Geopolitics, experts and the making of foreign policy

Klaus J Dodds, Department of Geography, University of Bristol, University Road, Bristol, BS8 1SS

Summary *This paper focuses on opportunities that ' critical geopolitics ' offers to foreign policy analysis. Two themes are addressed: first, the role of expertise and secondly, the construction of ' space ' and ' place ' in foreign policy. By adopting the metaphor of the ' script ' the opportunities for ' critical geopolitics ' during and beyond the 1991 Gulf War are highlighted.*

' In international relations, what we call ' Geography ' is subjected to two contradictory appraisals. The influence of factors considered to be geographic is either greatly exaggerated or nearly overlooked, in spite of obvious territorial imperatives.' Lacoste (1984, 213).

The ending of the Cold War has been much heralded. The seemingly stable terrain of bloc politics underwritten by the master code of totalitarianism/anti-communism has been upended by revolutions in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union (Pietz 1988; Luke 1991). The effects for the western ' security intellectual ' appear highly disruptive. Forty years of advocating strategies of containment and nuclear deterrence provide few pointers in the 1990s for analysing or dealing with the uncertainties of any post-Cold War world (Taylor 1992).

If the Gulf War of 1990–1 revealed anything, however, about the Western Alliance and how the war was discursively fought, it was how the Cold War codes/reasoning of containment were simply redirected against a general malevolence instead of simply communism. These codes are inherently geographical, for to be effective one must know which places and peoples are to be considered ' evil ' and as a consequence which are to be labelled as ' good '. In the case of the Cold War, these simple characterisations constituted a powerful ' war of words ' where the capitalist/freedom-loving West was pitted against the communist/totalitarian East (Kaldor 1990).

This short paper is organised in three parts. The first section briefly explores the recent literature of critical geopolitics. It is suggested that the new forms of geopolitics currently on offer have much to offer foreign policy analysis. The question of expertise is addressed in the second section. Those who comment on foreign policy and international affairs occupy a privileged position in society. One only had to watch the television during the Gulf War to witness the sway given to the commentaries of those armchair strategists. The third section addresses the issue of how places are scripted in foreign policy. In spite of the risk of being accused of stating the obvious, political geographers have a useful role to play in investigating how geographical representations within foreign policy emerge and in the process highlight where author(ity) lies. My conclusions attempt to set out briefly what critical geopolitics can offer to foreign policy analysis.

Critical geopolitics: new research directions

The recent literature on critical geopolitics has amongst other things sought to explore the role of security intellectuals and foreign policy experts in the making of foreign

policy (O'Tuathail and Agnew 1992; Agnew and Corbridge 1989; Dalby 1990). By redefining geopolitics as a discursive practice various writers had hoped to create a new focus on the reasoning process by which security intellectuals ' spatialise ' international politics. Two types of geopolitics have been identified: first, the formal texts of the academic experts such as Colin Gray who are in turn supported by an array of research institutions. Secondly, a practical or common sense type of reasoning has been identified with a focus on how foreign places are represented in foreign policy discourse.

   The distinction between formal and practical geopolitical reasoning is not entirely a product of the recent Anglo-American critical geopolitical literature. The French geopolitical writer Yves Lacoste has identified similar types of reasoning. In 1984, for example, he noted in an article on geography and foreign policy that '. . . I am going to show how and why the method of true geographic reasoning—reasoning of the strategic type (which is very different from that employed in the academic world)—is particularly effective in analysing international relations and the foreign policies of states ' (1984, 216).

   Both Anglo-American critical geopolitics and French geopolitics have sought to challenge orthodox geopolitics. One of the most useful traits of these different literatures is their focus on the geographical aspects of contemporary foreign policy making. First, following O'Tuathail and Agnew (1992), I suggest that the practice of foreign policy is inherently geopolitical because it involves the construction of meaning and values of spaces and places. Instead of focusing on how, for example, the external environment influences foreign policy, critical geopolitics seeks to examine how geographical representations are constructed and how those representations in turn structure the perceived reality of places. Thus, geography, instead of being treated as a mere stage or backdrop on which events occur, is seen as a crucial element in the construction of ' worlds '.

   It may seem self-evident that foreign policy has geographical connotations. However, by drawing attention to the fact that there is no ' natural ' or ' prediscursive ' geography of international relations, we draw attention to how policy makers and academic experts through linguistic practices represent places and peoples in the practice of foreign policy. Foreign policy if viewed as a boundary-producing practice, draws attention to how the boundaries that divide relations between the domestic and the foreign are constituted (Campbell 1990). In the process spaces are clearly demarcated.

Privileging expertise

When we discuss something as important as the foreign policy of a state, we clearly need to draw attention to the narrative functions of a state's privileged story tellers. In this case, we need to consider the role of academic experts, the media and foreign policy professionals themselves (eg Foreign Office officials). This seems to be a relatively understudied aspect of political geography, foreign policy analysis and international relations. Few seem to stop and consider the power relations embedded in their claims to expertise. As Edward Said (1983, 2) has usefully noted, ' Expertise in foreign affairs, for example, has usually meant the legitimation of the conduct of foreign policy and, what is more to the point, a sustained investment in revalidating the role of experts in foreign policy ' (see also Said 1981).

   There exists a close relationship between the media, academic experts and foreign policy professionals. In many respects, the academic expert is closely involved with the

other two. In the context of the media, we only need to look at television and the discussion of foreign affairs to note the role of the ' expert ' in explaining events to us in the form of a simple story. In the case of the 1982 Falklands War and the 1991 Gulf War, the role of the academic and military armchair strategists was striking (Newman 1988). The media coverage of the Gulf War, which included a mixture of Allied press briefings, pictures of Allied forces and commentary from the experts, produced a remarkably sanitised and controlled televisual spectacle.

In the case of the foreign policy professionals, we know that academics interview those professionals as part of their research. In addition, the Foreign Office will periodically invite academics to discuss matters of state. In return, the academic institutions such as the Royal Institute for International Affairs or the International Institute for Strategic Studies regularly invite Foreign Offce personnel to workshops and conferences.

The role of the research institute in informing or influencing foreign policy-making is a much neglected topic. In Britain, the strategic or foreign policy expert plays an important role in cultivating and sustaining an elite audience. There is considerable interaction between the two groups as discussion papers are read and digested by foreign policy makers. In the Foreign Office, for example, each department has a number of officials who produce commentaries on current academic research in their respective regions of interest. This collective group, as feminist writers such as Christine Sylvester have noted, is overwhelmingly a white, middle class, university or military educated male elite.

The place of scripting in the narratives of foreign policy

The metaphor of script has been employed by O'Tuathail and Agnew (1992) to describe how place is embedded in the foreign policy narrative. Scripts have been defined as a set of representations, a collection of descriptions, attributes and scenarios deemed necessary to define a place. I think the notion of scripting is useful because it conjures up images of the script or film writer constantly re-writing or changing a story line or narrative. One of the most common everyday practices we use to make sense of the unfamiliar or the novel is to establish a narrative with sequentially ordered plot, a cast of characters, identifiable and attributable forces in order to make sense of the unknown. I am not trying to trivialise the practice of foreign policy, instead I merely draw attention to how foreign policy scripts tell stories about the ' other/foreign ' in order to differentiate the ' domestic ' from the ' other.'

Whilst I accept O'Tuathail and Agnew's definition as useful, I think that we should also note how the State uses foreign policy to construct stable identities for itself. Such practices seek to establish various dimensions of identity with territory so that it is possible to speak of a state with a stable and definable character. As a consequence of defining domestic identity, the production of difference becomes crucial if there is to be meaningful differentiation of the self and other. Campbell (1990, 1992a, 1992b) has usefully drawn attention to the construction of these ethical boundaries and how they establish moral and political spaces, incorporate standards of legitimacy, privilege certain interpretations of history and marginalise alternatives.

Does it matter that the operation of foreign policy involves constructing representations of the ' domestic ' and the ' foreign '? Does it matter, for example, that the complexities of places and peoples are reduced to more manageable proportions? It is not inevitable that however geographically sensitive we hope a state's foreign policy might be, places and regions will be lumped together? It may be necessary to generalise

about certain parts of the world, but what is absolutely critical is that the labels that are used by foreign policy professionals and academic experts are always *contested*.

The recent Gulf War provided ample evidence that the geographical representations of peoples and places have the utmost significance. By drawing on the memories and scripts of World War II, the Western Alliance was able to depict the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent Allied launch of Desert Storm and the short land war that followed in highly dichotomous terms (for accounts of the war, see Freedman and Karsh 1991; Halliday 1991; Luke 1991; MacArthur 1991; Simpson 1991 and Woodward 1991). We were told that it was a simple fight between ' good ' and ' evil '. Saddam Hussein was cast as the villain, another ' Hitler-like ' figure who had demonstrated the bankruptcy of his regime by invading a small nation (Kuwait) that was rapidly transformed into a latter day Czechoslovakia or Poland—a country far away about which we know little. The narratives of World War II were used because it is the last ' good and just war ' that exists unproblematically in the collective memories of American and British citizens. The memories of Vietnam and Suez could thus be banished, although in Britain's case the memories of the Falklands have eased this task. Indeed the parallels between the discursive response of the Thatcher government to the 1982 War and the Gulf Crisis were alarmingly similar (Dillon 1989).

I do not wish to discuss the Gulf War any further except to note that the geographical depictions of Iraq made by the West were highly arbitrary and ultimately effective in the way they were able to contribute to a story of unprovoked aggression by Iraq and the need to reverse that wrong-doing. In times of war it is perhaps easier to appreciate how the depiction of places and peoples within foreign policy is important. However, in a more general sense, these depictions are continuously in operation as policy professionals attempt to simplify the world and its regions into more malleable forms. As a consequence these descriptions tend to transform places into singular and predictable units. As O'Tuathail and Agnew (1992, 202) conclude, ' The irony of practical geographical representations of place is that, in order to succeed, they actually necessitate the abrogation of genuine geographical knowledge about the diversity and complexity of places as social entities. ' Although it remains to be explained what form ' genuine ' geographical knowledge might take and, importantly, if it is possible.

Conclusions

The making of foreign policy has profound geographical and geopolitical implications. Representations of places and peoples as ' foreign ' are clearly crucial in the execution of foreign policy. Adopting the metaphor of a script or performance usefully draws attention to how the self and the other are made familiar. In constructing a policy for the ' other ', a state is inevitably involved in the production of difference. How a state draws discursive and political boundaries to establish an identity over ' sovereign ' territory should draw our attention to the role of experts, foreign policy professionals and media people. These three groups are the state's privileged story tellers. It is they who legitimate foreign policy, and it is they who promote their mutual expertise.

The contribution of critical geopolitics can be seen in two different ways. First, it puts the notion of space back into the centre of international politics. By refusing to treat space as simply a backdrop or stage for international affairs we can draw attention to how the construction of space is crucial to sustaining the drama of international life. Secondly, critical geopolitics can draw attention to how places and peoples are scripted by foreign policy discourse. Instead of seeking to legitimate or encourage these discourses, we can actually begin to challenge them.

References
Adams V (1986) *The Media and the Falklands campaign* (Macmillan, London)
Agnew J and Corbridge S (1989) ' The new geopolitics: the dynamics of geopolitical order ' in Johnston R and Taylor P (eds) *A World in crisis* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford)
Campbell D (1990) ' Global inscription: how foreign policy constitutes the United States ' *Alternatives* 15, 263–86
Campbell D (1992a) *Writing security* (Manchester University Press, Manchester)
Campbell D (1992b) ' Politics without principle: narratives of the Persian Gulf War and the ethicality of Operation Desert Storm ' Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention Atlanta April 1–4 1992
Dalby S (1990) *Creating the second Cold War* (Francis Pinter, London)
Dillon M (1989) *The Falklands, politics and war* (Macmillan, London)
Freedman L and Karsh E (1991) ' How Kuwait was won: strategy in the Gulf War ' *International Security* 16, 5–41
Halliday F (1991) ' The Gulf War and its aftermath: first reflections ' *International Affairs* 67, 223–34
Kaldor M (1990) *The imaginary war* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford)
Lacoste Y (1976) *La Géographie ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre* (Maspero, Paris)
Lacoste Y (1984) ' Geography and foreign policy ' *SAIS Review* 4, 213–27
Luke T (1991) ' The discipline of security studies and the codes of containment: learning from Kuwait ' *Alternatives* 16, 315–44
MacArthur B (ed) (1991) *Despatches from the Gulf* (Bloomsbury, London)
Newman K (1988) ' Politics and the media ' *Political Studies* 34, 696–703
Pietz W (1988) ' The ' post-colonialism ' of Cold War discourse ' *Social Text* 19–20, 55–75
Said E (1981) *Covering Islam* (Pantheon, New York)
Said E (1983) *The World, the text and the critic* (Vintage, London)
Simpson J (1991) *House of war* (Arrow Books, London)
Taylor P (1992) ' Tribulations of transition ' *Professional Geographer* 44, 10–2
O'Tuathail G and Agnew J (1992) ' Geopolitics and discourse: practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy ' *Political Geography* 11, 190–204
Woodward B (1991) *The commanders* (Simon and Schuster, New York)