Contemporary political geography: intellectual heterodoxy and its dilemmas

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I think that there is a field called political geography that has a set of conventions and subject-matter but which is fluid with respect to the empirical content and theories that characterize it at any specific time. What joins it together is a focus on a set of concepts and research questions that persist over time devoted to exploring geographies of political power. What divides it are theoretical and methodological differences over how best to define concepts and pursue research questions.¹

The revival of the field since the 1960s has not yet produced a single orthodoxy that dominates the field as a whole. Achieving this might be everyone’s goal, but rather like World Empire under modern global capitalism it forever remains outside anyone’s grasp. Heterodoxy, therefore, can be expected unless and until a hegemonic bloc imposes its authority. I would like to do so, but I have met with resistance. From a radically democratic perspective, however, heterodoxy is a good thing in itself. This is so not only because it does not insist on a “one size fits all” conception of theory and methodology but also because it finds contention, critique, and disagreement to be sources of intellectual invention and the enemies of complacency.

Much of what is of interest to me in contemporary political geography is exciting precisely because there is more limited agreement than was once the case in political geography and is the case today in some other fields (such as economic geography). By analogy, political geography is like Canada or Italy, a complex entity in imminent danger of collapsing under the weight of its internal differences. But for this very reason each is more interesting to the political geographer than, say, Luxembourg. Economic geography is like Luxembourg: an agglomeration economy with integrated forward and backward linkages but with little or no relevance to geographical vari-

¹ I have provided a justification for this perspective in Agnew (2002a). Many of the points in the following commentary are developed at greater length in this book.
ation at a world scale. I see absolutely no basis, therefore, for the feeling of “inferiority” to fields with orthodoxies that have more and more to say about less and less.\(^2\)

This is not to say that there are not significant problems with contemporary political geography that stand in need of sustained attention. It is just that the absence of an orthodox or authoritarian paradigm is not one of them. I see at least four dilemmas with the present field that need addressing, if not resolving.

The first of these is that too much of what is passed off as political geography (in the main journals such as Political Geography, Society and Space, Space and Polity) is not very geographical. By this I mean that much of it travels under the banner of multi- or trans-disciplinarity with geography as the term which licenses it: the synonym for “anything goes.” I estimate that well over half of the articles in Political Geography and three-quarters in Society and Space in the period 1996–2001 have what I would consider extremely limited geographical content. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with such work. But there are journals already devoted to it, so why not publish in them? Surely, political geography involves the application of geographical perspectives and concepts to political issues of various types with an emphasis on the geographical? In my view, we need to refocus publication in our major outlets around such concepts as territory, space, place, network, and scale.\(^3\) Articles with no or desperately limited geographical content, as represented by such concepts, should be submitted elsewhere. The point has wider implications than simply imposing a “content rule” on journals. It represents a symbolic decision to commit to the geographical element in political geography. Without it we have little or nothing new to add to available perspectives from comparative literature, cultural studies, development studies, film studies, and political economy. As we all know their uses of geographical concepts are often deeply problematic and need critical scrutiny from those who have been thinking about them for much longer.

A second dilemma I see is that much of what is labeled as political geography is not very political. Often the political is read off from the economic or the cultural such that this or that economic interest or cultural identity, respectively, is more the subject of analysis than is the organizing of political agency in pursuit of this or that interest or identity. Under the influence of economistic varieties of neo-Marxism (particularly those of a heavily Leninist cast), ethnic identity politics, and essentialist versions of feminism the distinctively political (and the agency that comes with it) has disappeared into analyses that presume superorganic categories which determine political outcomes. Politics is already determined before anyone engages in it. These narratives of hegemony are so totalizing that they put me in mind of the superorganic theory of culture promoted by the anthropologist Leslie White in the 1940s and


\(^3\) This reflects my claim that the history of fields is best thought of in terms of the history of their central concepts. Unfortunately, geographers have tended to a biographical approach to the history of their fields (great men and their ideas). See Agnew et al. (1996), General Introduction.
1950s.\textsuperscript{4} In White's view, culture (substitute discourse, economy, etc.) is an independent, self-moving order of which human action is merely the expression. The individual person, White wrote, is like a pilotless airplane controlled from the ground by radio waves. To criticize this superorganic conception of critical categories is not to endorse a liberal and individualist conception of political action but only to suggest that politics must be (1) the fruit of agency and (2) organized rather than predetermined.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, the overemphasis on determining totalities (culture, discourse, patriarchy, capitalism, etc.) is not only politically disabling, it also limits the possibility of learning from others and incorporating their insights into reformulated theories.

An open debate about the meaning of the political in relation to the economic and the cultural is long overdue in political geography. If there is one feature of traditional political geography that does need jettisoning it is the obsession with the ideal-typical "state" Though this concept does give the field a focus it is one that comes at a very high cost. One of the healthier results of the liaisons with cultural geography and political economy has been the drift away from identifying the political with "the state." From this point of view, the state is only one way, albeit an important one, of organizing politics. Not only are there many types of formal polity at a range of geographical scales and with a range of powers, there is also politics in many other social and economic institutions—households, firms, universities, and non-governmental organizations of all sorts. Yet, political geography textbooks are still largely organized with reference to and obsessed by the "state." One would like to see a little more self-consciousness about the actual geographical incidence of this "state," the history of statehood in various world regions, the differences in operational "reach" and infrastructural power between different states, and the emergence and significance of other forms of politics.\textsuperscript{6}

Finally, political geography has been slow to examine the normative aspects of many of the concepts it draws on and uses such as sovereignty, equality, justice, democracy, and citizenship. These tend to be regarded as if they had simple dictionary definitions rather than long and contested histories. One need, therefore, is to engage more fully with the literature in political theory that addresses these concepts and how they relate to such key political-geographical concepts as territoriality and place.\textsuperscript{7} Another is to be more openly normative in approach to the questions we engage; to argue in favor of territorial or other geographical arrangements that are plausibly more democratic, etc.\textsuperscript{8} Currently, we tend to hide our normative commitments behind empirical claims and positive theoretical arguments as if these had no relation to questions of values. Rather than bringing in our beliefs and values by the "back door," so to speak, we need to discuss them explicitly and relate them to long-

\textsuperscript{4} White (1949), White (1959).
\textsuperscript{5} I provide one way of addressing this problem in Agnew (2002b).
\textsuperscript{6} For different attempts at doing so, see, e.g., Ferguson and Mansbach (1996) and Magnusson (1996).
\textsuperscript{7} Perhaps the outstanding example, providing the exception that has proved the rule, is Gottmann (1973). For some of my contributions in this area see, e.g., Agnew (1994) and Agnew (2001).
\textsuperscript{8} See, e.g., Anderson (2002).
standing controversies in political theory. Political theory is one field that political geographers would definitely benefit from engaging with much more closely than is currently the case.

Defending heterodoxy is not the same thing as defending “anything goes.” Far from it. At the same time that I would defend the variety of theories and methodologies in contemporary political geography as evidence of excitement and innovation I would insist on the need to define more carefully what it is we do that differs from others. We need more truth in advertising. What is our value added, a university Dean might ask? An anarchist or libertarian might object that this is to endorse enhanced policing and disciplining of the field. Of course this claim is correct, but only in the equivalent case that having a personal identity requires defining what you are not and what you do not believe. One polices oneself all the time. But it misses the point that if we are to have an intellectual division of labor and we value our position in it, and I see no real alternative in the contemporary academic world, then we should do a better job of representing and promoting our place. This is where we could really improve ourselves.

References