Future directions in political geography

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Concerns about the state of political geography seem to surface periodically. In the mid-1980s, a number of authors voiced their concern about the endless diversity of approaches and lack of theory in political geography (Dear, 1986; Kirby, 1986). Kevin Cox and Murray Low in their original statement for the Panel discussion noted that "today, political geography seems to be more fragmented and 'unevenly developed' than its cultural and economic neighbours". My first reaction to this was that may be we are conferring on economic and cultural geographies a unity of purpose or theoretical cohesion which they do not have? Economic geography, though revitalised, has not expunged the more traditional concerns and analyses. Cultural geography, in its engagement with postmodernist approaches and identity politics, is being subjected to criticisms for its tendency to over emphasise the representational and the textual, and in doing so dematerialise human geography (Philo, 2000). Critiques of landscapes without peoples (Kofman, 1996) and the failure to address social relations in specific places at specific times (Smith, 2000) have been levelled at critical geopolitics which has been strongly influenced by the cultural turn.

In questioning the state of political geography, it is important that we adopt an historical perspective in examining the development of political geography, and what has either influenced or had little impact on it. There seems to be an assumption amongst some critics that the problems of political geography are its failure to incorporate the kind of changes introduced through cultural geography, as for example, the attention paid to the everyday. Cultural geography supposedly deals with the everyday, whilst political geography does not. If this is the case, why not? Political studies and political geography too have had their protagonists of the everyday. The polemical feminist slogan of the 1970s 'the personal is political' was intended to challenge and contest the notion of the political, which was now to be seen everywhere and a matter of everyday relations; the political was no longer to be segregated

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and equated with the formal domain. Interestingly, so too did Pounds (1972) argue for considering the everyday as a valid focus of political geography when he pointed out “people act politically every day of their lives, and their actions are no less susceptible of political analysis than those of the decision-makers in the nation’s capital;” (p. vii). Unfortunately, the primacy of the state continued to overwhelm political geography. And Anglo critical geopolitics, which is the area most influenced by cultural considerations, has continued to focus on elite actors. However, now that the state no longer reigns supreme in our understanding of political processes, it is about time that political geographers brought the everyday fully into their analyses (Flint, 2002), whilst recognising that there are different theorisations and conceptualisations (Gardiner, 2000) and that feminist scholars have much to contributed theoretically and methodologically, to this issue beyond studies of gender relations.

We might also want to ask why political geography seems uninviting for some compared to cultural geography. This goes beyond the absence of the everyday in its analyses. It applies especially to theoretical discussions of feminism, anti-racism, sexuality and other facets of political identity which typically do not find a place in the journal Political Geography (Kodras 1999: 78). Although political questions may be coming to the fore more than ever in human geography, this raises the issue of what is distinctive about political analysis as opposed to a generalised politicisation of issues. Are there degrees of the political? Have we possibly dissolved the political too much in our quest to deconstruct dualisms, an endeavour particularly associated with feminist geography. Fincher (forthcoming) has questioned the degree of dissolution of the political where everything is now being seen to be political and suggests that it may be helpful to separate the content of political action from the actual spheres in which it occurs (Staeheili, 1996). Implicitly connecting action, activism and spheres are political subjects who operate at different scales and in different places and times. And these subjects may not have a conventional interpretation of what constitutes the political or activism, as studies which seek to understand the politics of non-participation (specifically in relation to formal political processes such as elections) among a group of young people in the UK (O’ Toole, 2002), indicate. For many young people challenging racism and sexism and being involved in community activities were regarded as political. The sites of activity too may well be different to previous generations. A sense of agency and self, not just for the elites of geopolitics, states or international organisations, is what cultural geography has managed to convey, and which there is no reason why political geography should not do as well.

There isn’t necessarily a contradiction between a heightened interest in political questions within human geography and the existence of something called political geography as a sub-discipline. Feminism was one of the radical movements in the 1960s and 1970s, along with anti-racist, environmental, gay and regionalist movements amongst others, that exploded the realm of the political, and demanded a whole series of rights and/or a more inclusive citizenship. The agendas of these movements are played out at different scales ranging from the everyday and local to the global. And no longer do we speak of government but also of governmentality and governance which have in turn also modified our understanding of the political
and its regulatory institutions and instruments. It is not simply a matter of noting
that human geographers deal with many issues that have been politicised. There is
a role for political geography which should be grappling with and incorporating
increasingly complex relationships between political subjects, actions, scales, sites
and institutions. For me this requires some understanding of political theory, practices
and processes.

A second point I would like to raise are some areas where political geography
would benefit from engaging with, not just passively but actively through joint initia-
tives. These are political theory and legal studies which have proved immensely useful
in my own specialist area of migration and citizenship. For Held (1989), political
theory makes claims about the operation of the political world; it is concerned with
the nature and structure of political practices, processes and institutions. It also
interrogates key concepts such as democracy, community, justice, and equality, yet
political geographers have for the most part failed to explore how it might be rel-
vant. Of course, the lack of interaction between political theory and geography may
well be due to the fact that political theorists have disregarded the spatial in their
conceptualisation of political processes and ideologies, a very different situation to
that which prevails between cultural theory and geography. Another area of relevance
is constitutional and sociological legal studies which interrogate the regulation of
political units and their boundaries. Few geographers have embraced either area,
although Nick Blomley and Audrey Kobyashi have worked closely with socio-legal
scholars. Drawing on recent socio-legal studies on European borders, for example
by Ryzard Cholewinski and Elspeth Guild, gives new meanings to the notion of
borders, a very traditional political geographical topic. Increasingly geographers cite
the significance of human rights in the regulation of societies that are based on
philosophical, political and legal principles, and hence make knowledge of develop-
ments in this literature more necessary than ever.

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