



## The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics

C. B. Tansel

School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Correspondence to: C. B. Tansel (ldxcbt@nottingham.ac.uk)

*Dodds, K., Kuus, M., and Sharp, J. (Eds.): The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics, 570 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-4094-2380-5, Ashgate, Farnham, €125.00, 2013.*

*The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics* (hereafter “the Companion”) brings together an impressive list of contributors and offers one of the most comprehensive engagements with the rich and ever-growing literature on critical geopolitics in a single book. Divided into three parts and composed of twenty-eight chapters (plus an introduction written by the editors), the Companion not only provides an extensive survey of the field, but it also highlights a number of shortcomings in the literature as well as setting agendas for future research.

The book opens with a brief foreword by Gearóid Ó Tuathail and two chapters outlining the historical and conceptual origins of critical geopolitics by John Agnew and Simon Dalby. This three-piece introduction to the literature compiled by the pioneers of critical geopolitical approach(es) to the study of international politics marks both the commonalities behind the initial intellectual impetus and the eventual differences that emerged throughout the first decade of a more or less congealing critical geopolitics scholarship. While the political geographers’ early endeavours to reclaim geopolitics from the state-centric, “strategy” oriented analyses of mainstream international relations (IR) frameworks were coupled with similar efforts in critical IR approaches, the development of a distinct critical geopolitical scholarship in the 1990s quickly took on its own unique form in dialogue with a broad spectrum of methodological sources ranging from poststructuralism and Marxism, to feminism and postcolonialism. This receptivity to different – and perhaps in some cases incompatible – theoretical resources has undoubtedly helped critical geopolitics to develop its own sub-categories as well as to broaden its empirical and conceptual boundaries. As Alex Jeffrey suggests, rather than a clearly demarcated disciplinary field, critical geopolitics today acts more as a “departure point for a range of disparate schol-

arly practices that seek to illuminate and challenge existing dominant imaginaries concerning space and power” (p. 400). Yet some critics have suggested that “critical geopolitics’ is neither sufficiently critical nor analytical, and falls short of exhausting the potential of geopolitics” as it is “unable to illuminate the role of space in international politics at a level beyond the merely discursive” (Colás and Pozo, 2011, p. 212). A cursory glance at the literature may highlight statements that support this view. Indeed, the editors’ own introduction to the Companion, which conceptualises geopolitics as “an interpretative cultural practice and a discursive construction of ontological claims” (p. 7), signals the prioritised role “discourse” plays in critical geopolitical analyses. Yet the Companion effectively reveals that the body of scholarship that has surfaced under the umbrella of “critical geopolitics” is too diverse and multifaceted to be dismissed by a single methodological claim.

The book gives a platform to a number of thoughtful criticisms targeting the privileged status of discourse analysis in (some) critical geopolitical scholarship. John Agnew, for example, notes that “critical geopolitics has tended to become associated in some quarters largely with the constitutive role of discourse” (p. 24), while Julien Mercille maintains that “critical geopolitics has neglected to identify and examine the causes of government policy, wars and political events, having been more concerned with the task of describing how they unfold and the ways in which they are represented through various discursive strategies” (p. 133). Combined with the extant critiques of the critical geopolitics’ “deconstructive impulses” (Hyndman, 2001, p. 213), such interventions underscore a concentrated tendency to transcend the shortcomings of exclusively discourse-based analyses (as already noted by Smith, 2000; Agnew, 2000; Mamadouh, 2010). Simultaneously, these critiques are reinforced by a set of methodological and empirical interventions aimed at (1) resituating the role of discourse and the ways in which it is being utilised as an analytical parameter, and (2) highlighting the material roots and the everyday forms of geopolitical scripts unravelling across different scales of spatial politics.

It is in these chapters that the Companion becomes more than a comprehensive overview of the field and assumes a more argumentative tone with which the existing scholarship is carefully dissected and new research agendas are identified. While many of the arguments put forward in these chapters have already been published in different mediums, the editors' attentive curation brings them together in a thematic manner which all the more highlights their importance.

Martin Müller's chapter ("Text, Discourse, Affect and Things") offers the most substantial engagement with the discursive focus of critical geopolitics in the book, in which the author calls for discourse analysis to be integrated into a more systematic framework. Accordingly, Müller claims that "discourses need to be analysed for the systematic regularities they exhibit. Discourse analysis therefore cannot only be a critical manifesto that sides with the disenfranchised for critique's sake, but needs to demonstrate how effects of exclusion or closure are achieved" (p. 58). Such explicitly material effects of dominant discourses on everyday practices, as Müller notes, have already been examined by feminist geopolitics, yet Linda Peake's chapter ("Heteronormativity") argues for a more rigorous re-consideration of what is "included" and "excluded" within the analytical boundaries of critical geopolitics. While Peake problematises the absence of the territorialisation of queer bodies in the literature and stresses the interplay between "the scale of the bodily, the national and the global" (p. 103), Cowen and Story ("Intimacy and the Everyday") aim to expand the "epistemological registers" (p. 346) of critical geopolitics by charting a "shift from a focus on dominant geopolitical discourses to interrogate the logistics of everyday life that enable particular forms of social organisation" (p. 354).

This collective emphasis on the material and the multi-scalar nature of the forms in which geopolitical narratives are played out necessitates a more substantial engagement with non-Western dimensions of geopolitical knowledge production (see Slater, 2004) as well as with theoretical frameworks devised to answer not only the questions of "how" but also "why geopolitical knowledge is constructed where it is and by and for whom" (Agnew, 2000, p. 98). Illustratively, the chapter on the Global South by Chih Yuan Woon acutely unpacks the discursive-representative utilisation of non-Western geographies in hegemonic knowledge production, but perhaps succeeds less in articulating a counter-hegemonic geopolitical imaginary. While the author's claim that "the Global South can serve as site of intervention that exposes the reductionism inherent in homogenising, (Northern) meta-theories" (p. 324) certainly highlights a trend in some theoretical frameworks, this should not preclude potentially productive dialogues with other theories that may have "meta-theoretical" or universal aspirations. For example, Julien Mercille's chapter on "radical geopolitics", which focuses on the geopolitical and geoeconomic logics of power, convincingly reasserts the significance of utilising systematic frameworks that strive to illuminate both causal mechanisms

and material structures of power in the study of geopolitics. Such contributions not only provide a meaningful avenue with which to explain the interaction between the "material" and "discursive" realms of analysis, they can also map out, as Fiona McConnell suggests in her analysis of sovereignty, "a route back to the 'big questions' of formal and practical geopolitics" (p. 122; see also Dalby, 2010).

This book is a testimony to the fact that critical geopolitics has managed to carve for itself an inter-disciplinary space in which the myriad questions on space, state, power and identity are vigorously scrutinised with a view to confronting established paradigms and practices. The outlined shortcomings and calls for extended conceptual registers discussed in this book signal the intellectual dynamism of the field. Following Anssi Paasi, if the emergence of critical geopolitics can be "understood as a rise of a new generation of scholars in political geography, a generation that was drawing effectively on interdisciplinary, mainly postmodern and poststructuralist literature" (p. 225), the Companion suggests that the current generation of critical geopolitical scholarship has already expanded its horizons beyond the achievements of its predecessors.

## References

- Agnew, J. A.: Global political geography beyond geopolitics, *International Studies Review* 2, 1, 91–99, 2000.
- Colás, A. and Pozo, G.: The value of territory: towards a Marxist geopolitics, *Geopolitics*, 16, 211–220, 2011.
- Dalby, S.: Recontextualising violence, power and nature: the next twenty years of critical geopolitics?, *Polit. Geogr.*, 29, 280–288, 2010.
- Hyndman, J.: Towards a feminist geopolitics, *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, 45, 210–222, 2001.
- Mamadouh, V.: Critical geopolitics at a (not so) critical junction, *GeoJournal*, 75, 320–321, 2010.
- Slater, D.: *Geopolitics and the post-colonial: rethinking North-South relations*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.
- Smith, N.: Is a critical geopolitics possible? Foucault, class, and the vision thing, *Polit. Geogr.*, 19, 365–371, 2000.