Ogoniland rendered it inappropriate to retain such links with the company. In the event the sponsorship was retained but many academics left the society as a consequence. The episode precipitated debates over (among other things) the links between activism and the academy, the implications of commercial sponsorship for academic integrity, and the moral and ethical values held by geographers.

Academic Boycotts

The issue of an academic boycott of Israel has recently exercised the minds of some geographers. Calls for a full academic boycott of Israeli academic institutions have been circulating for some time. These have emanated both from Palestinian groups and from academics in other countries. There have been repeated calls in some quarters for a series of sanctions (of which an academic boycott would be one component) designed to isolate Israel as a consequence of its policies on the Palestinian question. The argument rests on the view that Israeli academic institutions have done little if anything to question the policies of their governments in relation to the Palestinian question. Some point to the earlier boycott of South Africa during the apartheid era as a basis for such a tactic in trying to bring about political change.

More specifically the academic boycott issue intruded directly into the policies and workings of the journal *Political Geography* in 2005. Controversy over whether or not to accept an article by Israeli-based academics promoted a flurry of media coverage and an exchange within the pages of the journal itself. On the one hand there are arguments surrounding academic freedom, the primacy of free speech, and the need to engage in open dialog, while on the other there are calls for a recognition of the legitimacy of boycott as a tactic to try and bring about pressures for change. Debate continues over the issues of the morality, equity, practicality, and effectiveness of such actions.

Elsevier and Arms Fairs

A recent political issue with which some geographers wrestled concerned the links between Elsevier

(publishers of this encyclopedia) and the arms trade through two associated companies which, among other things, organize arms fairs. Elsevier are a major international academic publishing company which produces a range of books and academic journals including *Political Geography* and many saw their connections with arms fairs as a very unsavory activity. A number of academics signed a petition calling on the company to sever its connections with this trade while others (many geographers among them) called for a boycott on publishing in, or subscribing to, Elsevier publications (including this one). Following this pressure and disquiet from the public and company employees, the firm has agreed to withdraw from this activity. In engaging with these and similar issues, geographers are dealing with the messy realities of 'real' politics and tensions that emerge involving issues of personal and career motivations to publish and disseminate ideas, political beliefs, and matters of conscience, ethics, idealism, and pragmatism.

Summary

Political geography is a diverse and ever-changing field of geographic enquiry. As such it defies easy definition. It has moved from being an account of the distribution and arrangement of power at different (though overlapping and interdependent) geographical scales to a consideration of how power diffuses across different scales. The workings of political networks, the drugs trade, terrorist organizations, environmental campaigns, and many other political issues operate across geographical scales. While this account has perhaps given the impression that political geography has evolved in a linear fashion, that is not the case. People like Elise Reclus and Peter Kropotkin wrote geographies heavily influenced by their anarchist beliefs and critical of big power politics as long ago as the late nineteenth century.

A key criticism of traditional political geography has been its state-centeredness. The uncritical assumption of the state as a 'natural' political unit has been replaced by attempts at a deeper exploration of the nature of the state and its reasons for existing. Another criticism is linked to the focus on a traditional politics centered on the state and ignoring other political issues. The state is now seen as only one of a number of actors (albeit a very powerful and resilient one) to which attention needs to be directed.

Another key change within political geography (and human geography more generally) has been the shift from the supposedly objective 'view from nowhere' to the clear acceptance of the idea of positionality on the part of the academic. While many may accept the 'situated knowledge' approach, it is not universal with some academics continuing to promulgate an academic objectivity that many others see as unsustainable.

Political geography has been shaped by a variety of influences including intellectual currents within the broader discipline and political events and practices beyond the academy. It continues to evolve and displays considerable vibrancy both in terms of the range of issues now considered and the variety of approaches brought to bear.

See also: Apartheid/post-Apartheid; Bowman, I; Community; Difference/politics of difference; Environmental determinism/environmental geography; Hartshorne, R; Harvey, D; Identity politics; Kropotkin, P; Mackinder, H J; Maps and Colonialization; Maps and Geopolitics; Maps and the State; Nation; National Identity; Nationalism; Neo-Liberalism; Political Boundaries; Post-modernism/post-modernist geographies; Radical geography; Ratzel, F; Reclus, E.

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