

# POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY



A new introduction

RICHARD MUIR

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For little **Kieran**, without whom this book would have been finished much sooner

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# Introduction

Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences.

Mao Tse-Tung, speech 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions' (1957)

When shall the saner softer polities/Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land . . . ?

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) 'Departure' (1899)

It is now some twenty years since I published *Modern Political Geography*. When this book first appeared, in 1975, the rehabilitation of political geography had scarcely begun (Muir 1976), though during the 1980s the subject reclaimed a position near the centre of the geographical stage, and its prominence has been consolidated during the 1990s. The two decades which span the publication of *Modern Political Geography* and that of *Political Geography: A New Introduction* cover a most formative period in the development of the subject and provide interesting bases for comparison.

Twenty years ago the 'Quantitative Revolution', which wrought such havoc and alienated so many gifted scholars, was still a considerable force in geography. As a young and relatively inexperienced lecturer, I felt obliged to represent a spectrum of quantitative techniques in my text – even though many seemed only to describe the obvious or to have been adopted in research as ends rather than means. Now, however, and in keeping with most current practice, I have felt no obligation to impose a quantitative dimension: this book is very largely a positivist desert; an equation-free zone. Yet at least 'spatial science' produced some useful counter-actions: behavioural geography expanded and reminded us again that people are human, while: 'A movement toward or, more properly, a reawakened awareness of humanist principles and aims over and against a preoccupation with the techniques of scientific rationality began to emerge. Humanism, as it were, was rediscovered as the central concern for a geography of man' (Ley and Samuels 1978, p. 1).

In the book of 1975, and more particularly in the revised edition of 1981 and in my work with Ronan Paddison, also of that year, I stressed the importance of developing a more politically erudite political

geography by establishing closer links with political science and International Relations, and of developing behavioural approaches as a means to understanding the processes of political perception and decision-making which serve to determine the nature of change effected upon the environment. These concerns are, to my mind, still central to political geography, and if interest in behavioural geography has, to some extent, gone off the boil, the post-modern fascination with deconstruction and discourse has definite links to the tradition.

Such ideas, however, are a matter of personal opinion. One happy and liberating aspect of the political geography of today (rather than that of a generation ago) is that there is now much more scope for individual judgement, sensibility and intuition. Long gone are the days when geography was expected to masquerade as an objective, dehumanised science. Those were the times when one might have imagined that the subject had a single, objective existence, one which could be divined by the initiates and imposed upon their disciples: the times when a mega-guru, such as Richard Hartshorne, could define a depoliticised political geography and then arbitrate on what the subject was, and was not, could or could not be. If we have not yet reached a point when all can simply accept that 'political geography is what political geographers do' at least there is a far broader toleration of diversity. And this, surely, is a mark of the greater maturity and confidence abroad within the subject. It is certainly true that neo-Marxists or structuralists will argue for one emphasis within the study of political geography and humanists for another, while pluralists will have their viewpoints and positivists will always be able to discover aspects that genuinely merit quantitative analysis. The important factor is that the prescriptive aspect has largely vanished from the rhetoric: the subject is much more inclusive than it was.

Today, at least in the UK, the teaching of political geography is dominated by structuralist perspectives, reflecting the fact that the two most prominent practitioners have, in their different ways, adopted Marxist- or neo-Marxist-based approaches, R. J. Johnston advocating a political economy perspective and P. J. Taylor having developed world-systems analysis in a geographical context. Despite their prominence, they have not escaped criticism, and several authoritative writers have criticised the reductionism inherent in Taylor's world-systems approach and faulted Johnston's interpretation of Marxism/structuration theory (Smith 1994 and Painter 1995).

Different approaches have their different merits, and while not seeking to suggest that one perspective on political geography is better than another, here I have developed and employed – though not slavishly – a humanistic approach. Within geography generally there

has been a cultural turn towards a greater toleration of diversity and the unpredictable, and a recognition that subjects as elusive as the spirit of place can still be of crucial importance. Writing in 1987, Brunn and Yanarella thought that 'the contributions of humanistic geography and humanistic political geographers are only beginning to emerge in contemporary thought and research' (ibid., p. 4). Indeed, so limited was the development of a humanistic approach to political geography at this stage that they were obliged to create their own definition, according to which HPG 'is concerned with uncovering the dynamic social processes whereby the spatial dimensions of the natural and social world are organized and reorganized into geographically delimited and symbolically meaningful provinces by national and transnational groups' (ibid., p. 8). Thus far, the definition seems quite conventional, but Brunn and Yanarella continue: 'Among its most important issues and themes would be the role of the state in creating landscapes that yield attachment to places (including symbols, images, etc.) and the place of different groupings in the recognition of meaning of territory in nation building and state formation' (ibid., p. 9). What emerges from this exploration is a very exciting, new, and vital political geography which embraces human consciousness, experiences and perceptions of place and politics, landscape, the elusive sense of place, territoriality and identification with politically organised spaces and groupings.

Active discussion about the place of political geography within the social sciences will continue. Some will argue that there is no independent political geography and that it simply exists to enhance our understanding of the much broader world of the social sciences. Others will prefer to regard the subject as a systematic branch of geography, comparable to the social, historical or economic branches. Most of the time such differences of outlook will not matter a jot. Meanwhile, the rising status of the subject is reflected in the publication of papers by workers in disciplines like political science and International Relations in geographical journals and by the invitations to geographers to contribute to political journals and collections.

Gone then are the days when it was assumed if unstated that geographical writing should be politically neutral and preferably apolitical – the discipline's (largely conservative) establishment being hostile to any potentially disruptive or controversial expression of political outlooks or moral beliefs: human sentiment should not intrude upon the study of humanity. During the last two or three decades these unrealistic constraints have largely been abandoned. This is much to be welcomed, for in a world riven by cultural conflicts and rivalries and threatened by ecological disruption geographers must be able to contribute fully and freely towards the salvation of the planet:

Geographers have much to offer by way of more cross-cultural and historical evidence from mankind's experiences in sociality and ecology. Attuned to the emancipatory role which humanist thought has played historically, too, they could reiterate at least the essential message that human reason cannot function without hope. Gaia's human envelope, the *anthroposphere*, needs to be understood as a drama more complex than simply as battleground of ecological versus economic rationality, but rather as *oecumene*, potential home for mankind, a species which urgently needs to discover the art of dwelling. (Buttimer 1990, pp. 27–8)

Political geography has become much more perceptive and erudite in its treatment of the subtleties of local political attachments – the politics of place – and it has become more concerned with the politics of identity, notably citizenship, gender issues and the politics of race. In the past, a preoccupation with state and nation may have obscured the close relationships between people, groups and territories which existed within, and occasionally even across, the sovereign boundaries. Fundamental questions concerning the (possible) biological basis of human territoriality are still routinely side-stepped by political geographers, though there is recent interest in territoriality as a form of social and political control.

The political geography of the mid-1990s is far better than that of the mid-1970s in respect of all aspects but one: communication. When Mackinder expounded his ideas at the start of this century, every educated man or woman in the English speaking world could understand and evaluate what he was saying. A generation ago, it would just about have been possible for a diligent geography graduate with a few years to spare to have read and understood everything ever written on political geography in the English language. Today the literature is far vaster – and this is good. Unfortunately, however, much of it is written in language that is overspecialised, ambiguous, jargon-laden, tortuous and, indeed, deliberately made difficult. Since the most influential political geographers of today – like Johnston, Taylor and O'Loughlin – manage to publish their work in language that is crisp and lucid, there can be no credible reason why others should not do the same. Perhaps editors should be more persistent in their reminders that the purpose of publication is the communication of knowledge?

Finally, I am indebted to Graham Smith of the University of Cambridge for his comments upon my text; various of his suggestions were incorporated, and where I have failed to follow his advice I have only myself to blame.

## ■ Chapter 1 ■

# The Politics of Territory and Place

I have heard by antient persons that at first there was onely three rows of Seates in Myddle Church, and that the space betweene the South Isle and the South wall was voyd Ground, onely there was a bench all along the South wall. And that afterward Bayliffe Downton built for himselfe a large wainscott peiw att the upper end of this voyd ground, and Thomas Niclas of Balderton Hall built another nexte to him, and after, all the rest was furnished with formes.

Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle* (c.1700)

Political geography is involved in studying human claims and conflicts concerning the use, partitioning and ownership of the land and its resources. Such disputes can occur at many different levels. They can involve neighbours squabbling over the proper positioning of posts holding up a garden fence; territorial claims between rival tribes or different national groups living within a single state; territorial disputes between adjacent states, or competitions for global influence between great power blocs. They can occur within as well as between societies – as when environmental and neighbourhood groups oppose tree-felling or road-building operations.

As the study of geography has evolved, we have grown to recognise that territory amounts to much more than a resource containing farmland, minerals or real estate, while place is more than a location on a map. The words ‘setting’, ‘locality’, ‘locale’, ‘territory’ and ‘place’ have been interpreted in different ways by geographers, but invariably there is a psychological and emotional relationship between people and the spaces within which they follow their day-to-day lives. Perhaps the most fundamental questions in geography are about place, while the most basic aspects of political geography concern the politics of place. As is often the case, however, it is the most basic question that is the hardest to answer. Geography, having taken place for granted for almost the first century of its academic existence, has recently struggled to develop a doctrine of place. Frequently, lucidity has been an early

casualty in this encounter, but gradually an understanding of places and their political associations is beginning to emerge.

The rediscovery of place is closely linked to the decline of spatial analysis (which so often condemned geographers to engage in sterile attempts at 'scientific' enquiry) and to the emergence of a new, humanistic geography, which delights in exploring the unquantifiable – like the nature, origins and effects of the human sense of place. Currently, human geography may be divided into three groups of activity and outlook: the positivist, the humanistic and the structuralist (Johnston 1990, p. 447). Positivists are interested in 'scientific' laws and quantification and will have little time for things like the emotional associations of place. Humanistic geographers regard the interaction between places and the human spirit as central to geographical enquiry. Structuralists, who include the supporters of Marx and World-systems theory, are interested in the way that a consciousness of places, like working-class neighbourhoods, may emerge in the course of struggles between workers and capitalism or in the ways in which places, like streets of industrial housing, may be products of a capitalist system.

## ■ Human territoriality

The most fundamental question that we can ask about conflicts involving the ownership and control of space concerns the biological basis of human territoriality. We all know that territorial behaviour is common in the animal world, and are familiar with images like those of howler monkeys howling at strategic points around the borders of their troop territories or the cock robin singing loudly from twigs spaced at intervals around the limits of his nesting territory. Such behaviour amounts to much more than ritual or self-expression; it broadcasts the claim of exclusive territorial rights to potential competitors from the same species.

The ethologist, Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1979, p. 41), described territoriality as 'space-related intolerance', while to Kummer (1971, p. 223) it was 'a field of repulsion . . . fixed in space'. The former explained the geographical justification of territoriality: 'If an animal population is to prosper, it must be spaced out in a way that avoids overpopulation of any particular area. By their aggressive behavior, animals exert a certain pressure on their conspecifics, enforcing their distribution over a wider area' (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1979, p. 40). Territorial conflicts are often stylised in ways that prevent serious injury to the contestants, while in some cases rituals substitute for physical contests of strength: 'Sea lions mark out a territory by making themselves as tall as possible

on their boundaries and barking across to their neighbor. The latter responds in the same way. Neighbors generally respect each other's territory, and fighting is rare' (ibid., p. 41).

But are human beings territorial in any comparable ways? In other words, is there an instinctive urge to acquire territory and then to operate an exclusive control over it? And to what extent are our urges to control space based in biological drives rather than the practical, economic necessities of survival? The topic of territoriality has been studied in some depth by political geographers, notably by Jean Gottmann (1973). Subsequently, Robert Sack (1980) produced a more intricate treatment, yet side-stepped a quite fundamental question when deciding that: 'I shall skirt the issue of whether human territoriality is a biological drive or instinct' (Sack 1983, p. 55).

In the animal kingdom, territorial behaviour offers certain distinct advantages. It helps, for example, to adjust the breeding population of a species to the available food resources or 'carrying capacity' by ensuring that only those pairs which have established control over territory will reproduce. Also, where breeding territories are held by pairs rather than by groups of animals, mates are only attracted to males who have demonstrated an ability to establish and retain a breeding territory. This helps to ensure that only the more vigorous and dominant males are able to contribute to the gene pool. Here, though, we can note that extreme sexual dimorphism (differences in size between males and females) amongst our ancestors seems to have come to an end as our distant australopithecine ancestors gave way to our human forbears:

Extensive body-size dimorphism, like that in baboons, is usually associated with intense competition among the males for access to females, and the males in the troop are usually genetically unrelated to one another. A reduction in body-size dimorphism . . . is usually associated with reduced competition among males for access to females, and the males are often genetically related. (Leakey and Lewin 1992, p. 163)

Opinions differ about the nature of human territorial behaviour. In 1967, the right-wing author, Robert Ardrey, published a popular book in which he argued that humankind was essentially aggressive and dominated by the urge to exert an exclusive control over space. In reality, his identification of human descent from a cannibalistic meat-eating ape, which was invoked to underpin his interpretation of human territoriality, has been shown to be flawed. The cave assemblages of bones and associated South African australopithecine remains have been found to bear indentations which correspond to the spacing of the



**Box 1.1** *Human nature*

Human nature is not something that can be extracted and analysed by scientific methods. It is of fundamental importance to our understanding of the social sciences – and much more besides – and yet it cannot exactly be defined. Therefore, human nature has been the subject of much argument. One of the most basic topics for discussion concerns the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate, over whether human behaviour is determined by our innate genetic characteristics, or whether, instead, it is moulded by the processes of nurture and socialisation? Both must contribute, and today the serious debates are about their relative importance. There is no doubt that we are the genetic products of millions of years of evolution, and ethologists, such as Konrad Lorenz, can argue convincingly that aggression is programmed into the biological make-up of the human animal (Lorenz 1966). In the animal kingdom aggression is extremely common and is thought to evolve whenever a species needs a form of deterrent behaviour to secure access to a resource – such as territory, food, females or a nesting place – which is in short supply. It may often be used against members of the same species to establish a hierarchy of dominance giving precedence in access to such resources. Recently, developments in sociobiology have shown that there is a continuity from animal to human behaviour, and though our psychological make-up and social behaviour are extremely complex, aggression, often in subtle verbal forms, does play a significant part in our efforts to secure access to scarce facilities – like promotion or the best seat in a crowded space.

More extreme ideas have been advanced by sociobiologists, who have reinterpreted Darwin’s ideas about natural selection at the level of the gene and have attempted to present all human behaviour, whether high-minded or selfish, as attempts to pass on the individual’s genes to a new generation. The perpetuation of the ‘selfish gene’ is said to be more likely if it can be housed in a body that is well equipped for survival and in an individual that is selfish in his or her behaviour (Dawkins 1976). On the whole, the advocates of right-wing political philosophies seem to expect to gain support for their advocacy of authoritarian controls if they can present human nature as being brutal, devoid of virtue and rooted in dark, biological drives, while socialists favour more optimistic interpretations which emphasise the plasticity of human nature. In this way, left-wingers tend to think that improvements to society will produce reciprocal improvements in its members. A different view again was expressed by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), who believed that each member of humanity enjoys the freedom of self-definition through his or her actions. In this way our day-to-day actions and decisions make up our identity; we exist first and define ourselves afterwards. Therefore, any claims that an inbuilt human nature exists would amount to an assault on that freedom.