

Revisiting Mackinder 1904–2004

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These thoughtful articles reflect constructively on Mackinder's 1904 Pivot paper, documenting the ways in which his ideas were transposed to other parts of the world and interrogating his very imperial geopolitics a century on. In revisiting Mackinder for this centenary issue, I am reminded that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Geographers continue to probe the edges of empire, as critics, patriots, and scientists.

Mackinder's 'panoramic view of global imperialism' (see Blouet, this issue) can be juxtaposed with more current occupations, such as 'pre-emptive protection' in Iraq. Mackinder's observation of the shift from sea to land power under the rubric of colonialism may be outdated by contemporary military might, but his imperial logic of geopolitical influence is not. From another perspective, Hardt and Negri (2000) argue in *Empire* that the United States holds a position of privilege and power in an empire without a centre, one transformed not by the advent of air or land power but by the informational mode of production. One cannot, of course, read Mackinder outside of the strategic debates and international relations of his time (see Venier, this issue), nor can we interpret his 1904 writing in the context of current debates, but tracing critically the ways in which imperial visions are developed and deployed is as relevant as ever.

From Mackinder's 'imperial protectionism' (Blouet, this issue) to the Bush Administration's 'pre-emptive' war in Iraq, thinking about geopolitical strategy appears to have changed less than one might like to believe. Mackinder's pivot theory interprets and portrays 'other' landscapes in a detached, neutral manner that naturalizes people and place and scientifically justifies 'intervention' (see Hepple, this issue). For the Bush Administration, in contrast, the 'axis of evil' is vilified in dominant geopolitical discourse, underwritten by scientific claims about the existence of weapons of mass destruction, yet the same kind of justification for imperial invention is made.

Gerry Kearns and Pascal Venier (in this issue) argue that the Pivot paper demonstrates the policy

relevance of geography in aiding statecraft. Specifically, Kearns contends that Mackinder's strongly imperialist view of geography alienated liberals and socialists alike, but also threatened the intellectual integrity of the discipline by over-politicizing geopolitical discourse. Operating at the intersection of geography, history and empire, it becomes clear that Mackinder's geopolitical analysis prescribes a geopolitical strategy of empire as much as it derives from an imperial geopolitics, a tautology that Mackinder did not resolve. Gerry Kearns (this issue) notes that 'Mackinder was constructing a subject that would train imperial minds' during what was arguably the pinnacle of British imperial power.

The natural resources of the pivot region made its control vital for Britain to become the world's economic superpower, as Nick Megoran (in this issue) argues. One cannot ignore the parallel concern with US access to oil reserves. Even if the government of Saudi Arabia has been a US ally since the 1940s (Sidaway 1998), significant sections of Saudi society object to American forces (or contractors) on Saudi soil. Geographers might ask how the US has left Saudi Arabia without appearing to 'withdraw'? Some have traced the ways in which the Gulf came to occupy centre stage in the US strategic gaze. As James Sidaway (1998, 235) shows, the dominant representations of the Gulf War in 1990 were directly linked to the geopolitical rhetoric of Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski in the 1970s: 'Their version of what must be done for the "new world order" was resolute and did not allow for alternatives. This new order is full of recycled and new scripts of threat-danger'. The importance of prying apart the geohistorical antecedents of dominant geopolitical discourse could not be clearer; without 'alternatives' a second Gulf war was imminent.

Significant connections between the US and Central Asia were also forged during the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (when oil and gas interests prevailed), only to resurface under related guises after 9/11. In December 1997, Taliban leaders met with US State Department officials

and UNOCAL oil executives in Houston, Texas. Turkmenistan, which borders on Afghanistan, holds vast gas reserves and an estimated six billion barrels of oil reserves. Assured access for an oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea, oil and gas reserves to the Indian Ocean would decrease US reliance on Middle Eastern sources (Chossudovsky forthcoming). Such connections, however, were not part of the scripts employed to underwrite the 'war on terror' against the Taliban, launched in the wake of 9/11.

Critical geopolitics and imperial geographies

Where does geography find itself one hundred years later? While the training of imperial minds in the context of a behemoth British Empire is surely a relic of Mackinder's era, the events of 9/11 have ushered in a new context for imperial geopolitics. Authored in the name of collective security, the 'war on terror' is also a powerful, if misleading, rationale for the invasion of Iraq, the torture of prisoners (aka 'enemy combatants'), the suspension of civil rights, and the invasion of privacy. As Mayell (in this issue) notes, the events of 11 September 2001 consolidated a renewed notion of 'global interconnectedness' through common insecurity. Most disconcerting within the discipline of geography are writings about 'how to' fight terrorism (Cutter *et al.* 2003; Beck 2003) which have featured rather too prominently – in my view – compared with more critical perspectives that explore 'why terrorism?', 'whose terror?', and its geohistorical antecedents (Gregory 2004a; Flint 2003; Hyndman 2003).

Critical geopolitics is vital to these emerging debates about empire. A school of political geography and international relations that scrutinizes and interrogates the power relations embedded in dominant geopolitical narratives, critical geopolitics represents an important intervention into the imperial imaginations of 'great men' and the grand narratives they promulgate (Sharp 2000). As Dodds and Sidaway wrote a decade ago, 'From this position, challenging conventional geopolitics means problematising the geo-optical supports (ways of seeing, sites of production) that underwrite and undersee geopolitical traditions' (1994, 518). In one such example, the ways in which the bipolar landscape of the Cold War gave rise to widespread geopolitical political thinking predicated on the domino theory has been analysed in depth by Joanne Sharp (1999). The domino metaphor viewed the spread of Communism or socialism simply as a result of proximity to Soviet-controlled territory, a theory that proved historically and geographically inaccurate, but held sway nonetheless during much of the Cold War. Sharp unpacks the moments and

momentum behind such thinking, which has clear parallels with Mackinder's Pivot paper.

Within geography, '[c]ritical geopolitics is one of many cultures of resistance to geography as imperial truth, state-capitalized knowledge, and military weapon. It is a small part of a much larger rainbow struggle to decolonise our inherited geographical imagination so that other geo-graphings and other worlds might be possible' (Ó Tuathail 1996, 256). Critical geopolitics has succeeded in *exposing* our colonial geographical imaginations, but I am unconvinced that it has gone very far to decolonize them. Part of the problem is that most 'critical geopolitics' is predominantly written and consumed in the academy of current and former imperial centres.

In the same vein, there is a real risk that in perfecting critical geopolitics as an intellectual mode of deconstructing imperial truths, it fails to have political valence. As Simon Dalby cautions, 'recent debates under the rubric of critical geopolitics are always in danger of becoming discussions of social science method rather than engagements with politics, discussions of the relative merits of various theorists rather than critiques of the geopolitical reasoning in vogue in world politics' (2003, 4). Normative ontological commitments at crucial junctures must be made within the journals of geography, but also in the op-ed spaces of newspapers and in everyday encounters with the 'war on terror'.

Matt Sparke (2000) distinguishes between 'real-worlders' and those critical geographers who are committed to revealing the relations of power that underwrite the knowledge production of 'real-worlders'. Yet, partly because the real-worlders are unwilling to question the premises on which their knowledge is enabled and limited, they are able to promote imperial visions and ambition. They aim to make the world according to their 'real' sense of it. What then are the possibilities for alternative worlds? Can the normative claims of critical geographers, who are perhaps more willing to question the production of their knowledge but no less wed to it, not also intervene to create subaltern and other non-imperial geographies? I think so.

Feminist geopolitics

Whereas the militarized politics of 'real-worlders' are problematic (among other things they tend to be complicit with state tactics of violence), feminist geopolitics draws on deconstructive impulses of critical geopolitics and its project to expose investments in dominant power relations *and* makes a space for other normative engagements. Such an approach is not without risk or compromise, yet it

promises possibility beyond the intervention of critique. Feminist geopolitics attempts to develop a politics of security at the scale of the (civilian) body. It decentres state security, the conventional subject of geopolitics, and contests the militarization of states and societies. Like critical geopolitics, feminist geopolitics is not a new theory of geopolitics nor a new ordering of space. It is an analytic politics that is contingent upon context, place, and time (Hyndman 2003).

A feminist analytics of geopolitics incorporates heightened transnational economic integration, political transformation, and social dislocation (Dowler and Sharp 2001). Feminist geopolitics is committed to exposing and transforming imperial knowledge production. How so? Highlighting the rarely cited body counts of Iraqi civilians and juxtaposing these with the well-publicized body counts of American soldiers and civilians, for example, exposes certain silences, and foregrounds more embodied security concerns: 'There has never been a greater need to untwist the separations between "us" and "them" than the present moment of danger' (Gregory 2004b, 7). Ultimately one must change what counts as security, for whom, and present alternate versions of seeing the 'war on terror'. In the wake of 9/11, there is a space for proponents of critical and feminist geopolitics to reconfigure the 'real-world' and its dominant representations by introducing other ways of seeing.

Given my brief critique of imperial knowledge production and the grand scales at which it takes place, does Mackinder's Pivot paper hold much relevance to geographers a century on? One response is to argue that a more embodied and finely grained analysis of geopolitics (critical and feminist), is a necessary path to decolonizing the 'big-picture' geopolitics that continues to dominate our political landscape. As Paul Kennedy (2004) notes in his review of both Mackinder's Pivot paper and Niall Ferguson's book, *Colossus*, Mackinder was not shy of the big picture. In the Pivot paper, successive waves of invasion were seen to be the norm and to be warded off by preemptive imperial manoeuvres. Reviewing Ferguson, Kennedy notes how imperialism has come to be understood more as the exertion of undisputed influence than as the formal annexation of another land. The British empire is to the nineteenth and early twentieth century what the US is to the twenty-first. 'When a single country has 368,000 people in its national service overseas, in 120 other countries... it is rather hard to avoid using the term imperial' (Kennedy 2004, 18).

Felix Driver (2003) raises a related issue in a provocative editorial in which he notes that 'regime change' was a standard strategy in the armoury of

the British Empire, employed in both Afghanistan (the late nineteenth century) and in the establishment of Iraq (post-World War I). Driver also notes that dominant geopolitical discourse has not changed much in the interim, despite efforts within the academy to deconstruct the politics of knowledge production. Neo-orientalist accounts remain common in the context of Afghanistan and Iraq: 'what is really striking about our present predicament is not the deployment of knowledge in the service of power, but quite the reverse: the strategic uses of ignorance as a weapon of warfare' (2003, 131).

In *The colonial present*, Derek Gregory (2004a) probes the construction of 'terrorists' in the aftermath of 9/11, noting their representation as murderous messengers and perpetrators in an inevitable 'clash of civilizations'. This now well-known story, most commonly associated with Samuel Huntington, has its origins in a 1993 essay by Orientalist Bernard Lewis, but is recast in a way that fits the 'civilizational invasions' of 11 September. Imperial representations of geopolitical conflict remain embedded in the colonial present. 'Big picture' geopolitics remains a compelling, if highly flawed, way of seeing the political world. Critical geopolitics can destabilize these visions and feminist geopolitics will develop alternatives where none are offered. As Gerry Kearns (this issue) notes, Mackinder's Pivot paper 'showed one way geography might be relevant to current affairs'. It still is.

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