

THE ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION *to* CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS



Edited by
**KLAUS DODDS, MERJE KUUS
AND JOANNE SHARP**

The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics

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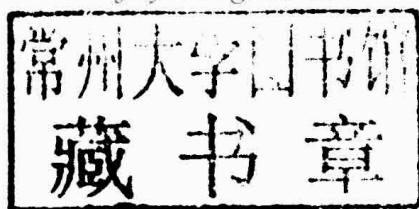
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Foreword

Arguing about Geopolitics

Gerard Toal/Gearóid Ó Tuathail

On a mountain top, two men gaze upon a city below. The local explains to the visitor: 'After Turks came, after the Kosovo battle, those Serbs who didn't accept Islam have been pushed to the mountains, out of valleys, out of good, good country ...'. The visitor interjects with an interpretation: 'So the traditional imposed geopolitics ...'. To which the local responds: 'Geopolitics, geopolitics. Exactly!' The year is 1992, the city Sarajevo, the local Radovan Karadžić, and the visitor, Russian writer Eduard Liminov. A few minutes later, Liminov takes a turn firing a heavy machine gun with a sniper scope at civilians in the city below.¹

Was Radovan Karadžić practicing a critical geopolitics when he led the establishment of a secessionist state within Bosnia–Herzegovina in 1992 and when this statelet's army committed war crimes, including summary executions, forced displacement and genocide, against Bosnian civilians? There is little doubt but that he thought so. Karadžić's opening defense of his actions before the International Criminal Tribunal on the former Yugoslavia in The Hague described him as defending 'the greatness of a small nation in Bosnia–Herzegovina which, for five hundred years, has had to suffer and has demonstrated a great deal of modesty and perseverance to survive in freedom'.² As he saw it, his actions were in opposition to what empires had determined, what Communists had imposed (unfair borders), and what the great powers of the West wanted to dictate.

The term 'geopolitics' is a covering word that over the last hundred years has diffused beyond particularly modest origins to become a popular name for a variety of forms of thought and practice. These can be classified in terms of four

¹ This scene is captured on film by Pavel Pawlikowsk in his documentary *Serbian Epics* (BBC films, 1992) (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tH_v6aL1D84>).

² Karadžić trial (IT-95-5/18-I) ICTY, Defense Opening Statement, 10 Mar. 2010, 1. <<http://www.icty.org/case/karadzic/4>>.

overlapping themes, all of which concern the operation of power structures across space. The first concerns the earth and physical environment and is preoccupied with the influence of material geographic factors in shaping forms of power. The subject is one of many that concerned ancient Greek philosophers and finds full Enlightenment expression in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). The second concerns the relationship of state territorial power and demography, also has ancient origins, and finds expression in ideas like *Lebensraum*, social Darwinism on the map (to survive states need to expand their living space), and a horrific apotheosis in the Nazi *Generalplan Ost* (1940), which envisaged the clearing of vast areas of Poland and other East European lands for ethnic German settlement. The third concerns less the internal territorial basis of states than their competition with each other for material resources and advantage across the earth. Like the others it too has ancient origins, with the scope of the competition increasing as larger state apparatuses formed and acquired greater technological capacities to act across greater and greater distances. This theme was the one that preoccupied Halford Mackinder and provoked his important though flawed speculations on techno-territorial complexes, namely the relationship between transportation system infrastructures, prevailing so-called 'natural seats of power' and the organizational 'efficiency' of great imperial powers. Finally, wherever there were geopolitical practices, there were varieties of resistance and interference, attempts by small-localized powers to subvert and divert imperial structures to serve their own purposes or outright opposition to the territorial schemes emanating from distant capitals. The locals also learn, and practice their own miniature forms of oppositional geopolitics. This is the tradition within which we can locate Karadžić's geopolitical gaze, a fixing of the landscape before him as a legacy of imperial injustice. In his optic, time and space collapse into a mytho-epic present featuring imperial agents (Muslims/Turks) and unbowed heroes (his army) in the final battle for the soil.

Just as geopolitical practices long predate the coinage and later popularity of the word, so too do the practices that can be gathered up by the idea of a critical geopolitics. My first recollection of this specific term is in the review letter I received from the then editor of *Political Geography Quarterly*, Peter Taylor, for my article on the 'language and nature' of US foreign policy towards El Salvador. The year was 1984, and I was fortunate to be able to chat in person with Peter Taylor, visiting the University of Illinois at the time, about it. My initial negative reaction to the phrase was in keeping with a long tradition within political geography that sought to impose a purity line between my enterprise and the imperial work of geopolitics. That impulse to purification is still strong within political geography and has lead scholars (myself included at times) to positions that are utopian and arguably unserious. By 1996 my conceptualization at least (others were working similarly) was that critical geopolitics is not something radically new in the world. It is an intervention into the pre-existing world of geopolitical practices, is parasitic on those practices and is inevitably a form of geopolitics itself. It is already compromised, already caught up in the mess of the forces conditioning its practitioners and shaping how they act in the world in opposition to a perceived 'uncritical', orthodox' or 'classical' geopolitics. Acknowledging this situatedness

(and its problems) is a necessary methodological point of departure for the research that gathers under its banner.

This volume is an important moment in hoisting that banner even higher in the world. Gathered here are many of the best scholars working within the discipline of geography: thinking, writing and arguing about geopolitics as a formalized tradition, as complexes of different kinds of practice and as everyday structuring conditions and demands upon subjectivity. For this we need to thank the editors. As should become apparent, there is no shared formula for doing critical geopolitics and considerable debate about its conceptualization and blind spots. This is as it should be. Critical geopolitics is an effort to think critically about the world around us and to challenge inherited legacies of imperial practices in the name of greater emancipation. But, as the history of the man in the dock in The Hague reminds us, even these noble impulses can be subverted and turned into rationales for crimes against humanity. Practicing critical geopolitics in a morally complex world – one where the marginalized sometimes use terrorism while great powers claim to act in the name of universal human rights – is a lot harder and messier than it appears. It is the challenge of our time.

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