

ON THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT: The contradictory voices in political geography speaking of revival and buoyancy of political geography on the one hand, and loss of direction leading to the lack of consistency of purpose that may undermine the revival of the subfield on the other, point to a crisis of identity that calls for urgent solution. The crisis may be traced to the existence of two parallel versions of the subfield since the middle of the 1980s—one predicated upon the nation-state as the dominant reality, and the other insisting that the global scale is the scale that really matters since the ultimate reality lies in the global World-Economy. A close analysis shows that this is a false dichotomy and the two versions of the subfield represent interrelated episodes in the growth of political geography as a more comprehensive field of social inquiry.

Political geography today is faced with a serious contradiction. On the one hand we find a group of scholars declaring all round growth of political geography leading to a state of buoyancy in which its flagship journal has succeeded in upstaging the long-established *Annals, A. A. G.* in its impact factor prompting the Editor to write that it was not the time for false modesty. On the other hand, we hear some important practitioners of the discipline lamenting that the subfield has lost coherence so that political geography today is increasingly hard to define. They tell us that the lack of a consistency of purpose and agreed research emphases have posed problems that may undermine the renaissance and revival of political geography. And doubts have also been raised whether the renaissance may not represent a false dawn. This state of affairs does not augur well for the discipline's health. The source of the contradiction needs to be identified and the crisis resolved in

order that political geography regains coherence as a field of learning. This paper is divided into three sections. The first part has detailed the nature of contradiction. The second has traced its source in the literature. The third part has summarised the argument and concludes that the contradiction and crisis arise from a false dichotomy between traditional and "post-renaissance" versions of the field which in reality represent interrelated episodes in the onward march of political geography as a more comprehensive field of social inquiry.

I

The year 1992 began with a big news for political geographers: The flagship journal of the discipline, *Political Geography Quarterly*, had been so successful as an academic as well as a commercial venture that the publishers had decided to make the journal a bi-monthly, necessitating change in the jour-

nal's name. As the editor wrote: "*PGQ* is dead. Long live *Political Geography*". The Editor proudly declared :

....this is not the time for false modesty. PGQ set out to be and succeeded in becoming the flagship in the revival of political geography, the erstwhile backwater of the geographical community.....

This success can be measured in three ways. Commercially the publishers have been pleased with its buoyant sales profile which is the basic reason we are able to expand to six issues a volume.Paper submissions have consistently grown in both quantity and quality.... But the ultimate test is what happens to our articles;... In an analysis of 27 geography journals covering 1983-87 (i.e., right at the beginning of *PGQ*'s existence), *PGQ* ranked second just behind the *Annals* in its "impact factor"... Furthermore, for 1984-87 we had leapfrogged the *Annals* into first place... For a new journal these results are quite remarkable, worthy of a flagship (Taylor, 1992)

Around the same time, however, the Associate Editor of the journal commenting upon the state of affairs in political geography as a field of knowledge, was lamenting in the columns of the *Progress in Human Geography* (vol. 15(3), 1991) :

After six years of reviewing the political geography literature I find it increasingly hard to define political geography. While I can list topics examined by political geographers, I find great difficulty expressing the core subject matter of the field. Conversations with colleagues in other disciplines convince me that they (and the general public) think that political geography can be equated with the regional perspective in international relations, with a heavy emphasis on territorial conflicts (O'Loughlin, 1991).

This statement may shock many who have over the past two decades pursued and projected political geography as the regional perspective in political sociology with a conspicuous focus on spatial analysis of political behaviour (voting and governmental expenditure) and geographical variation in welfare. (Colleagues and conversations are a function of the nature of the company one keeps. Conversations with colleagues in the disciplines with which they interact may well convince this latter group of political geographers otherwise than O'Loughlin was.)

Also relevant in this connection is to mention a "Comment" on the editorial statement of Taylor (cited above) in the last issue of *Political Geography* for 1992. Parts of this comment read as follows :

Political Geography Quarterly began to be looked upon as the journal of the political factor in human geography. It began to be used far more widely than political geography itself was being studied and researched. Seen in this light, the buoyant and increasing sales profile of *PGQ* does not necessarily reflect the actual state of helath and well-being of political geography as a branch discipline. ...the danger of a false dawn in political geography is by no means over. A rising body of research on the role of the political factor in human geography does not necessarily imply the development of political geography as a coherent subfield of geographical inquiry..... Many would share Claval's (1984 : 8) "impression that the field has developed in rather chaotic manner...." Are we then passing through a phase reminiscent of Carl Sauer's (1927) time when political geography had looked like a "Wayward child of the geographic family"—one that had lacked coherence and structure-- so that "method and material (were) free at the choice of the

student"?

This comment has further underlined that the current fashion effect of the role of power politics in human geography may not be very different in kind from the immense popularity of political geography in the inter-war years when almost every geographer of some claim to eminence had become a political geographer; but irrespective of this distinguished patronage the subfield had lost direction, and had failed to develop a coherent structure once the profession had abandoned Ratzel's theory of state as the overarching framework and the guiding principle for political geography.

The above three statements taken together point to an essential contradiction in contemporary political geography, and put a question mark regarding the identity of political geography as a field of study. The roots of current crisis lie in the course of development of political geography as a branch discipline. We trace this course in the next section.

II

Until the rise of Nazism in Germany, political geography had been the most lively branch of geographical science throughout the European realm so that to be a political geographer was an honourable thing. Thus, most leading geographers became in part also political geographers. All this began to change towards the close of the 1920s, following the rapid rise in popularity and academic respectability of Geopolitik as handed out by Haushofer's Institute for Geopolitik. The burgeoning popularity of Geopolitik in Germany, and its increasing identification with political geography had begun to alarm scholars and statesmen outside Germany, particularly those in the English-speaking world. The alarm became a major worry after the rise of Nazi

power, and the development of close links between the Institute and the policy planning wing of the Nazi government. In the general perception of geographers in the English-speaking world, political geography had become tainted with the "sins" of Geopolitik whose teachings, in their view, were highly dishonourable.

This led to attempts at distancing political geography from Geopolitik. A way out appeared to lie in giving the subfield an orientation away from the ecological perspective of Ratzel. The alternative direction was sought in the chorological view of geography as the study of earth areas in terms of their variations over the earth-space, so that political geography began to be viewed as the study of a particular kind of area--one whose boundaries were defined by political jurisdiction. Hence forth state in political geography began to be viewed as a particular type of area--but an area-- rather than a functioning system and a purposeful organization. One major consequence of this change-over was that whereas German geographers had emphasized the study of generic features of state--that is, state as a space organism, Whittlesey (1935, 1939) and Hartshorne (1935) underlined that each state represented a unique area, and that political geographers as geographers should logically be concerned with the study of particular states in the context of their geographical environment. It was repeatedly emphasized that considerations of the state as a general class lay outside the geographer's purview. Such a blanket ban on generalization, theory and model-building, rendered political geography as a field of learning that became completely devoid of academic challenge. This repelled research talent which got diverted to certain other more challenging branches of the discipline. Deprived of its callisthenics of theory, political geography was led to the course of

decline.

One major consequence of this change of orientation from organismic-ecological to chorological perspective was that whereas perviously the political geographer considered the state both in terms of its internal sturcture and external connectivity, the chorological orientation restricted the political geographer's vision to within-the-state phenomena : the sub-field's links with international relations got virtually snapped.

This was the general picture until around the beginning of the 1950s when efforts were initiated to transform geography into a positivist science increasingly focused on a theoretically oriented study of spatial patterns and processes through increased use of mathematical-statistical modes of analysis. In this new incarnation of the discipline in the fifties and sixties the guiding spirit in human goegraphy became Lord Kelvin's dictum that whatever the matter, if "your cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of meagre and unsatisfactory kind" (cited in Spate 1960).

The new geography of the mid-twentieth century, with its central focus on spatial analysis, and with neoclassical economics as its guiding frame, and logical positivism as its mehtodological underpinning "could not accommodate a political goegraphy", since the emphasis of neoclassical economics to view national economies as harmonious and self-regulating systems ignored questions of social conflicts and distributive justice : "The focus on logical positivism directed attention to verifiable empirical statements in particular and data analysis in general, and away from operation of the more incorporeal power relations within society" (Short, 1982, p.3). Things began to look up by the middle of 1960s following Ackerman's (1963) call for adopting a general systems perspective, and his

recommendation that political geography was particularly suited to adopt this perspective. The introduction of the systems perspective greatly helped in the revival of poltiical geography as a useful discipline, so that by the begining of the 1970s "The retreat from political geography... was over" (Dikshit, 1977).

Soon after Ackermn's call for a general systems perspective many political geographers had begun to draw attention to the works of David Easton (1953) and Karl Deutsch (1953) relating to the concept of political organization as an input-output system. Such a view of social/political systems gave political geogrophy a simple theoretical framework for the study of political systems by measuring the crucial flows that affect their functioning--that is to say, the demands made by society on the one hand, and governmental response through policies for corrective action, on the other. With the adoption of this framework, elections became enshrined as the most essential feedback thourgh which political control is achieved. Under the infulence of a buoyant political sociology, problems in political geogrophy had now begun to be posed in terms of exchange of information, transactions between pressure gropus, and stability and maintenance of social and political structures. However, the new theory and methodology adopted by political geography "was too concerned with quantitative methods to pay attention to qualitative factors without which thought cannot pass beyond the stage of trivial generalizations" (Claval, 1984, p. 15).

In the task of reformation and reconsolidation of political geography with a view to giving the subfield a "Sense of purpose and order... by bringing it more in line with contemporary trends in geography and other social sciences" (Minghi, 1981, p.33), through judi-

cious borrowings from the political sociology literature, the Kasperson and Minghi volume on *The Structure of Political Geography* (1969) had played a major role. It extended the task initiated by Douglas Jackson (1964) who was the first to clear the thicket and had prepared the ground for this larger venture. By initiating political geography to a systems-oriented structural-functional methodology with explicit appeal for general theoretical formulations, this book helped considerably in lowering down the barriers which had earlier separated political geography from the other social sciences, a legacy of the period when chorology had reigned supreme and, by and large, geographers had been busy building "a platform, as it were, from our own material and anchor it ourselves"-- a phase in the history of our discipline when geographers viewed their field of study "as an end in itself rather than in the broader context of as a contributor to a larger scientific goal" (Ackerman, 1963).

The input-output system framework had arrived in political geography at a rather opportune time. The framework's mechanistic model of bi-directional flows was easily amenable to quantitative analysis, and it called for a measure of quantitative expertise in its operationalization. This appeared as a great blessing for the large numbers of "quantitative" geographers who were at that point of time faced with impending redundancy in view of the current disenchantment of the social sciences with the positivist mode of study and their reorientation to value based questions, and away from abstract models. Geographical study of elections in the input-output frame caught the attention of many a quantitative geographer previously engaged in the fields of urban and economic geography. The attraction became particularly great after a distinguished peer had pronounced

political geography to be a "moribund backwater" in which "any change would be a step in the right direction" (Berry, 1969). Almost overnight the hitherto neglected field of political geography had begun to appear as a land of great promise--the theatre where the real action lay, and which offered opportunity to join in the crusade to reform and to establish a new order.

We were then at a juncture in the history of social science when the euphoria generated by quantification as the key that could open every lock had receded, and qualitative questions pertaining to equality and social justice were increasingly catching on the attention of social science students. As a consequence, politics was fast replacing economics as the guiding spirit in social science research. This was an inevitable result of the ever increasing role of governmental intervention in the life of nations and peoples the world over. This was the overall context of political geography in the beginning of the 1970s. A mad rush of crusaders armed with sophisticated tools of quantitative analysis trooped in with a view to occupying vantage positions on the centre stage of political geography and to enlist as front rank soldiers in the revolution (defined as fundamental reconstruction involving forcible substitution of the new for the old). The guiding inspiration was derived from political sociology, and the fundamental weapon was quantitative analysis. To borrow David Smith's phrase, as the "revolution" took shape, the bandwagon began to roll, and there was a good deal of pushing or jumping on to avoid being left behind (Smith, 1984, p.131). Those already engaged in the study of political geography appeared for a time taken aback by the sudden shift of events: most stood aside from the crowd; ignoring the bandwagon and pursuing the subfield as they understood it.

The emerging "new" political geography structured around the concept of state as an input-output system, in a quantitative mould, had two parallel strands of development: One was essentially an extension of the area of spatial analysis with a view to incorporate the study of political behaviour and its variation over space; the other focused on economic and political determinants of "who gets what where and why". Despite differences in perspectives, the two had retained the traditional focus of political geography on nation-state as the dominant reality in social and political organization in the modern world. This had continued well into the 1980s. The object of study and central focus of the old and the new versions were the same-- the difference chiefly lay in the quantitative and theoretical orientation in the work of the new political geographers. Around this time political geography became more pronouncedly political in content and orientation. Way back in 1966 Cohen had called for a "Geography of Policy", and early in the seventies geographers had started paying greater attention to governmental system as a critical element in the geography of states (Dikshit 1971a, 1971b). (It was inevitable that studies focused on "who gets what where and how" should lead to greater attention to the state and geographic process (Dear and Clark, 1978, 1980, 1984) and to an all round increase in dialogue with political science. The nature of state and government became a live issue in political geography by around 1980).

Most of the more zealous soldiers of the movement for change and new order-- particularly those drawn from the United Kingdom where the 1960s represented 'the nadir of political geography"-- had had at best only a passing acquaintance with political geography. While some had happened to "find" it through leisure reading in course of train jour-

neys to field trips (e. g., Taylor) most others learnt about it only after they had succeeded in creating one of their own. Given this mental frame about having created a new political geography, it was quite natural for the adherents of the new political geography to think of themselves as members of a new caste distinctly superior to the pagans who had inhabited the land before they had arrived on the scene. Hence the recurrent statements (e. g., in volume 1, no. 2 of *PGQ*, 1982) that attempted to distance "modern" political geography from the "traditional" version practised until the end of 1960s. As befitted a crusading squad, most of these statements were couched in terms of "we" versus "them".

Those of the new political geographers who had "found" the discipline before starting to create a new structure for the subfield, were somewhat more magnanimous: They *felt* "strongly that we cannot just dismiss our past as if it did not exist"-- dismiss it by all means, but don't *just* dismiss it without an obituary! (Quotation from Taylor, 1985, preface; emphasis not in the original). For the scholars of the latter kind, history of past development in political geography constituted a heritage-- even though a heritage of a dark past--that served a useful purpose by providing the background contrast for the new dawn. The heritage was suitably dissected into disjointed parts labelled respectively as "ideological heritage", "revolutionary heritage", "liberal heritage", and "ecological heritage" so that our past lost identity as a disciplinary structure representing cumulative development, and incorporating fruits of scholarly endeavour spread over the past one hundred years.

Thus, neither of the two much talked about British textbooks on Political Geography-- Short (1982) and Taylor (1985)--had found it necessary to include any discussion on the nature and history of political geography as

a discipline representing cumulative wisdom. Short did not do so because "The political geography of (his) book's title (was) not a specific object of inquiry but an indication of the nature of the endeavour", which was meant "to redress the imbalance in contemporary human geography toward a more explicit analysis of political and economic processes". Thus Ratzel had found no mention in the book; nor did either Hartshorne or Whitteley. Mackinder and Bowman are the only ones from among political geographers of the pre-1970 period who figured in the bibliography. Ratzel does get a space of two sentences in Taylor's book (1989 edn., p. 131) identifying him as the figure to whom the developmental and functional approaches to political geography could be traced and as the one "who is generally recognized to have the best claim to the title 'father of political geography'". (This represented an improvement over Norman pounds (1963, pp. 28-29) from whose book Taylor had his first introduction to political geography). The reason why Taylor did not include a discussion on past developments, was quite different. As he stated in the preface to the first edition of his book, he was trying to develop "a general framework of (his) own to supersede what (he) found to be inadequate". Since his objective was to "supersede" the existing structure of political geography, rather than advancing it through improvement and reformation, the past development of the discipline was of little use to him. A new discipline developed with a view to superseding the old must obviously acquire a new set of principles necessitating a new textbook giving instructions in its basic principles.

III

To sum up, since around the middle of the 1980s we have had (in a theoretical sense) two different political geographies : One, called

traditional political geography, was structured around the state as the central reality in social and political organization, and represented an ongoing tradition since the 1890s. Taylor refers to it as the "heritage" which many new political geographers regard as a disposable commodity that deserves to be dismissed though not "just", not "merely", not "totally" (Taylor, 1989, p. 137). The other political geography is the one which began taking shape in the early 1980s starting with an edited volume on *Political Studies from Spatial Perspectives* (Burnett and Taylor, 1981) through Short's *Introduction to Political Geography* (1982) and culminating in Taylor's 1985 textbook built around parts of the World— Systems theory of Wallerstein. Whereas political geography as a continuing tradition treats the nation-state as the fundamental reality of the modern world, and it is around state-centred politics that its entire structure is erected; the new political geography established through Taylor's 1985 book maintains that the ultimate reality of the contemporary World is contained in the global World-Economy as an omnipresent influence in our daily lives, irrespective of what part of the earth we live in. The world-system political geography of Taylor views the nation - state as a filter intervening between the local and global scales of political and economic operations, which acts to distort reality into a false and limited picture, and, thereby contributes to divert political protest away from the key processes at the global scale. This basic difference in the political world view of the two versions of political geography is the source of a great deal of controversy (Dikshit, 1993) and lies at the root of the current confusion and crisis that has led to "the lack of consistency of purpose and agreed research emphases ... that may undermine the revival" of political geography since the 1970s (O'Loughlin, 1990).

The problem has become acute only since the mid-nineteen eighties. Until that point of time, despite occasional noises to the contrary, in line with the general trend in academic disciplines, every new idea and perspective was put forward and seen as an extension of (or a revision upon) some ongoing concern of the subfield as a branch of knowledge and, as such, had tended to get subsumed into it. The introduction of Taylor's World-Systems approach in political geography as the central organizing principle for the subfield had reversed this trend in that for the first time in the life of political geography as a branch discipline the nation-state was denied its status as the dominant reality of our world. By relegating the nation-state to the status of a filter that distorts reality, the world-systems approach would appear to have turned political geography upside down.

But a closer look would reveal that this is only the surface manifestation. Whereas in terms of its basic theory the world-systems approach to political geography may appear to have made the discipline stand on its head, in practice it is business as usual. Thus, in line with the long established disciplinary tradition, political geographers (including those pursuing the world-systems political geography) continue to pursue the study of political phenomena at the three distinct but intertwined scales of political geography so that

each of the chapters in Taylor's book "concentrates on activities at one of the three scales "even though they do not constitute separate study of each scale : "For instance, imperialism is a concept associated with the global scale but we will argue that it cannot be understood without consideration of forces operating within states", wrote the author (Taylor, 1989, p. 40). But this is how it had always been—such an approach to treatment of topics represents a long established tradition in political geography.

As I see it, the situation is by no means inherently dichotomous. The fact is that in our day to day life, state-centred politics co-exists—in part cooperation and part conflict—with the all-pervading social and economic forces generated by the capitalist world-economy. The basic idea regarding the global world-economy imperceptively impinging on our daily lives has drawn attention to an aspect of the post-1945 reality that had been generally ignored by students of political geography in the past. This part of the new theory provides us with an additional set of factors to be used in analyzing political events and phenomena, and these should be suitably incorporated into our research strategy of state-centred politics. By the nature of things academic disciplines cannot be superseded; they only grow or decline. Every new idea, every new challenge, adds to their growth.

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