

Chapter 1

Introduction

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In a photograph that won a prize in the *Overcoming the Wall by Painting the Wall* exhibition mounted by the museum at Checkpoint Charlie in West Berlin in 1989, Ziegfried Rischar has superimposed a hand breaking through the Berlin Wall that had divided the city from 1961 to 1989 to offer a white rose to an outstretched hand on the other side. It was poster art such as this that carried the messages of many of the protagonists of the “velvet revolutions” that swept through Eastern Europe and into the Soviet Union in the years between 1980 and 1992. The Cold War division of Europe, symbolized most graphically by the Berlin Wall, had to be overcome and replaced by a new, nonantagonistic relationship between “East” and “West.” This particular poster is also representative of the sense – wildly popular at the time in Eastern Europe – that old barriers were breaking down and a new world order was about to dawn. Many such hopes have been dashed. Certainly, most of the old barriers have come down. But new ones, such as restricted entry into the European Union, Russia’s exclusion from the European “club,” and gated communities protecting the affluent from the impoverished, have replaced them.

Human history has rarely seen such a crystalline moment of change as November 9, 1989, when thousands of cheering people climbed upon, dismantled, and overcame the Berlin Wall by passing through it unimpeded. The revolution of ordinary citizens breaking through a geopolitical division in the heart of Europe was the culmination of a long struggle by new social movements to create a cultural space that challenged and moved beyond the geopolitics of the Cold War. With the mass media in the hands of authoritarian Communists until the very end in Eastern Europe, these social movements gave expression to their principles and aspirations in artistic creations and urban street activities. “1989,” one commentator noted, “was the springtime of societies aspiring to be civil” (Ash, 1990, p. 147). Vaclav Havel, later president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, noted: “In November 1989, when thousands of printed and hand drawn posters expressing the real will of the citizens were hanging on the walls of our towns, we recognized what power is hidden in their art” (quoted in Smithsonian Institution, 1992, p. 25).

At least two lessons seem to emerge from the events captured by Rischar's image. One is that the last decade of the twentieth century was one of the most dramatic periods in the reordering of the world's political geography. Between 1945 and 1989, most political leaders and commentators around the world thought that the Cold War geopolitical divisions were more or less permanent. We now know better. In fact, with hindsight we can see that geopolitical order and the relative barrier to movement and interaction posed by national boundaries have never been fixed but always historically contingent (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). We can also see that power is not simply concentrated in the hands of states and other organizations (such as transnational corporations and the mass media), but is also a capacity available to people when they mobilize collectively to realise their aspirations (as social movements and new group identities) and pursue their material and symbolic interests. One of the great surprises of 1989 was how the commitment of vast masses of people overcame the coercive apparatus of the states arrayed against them. Of course, we should not be naïve enough to think that coercion could not have worked if external conditions (such as the absence of Soviet military intervention) and internal changes (such as the demoralization of police forces) had not been favorable. "Resistance" does not in itself guarantee political success (Sharp et al., 2000).

What is Political Geography?

We begin this *Companion to Political Geography* with the theme of divisions and power because of the centrality of orders and borders to contemporary "political geography." As an area of study, "political geography" has changed historically but the themes of borders and orders, power, and resistance are always central to its operation. For us, political geography is about how barriers between people and their political communities are put up and come down; how world orders based on different geographic organizing principles (such as empires, state systems, and ideological-material relationships) arise and collapse; and how material processes and political movements are re-making how we inhabit and imagine the "world political map." Barriers are not only global or international, but also operate between regions within countries, and between neighborhoods within cities. They are conceptual and ideological as well as economic and physical. Politics is likewise not simply state-oriented, but includes the collective organization of social groups to oppose this or that activity (such as land-use changes they do not like) or to pursue objectives that transcend political boundaries (such as environmental or developmental goals). Political movements can be open and inclusive, asking critical questions of power structures and always pushing at the limits of human freedom of expression and how humans can live. Alternatively, they can be exclusive and closed to change, radically seeking a return to an idealized past or simplified moral universe, containing and corralling the possibilities of human freedom.

Reflecting on the historical evolution of "political geography" is instructive in situating what we have gathered in this volume to represent contemporary political geography. The use of the term "political geography" dates only from 1750 when the French *philosophe* Turgot coined it to refer to his attempts to show the relationship between geographic "facts," from soils and agriculture to settlement and ethnic distributions, to political organization. Political geography, in other words, was

conceived as a branch of knowledge for government and administration – as state knowledge. As a self-confessed sub-area of academic Geography, the term is even more recent, dating from the 1890s. As reinvented at that time, the field was particularly oriented to justifying and providing advice about the colonial ventures in which the Great Powers were then engaged (Godlewska and Smith, 1994). The word “geopolitics” was also invented in the 1890s, by the Swedish political scientist Kjellen, to refer to the so-called geographic basis of world politics. In the 1920s this word was expropriated by a group of right-wing Germans to offer justification for German territorial expansion. Thereafter disavowed for many years by professional geographers, the word has undergone a recent revival both in the hands of politicians and among political geographers. The former use it to refer to “hard headed” global strategies, whereas the latter are typically interested in how geography figures in the making of foreign policies (Parker, 1998).

But with respect to the political organization of earthly space and the links between places and politics, political geography pre-dates use of the term as such. From this viewpoint, it is an ancient enterprise with such venerable practitioners as Aristotle, Thucydides, Sun Tzu, and Livy and more recent exponents as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Madison, Rousseau, and Hegel. Thucydides’ (Strassler, 1996) idea of the fundamental opposition between sea- and land-powers – exemplified for him, respectively, by Athens and Sparta – has repeatedly been recycled as a key idea in modern geopolitics. A book published as recently as 1999 is organized around it but without citing the great man himself (Padfield, 1999). Far-right geopoliticians from South America to Russia and the United States still evoke variants on such radically simplifying deterministic categories (on Russia, see Smith, 1999). Jean Gottmann, possibly the greatest political geographer of the twentieth century, saw each of the historic figures in political thought wrestling intellectually, among other things, with how space is and should be organized politically. He was rightly critical of much of what had been made of them by later generations (Gottmann, 1952, 1973).

Early twentieth century political geography was largely in thrall to the great nation-states of the time, reflecting the common thinking of the era across most fields in the social sciences. A tendency to read geography in largely physical terms was combined with a reductionist understanding of politics as the activities of states and their elites. Thus, successful states were explained in terms of their relative location on a world scale and the resource bases they could exploit. Much effort was taken up with exhaustive accounting of state assets and with boundary disputes of one sort or another (see Kasperson and Minghi, 1969). Little or no attention was paid to politics outside the purview of states or to normative and ethical questions about the nature of rule or the “best” type of political organization for this or that problem. There were exceptions, such as Gottmann (1952) and Wilkinson (1951). But they are the exceptions that help to prove the rule.

Since the 1960s, the field has gone through a long period of reinvention using very different theories and methods than those that characterized political geography in the first part of the twentieth century. Although still focused broadly around questions of political territoriality and boundary-making, the old interest in global geopolitics has been revitalized in various types of “critical geopolitics” which problematize powerful geopolitical discourses (Ó Tuathail 1996), and new research areas, such as place and political identities and geographies of ethnic conflict,

have been engaged (e.g. Miller 2000). This revitalization has produced a veritable explosion of research and publication, including new journals and new research organizations.

Currently, three broad currents of thought run across the field. One adopts a spatial-analytic perspective to examine geographic patterns of election results or international conflicts and relate these to place differences, the spread of democratic practices, or the global pattern of interstate hostility (see, e.g., O' Loughlin, 1986 and chapter 3, this volume). A second takes a political-economic approach to understanding the historical structures of global political dominance, hegemonic competition between Great Powers, the development of a new geopolitical order based around major world cities (such as New York, Tokyo, and London), and the political economy of "law and order" [see, e.g., Glassman, 1999; Helleiner, 1999; Herbert 1997; chapters 4 (Taylor) and 29 (Gleeson and Low), this volume]. A third sees power as always mediated by modes of representation or ways of talking about and seeing the world [e.g. Hyndman, 2000; Ó Tuathail, 1996; chapters 6 (Slater), 18 (Shapiro), 19 (Till), and 20 (Krishna), this volume]. In this postmodern approach, international conflicts are understood in terms of the competing narratives or stories each side tells about itself and the other, nationalist identities are seen as constructed around popular memories that need repeated commemoration and celebration at sites of ritual or "places of memory," and groups invent or maintain identities by associating with particular places and the images such places communicate to larger audiences (see, e.g., Sharp, 2000). These currents are hardly sealed off from one another and innovative thinking frequently works across them. But as a rough and ready way of characterizing the theoretical structure of contemporary political geography the threefold division has considerable merit.

We would argue that three influences have helped to raise the profile of political geography around the world after a long period of intellectual stagnation following World War II (particularly during the early Cold War). The first was the slow erosion of the intellectual grip of the Cold War mentality beginning with the Vietnam War and ending with the Soviet collapse. In a wide range of fields the Cold War had intellectually stultifying effects (see, e.g., Siebers, 1993). Not surprisingly, given its subject matter, political geography was especially affected. Cold-War thinking led to a refusal on both sides to consider the historical character of geopolitical arrangements, a tendency to see each side as concentrated entirely in the capital cities of the two major (non)combatants, a freezing of international boundaries around the world to diminish the chances of military escalation if local conflicts brought in the two Superpowers, and national security states that were put beyond question for domestic criticism or proposals for alternative security arrangements. The final collapse of the Soviet Union was the icing on the cake, so to speak.

The second has been the recruitment into the social sciences in general and political geography more specifically of people from a wider range of geographic and social backgrounds. At one time, political geographers were overwhelmingly European and American males from upper and middle class backgrounds in the various Great Powers. Today, this is much less the case. This diversification of backgrounds has undoubtedly encouraged perspectives less oriented to the central political importance of states – particularly the Great Powers – and research interests that focus on the problems and prospects of subordinated social groups and identities.

The third is the synergy with a number of powerful intellectual influences originating both within Geography and in other fields. Good examples would be the influence of that political-economic thinking which originated with radical economic geography in the 1970s and the infusion of feminist approaches over the past twenty years. More recently, the variety of intellectual movements and trends grouped (often crudely) under the labels “postmodernism,” “poststructuralism,” and “postcolonialism” have underscored the significance of the issues political geographers struggle to engage: de-territorialization and re-territorialization, the macro- and micro-geopolitics of states and systems of control, space, power, and place. These influences are examined in several chapters of this book.

Together these trends have produced a contemporary political geography that is dynamic and diverse, an intellectual enterprise open to geographers and non-geographers that is distinguished by the critical nature of the questions it asks and the themes it pursues. We have no doubt that the themes and questions that distinguish contemporary political geography will change over the coming decade. Just as the collapse of the Berlin Wall was one of the most important events at the close of the twentieth century, the destruction of the World Trade Center in Manhattan after terrorist attacks (9.11) is one of the defining events of the opening of the twenty-first. The attacks were shocking reminders of the still active legacies of the wars of the late twentieth century, wars that left Afghanistan destroyed and then ignored after its utility as a Cold War pawn ended, and Saudi Arabia as an explicit American protectorate after Iraq’s ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The “blowback” from these geopolitical wars of world ordering took the form of a transnational network of radicalized Islamic militarists, *Al-Qaeda*, that declared a *jihad* against the perceived oppressive and corrupt empire of the United States [see chapter 15 (Luke) in this volume]. Networks are organizational systems that do not rely on sharply hierarchical arrangements, but rather, work through embedded, relational linkages. In contrast with slower and more inventory-intensive organizational hierarchies, networks allow fast and flexible movement in response to a rapidly changing environment. Celebrated as the organizational future of capitalism by Wall Street in the 1990s, networks were suddenly powerful because advances in information technology allowed them to function in such dynamic and flexible ways. Informational system networks have also transformed the practice of geopolitics since the end of the Cold War. Many of the same principles of relational, nonhierarchical linkages, and flexibility are evident in the rising power of non-state networked organizations, including transnational criminal and terrorist networks (e.g. Castells, 1996). While the borders of states remain vitally important and legal, and legitimate networks must negotiate with the political geographic order established by states, illicit and covert transnational networks such as *Al-Qaeda*, coordinate activities *through* and *around* state territories in a manner that eludes border controls and challenges territorial sovereignty in a novel way.

The geopolitical questions and moral dilemmas posed by events like 9.11, bioterrorism, and the open-ended war on global terrorism that followed are reminders of the continuing relevance of political geographic themes of (b)ordering in contemporary global affairs. This volume is the first *Companion to Political Geography* but it will certainly not be the last collection covering the best that political geography has to offer.

Approach and Organization of the Volume

This book is not a survey of the history of political geography or of its “great thinkers.” Neither is it a dictionary nor an encyclopedia. A dictionary is a compilation of technical concepts. An encyclopedia is an official record of a field. This is a “companion.” As such it is designed to both guide a reader through the main concepts and controversies of the field, and offer fresh and stimulating perspectives on the range of topics covered in contemporary political geography. The purpose is to introduce you to the energy and vitality of research and writing that characterizes today’s political geography. Many of the authors are geographers, because in Anglo-American universities most of what goes for political geography is undertaken by geographers. Yet there are also many chapters by those working outside of Geography in other disciplines and domains of knowledge. Political geography has always been interdisciplinary, so it is both limiting and disingenuous to limit authorship to geographers. We have tried to recruit authors who are active contributors to the contemporary field rather than simply senior figures or professional commentators.

The overall purpose of the volume is to provide advanced undergraduate students and graduate students, and faculty both inside and outside political geography, with a substantive overview of contemporary political geography. Our interest is not so much in empirical findings as in the ideas, concepts, and theories that are most debated in the field today. We hope that the essays convey a sense of the intellectual dynamism and diversity that presently characterize political geography. The chapters collected herein differ not simply by the topics they address but by the heterogeneity of perspectives, positions, and analytical frameworks they articulate. Yet while there are many “voices” in the volume – and undoubtedly some “silences” too – the conversation they make possible is political geography at its best.

The book is organized into six sections. The first, *Modes of Thinking*, provides an overview of the philosophical diversity of the field. This is necessarily selective. But it does cover what we consider the most significant modes of thinking in past and contemporary political geography. As our orientation is primarily to the present we cannot possibly provide a survey of all modes of thinking that have affected political geography. Following the first essay, which examines the content and impact of environmental determinism, subsequent essays explore in turn the spatial analysis tradition, Marxism, feminism, and postmodern approaches to political geographic questions and themes. These perspectives differ considerably in terms of their assumptions, theories, and methodological emphases. Essays in later sections cannot avoid taking positions in relation to these modes of thinking. Whether oriented to conceptual analysis or substantive themes, they cannot but situate themselves in relation to one or more of the modes of thinking. It is important to bear this in mind as you read the essays in the other sections.

The second section addresses what are arguably the most important concepts in political geography. These *Essentially Contested Concepts* are power, territory, boundary, scale, and place. The purpose is to survey the range of meanings associated with these concepts and show how they figure in different theoretical frameworks and substantive studies. The point about calling these concepts “essentially contested,” a phrase drawn from Gallie (1956), is not to suggest that there are such

profound disagreements about their meanings that they cannot be communicated to “non-believers.” Rather, the purpose is a “rhetorical stratagem” to “call attention to a persistent and recurring feature of political discourse – namely, the perpetual possibility of disagreement” (Ball, 1993, p. 556). Indeed, this disagreement is to be valued as a resource for making present and future conversations restlessly critical and self-reflexive.

One of the motifs that connects contemporary political geography to its past is that of “geopolitics.” In its most recent manifestation, geopolitics has reappeared in political geography as *Critical Geopolitics*: the study of the ways in which geopolitical thinking has entered into the practical reasoning of politicians and mass publics and how formal geopolitical analysis both represents and communicates essential features of the “modern geopolitical imagination.” The essays in this section cover the competing imperial geopolitical visions at the beginning of the twentieth century, Nazi geopolitics, Cold War geopolitics, “postmodern” geopolitics, and the century-long tradition of resistance to geopolitical discourse which forms an “anti-geopolitics.”

Another historic focus of political geography has been on *States, Territory, and Identity*. If in the past the relationship between the three elements was often taken for granted, today it is the subject of intensive investigation. Four of the most important substantive foci of contemporary research are opened up in this section: nation-states, places of memory, boundaries in question, and transnational regions. The intent is to provide a sense of how these phenomena are examined from political–geographic perspectives.

More recently, much energy has also gone into exploring *Geographies of Political and Social Movements*. Here attention is directed to the geographic formation and mobilization of groups directed towards affecting, disrupting, undermining, and supporting various policy goals and institutional frameworks. The classic focus on political parties and elections is the subject of the first essay. The following essays consider nationalism, religious movements, civil rights and citizenship, and sexual politics. Reflecting the politics of the day, these are all “hot” topics in contemporary political geography.

Last, but by no means least, political geography has begun to engage once more with questions of the physical environment. As part of Geography this might appear appropriate and unsurprising. But if in the past a causal arrow was seen as running from the physical environment to political outcomes (as in local geology causes predictable electoral outcomes!), today the interest is in how the natural environment is (mis)managed politically and how this generates political activities of one sort or another. *Geographies of Environmental Politics* addresses this emerging area of political geography with essays on the geopolitics of nature and resources, green geopolitics, environmental justice movements, and the appearance of planetary environmental politics.

The essays in the later sections can be read without having read the first two sections. It is our conviction, however, that a more informed reading of the more substantive essays would result from some familiarity with the modes of thinking and concepts examined at the outset. The hope is that you will come away from this book with a well-versed sense of the wide range of topics and approaches in contemporary political geography. We also hope that you will identify gaps and openings for your own research and writing – “silences” that need to be articulated.

In the final analysis, and in spite of the diversity, we hope that you see a common objective at work: to understand the ways in which people divide themselves up geographically and use these divisions for political ends. This is no small task in a world still stratified by barriers and walls of many kinds.

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