

Geopolitics

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The word geopolitics points to the interface between two distinct ontological realms and scientific disciplines, geography, and politics. The first of these root words, “geography,” is not necessarily restricted in this context to traditional geographic concerns like climate or the Earth’s physical surface, but entails a much broader spatial perspective concerned with scale and location, the size, shape, and boundaries of territories, and the processes by which territories are socially defined. The other root word, “politics,” points toward subfields of political science like international relations which are also focused on states and empires, borders and frontiers, international alliances and polarizations, the balance and imbalance of global power, and war, imperialism, and diplomacy (Burchill & Linklater 1996).

If geopolitics is delimited by the overlap between geography and politics, this definition does not yet specify the nature of the relationship between the two realms. The founding decades of geopolitical discussion saw an emphasis on geographical modes of explanation. Geopolitical thinkers at the turn of the previous century emphasized the effects of physical geography and spatial location on a state’s growth and decline and its military and foreign policies. The word *geopolitics* was coined by the Swedish social scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1917: 46), who defined it as “the doctrine of the state as a geographic organism or a spatial phenomenon: i.e., the state as land, territory, region, or, most precisely, as a *Reich* [realm, empire].” Kjellén’s thinking was based largely on the work of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who founded the subfields of *political geography* and *anthropo-geography* as the study of the geographical basis of the state’s action (Ratzel 1882, 1897). Ratzel’s American disciple Ellen Semple argued in her

programmatically entitled book *Influences of Geographic Environment* that “the natural environment” was “the physical basis of history” (Semple 1911: 2). Geopolitical thinkers at the turn of the century emphasized the effects of physical geography and spatial location on the growth and decline of states and on military and foreign policies. British geographer Halford Mackinder (1904: 422), another key founder of geopolitics, argued that the “geographical causation” of politics was permanent, inescapable, and pervasive, and that control of the inaccessible lands of the Eurasian “pivot” area (see Figure 3) was the key to world supremacy. Alfred Thayer Mahan, a Rear Admiral in the US Navy, developed an opposing argument about the primacy of seapower and control of the sea. In a chapter on the “general nature of geographical influences,” British historian H.B. George argued (1907: 7) that “the destinies of man are very largely determined by their environment,” especially climate and the “physical features of the Earth.” The leading figure in the German geopolitical school from the early 1920s until 1945, Karl Haushofer, defined the field as recognizing that “the fundamental features determined by the surface of the Earth ... are the only lasting ones” in international political struggles (Haushofer 1924 [2002]: xxxiii). The editorial committee of Haushofer’s *Journal of Geopolitics* (*Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*) defined geopolitics as the “science of political-spatial organisms [*politische Raumorganismen*] and their structures” insofar as they are conditioned “by the Earth” (Haushofer et al. 1928: 27).

Contemporary treatments of geopolitics often contain echoes of these environmentally-determinist origins. Heinz Brill defines geopolitics as the “doctrine of the influence of geographic space on the politics of a state” (Brill 1998: 206). A recent dictionary of security studies defines geopolitics as the “analysis of the influence of geographic conditions of

a state on its national and international policies” (Meier et al. 2005: 144). The *Encyclopædia Britannica* (n.d.) still defines geopolitics as “analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations.” Even a Marxist geographer like David Harvey (2003) conjures up an image of a conflict between one group of states trying to forge a Eurasian bloc versus an American strategy of disrupting this alliance by cultivating allies in what geopolitical thinkers used to call the East European “shatterbelt” (Trampler 1932) between Europe and Russia, with the ultimate goal of preventing the first group of powers from securing a stranglehold on Middle Eastern oil.

Today the idea of geopolitics covers a broad semantic terrain that ranges between geodeterminist and politicist extremes. At the geodeterminist pole we find Kjéllen’s original definition of geopolitics as the doctrine of the influence of geographic space on the form and action of states and empires. At the opposite pole, geopolitics is a synonym for great power politics. This second usage owes much to Henry Kissinger, who defined “geopolitical” perspective as “an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium,” thereby marginalizing spatial considerations (Kissinger 1979: 55, 1994; Howard 1994), but it was used in this way long before Kissinger (Coogan 1991: 5). Others soon began echoing Kissinger’s influential usage, defining geopolitics simply as “the art and the process of managing global rivalry” (Jay 1979: 486). Whereas the geodeterminist definition threatens to efface any difference between geopolitics and political geography, the second definition is almost identical to “realist” models of international relations, except that geopoliticians pay more attention to territories, borders, and concrete locations, while realist models often treat space as entirely abstract. The modal definition understands geopolitics as the analysis of all relations between space, on the one hand, and organized forms of political domination, contestation, and alliance, on the other (Meier et al. 2005: 144). Pierre Gallois (1990: 37) exemplifies this modal definition, describing geopolitics as

“the study of relations between the conduct of a politics of power oriented toward the international level and the geographic frame in which it is carried out.” The exact nature of the relationship between the two terms, their specific mechanisms, causal powers, and their relative importance, are left open in this image of a semantic range.

Another feature of “classical” geopolitical discourse that resonates in contemporary usages is the field’s emphasis on practical political applications. For most of its history geopolitics has been a “science” of the military staffs and security councils” (Tunander 2008: 167), though this has started to change in recent years. Geopolitics has never been an exclusively or even a predominantly academic formation; the boundaries between scientific and applied geopolitics have always been fluid. Even the word geopolitics is characterized by a constitutive ambiguity insofar as it refers both to the object of analysis and to the science of that object. The field of geopolitics has included both imperialist politicians and arm-chair intellectuals. For Otto Maull (1926: 246), Hans W. Weigert (1942: 734), and Richard Hartshorne (1960: 53), geopolitics was simply applied political geography. Indeed, the most famous geopolitical thinkers, from Mahan, Mackinder, and Haushofer, through to Henry Kissinger, Augusto Pinochet, Colin S. Gray, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, have all moved in and out of academic settings and foreign policy making. Even the university-based geopoliticians have pursued political aims. Friedrich Ratzel called for changes in popular education in order to promote awareness of planetary politics (Hell 2011). And even though adherents of contemporary “critical” versions of geopolitics have distanced themselves from the tradition of providing “advice to the prince” (Dalby 1994), many direct their work toward an alternative set of practical aims such as developing militant counter-strategies to militarism and imperialism and supporting local and social movements or weaker nation-states against larger hegemonies and centralized powers. Some have tried to transform geopolitics

into a theory of peace rather than war (Hepple 2000; Gilmartin & Kofman 2004).

Analysis of the relations between geography and political power reaches back to Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus, Strabo, and other writers in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds (Hartog 1978; Gallois 1990: 140–144). Attention to the nexus of geography and politics reemerged in Europe during the eighteenth century, partly as a result of the Enlightenment and partly as a reaction against it. In *Spirit of the Laws*, first published in 1748, Montesquieu (1989) “conceived human life as a reflection of geographical and climatic conditions” (Collingwood 1946: 79). Herder (1784: 284) connected the uniqueness of each national culture to geography, for example, connecting the lack of “inlets and bays” along the Chinese coastline to China’s “semi-Tartarish despotism.” Geopolitical modes of thinking were nourished by European exploration and imperialism and by the exigencies of securing political control over conquered territories in far-flung colonial empires. With the completion of the westward continental expansion of the United States frontier and the end of the second wave of European colonial conquest, the idea of “planetary thinking” or globalization emerged powerfully (Kearns 1984). Mackinder (1904) signaled the end of the “Columbian epoch” of European expansionism. Geographic attention turned from explorations of “absolute space” to interest in relative space, location, and scale. The idea that the entire globe was now occupied by states and that events in the most far-flung parts of the globe would be felt everywhere lent a renewed immediacy to geopolitical thinking. By the 1920s, geopoliticians were discussing the emergence of what one of them labeled the “global village” (*das Dörfchen Erde*: Dix 1929), decades before Marshall McLuhan re-coined that term (Murphy 1997: 50). The evolution of geopolitical thinking has also responded to technological advances in ship-building and navigation (Livingstone 1993), aviation (Hochholzer 1930; Weigert & Stefansson 1944), nuclear weapons (Zoppo & Zorgbibe 1983), and the Internet (Douzet 1997).

There was also a growing sense after 1945 that geography was no longer as politically or intellectually significant as it had been before. The new models of military and foreign policy were no longer as likely to be rooted in concrete maps and categories of geographical space. Although containment strategies actually took highly specific spatialized forms, the ideological definition of the struggle between communism and capitalism tended to detach itself from specific places (Mamadouh 1998: 238). As the United States emerged over the course of the twentieth century as the dominant global power, European colonial strategies and Eurasian models of continental expansion began to seem outdated. Even in its efforts to exercise global hegemony, the United States tended to pursue *nonterritorial* strategies that did not entail permanent occupation of foreign countries (Steinmetz 2005b). The American overseas military and political presence was pointillistic, taking the form of an “empire of basis” (Johnson 2004). As nonterritorial forms of US imperial domination replaced European colonialism, specifically geographic approaches began to seem less pertinent to understanding international relations. Murphy (2007) suggested that the new model of American global hegemony rendered “place differences increasingly irrelevant” and social science began to treat “differences from place to place as ‘noise’ in their model-building efforts.” Political scientists Przeworski and Teune (1970: 30) called explicitly for “replacing proper names of social systems by the relevant variables.” Mamadouh (1998) pointed to improvements in communication technology and nuclear weapons as additional reasons for the decline of geography after 1945.

Nonetheless, open or “hot” warfare, as Smith (2003: 26) noted, has been “good for geography,” and the same has been true of geopolitics. The most recent explosion of interest in geopolitics accompanied the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This is an example of the way in which geopolitical discussions have been shaped repeatedly by more punctual, world political events. The geopolitical analysis of

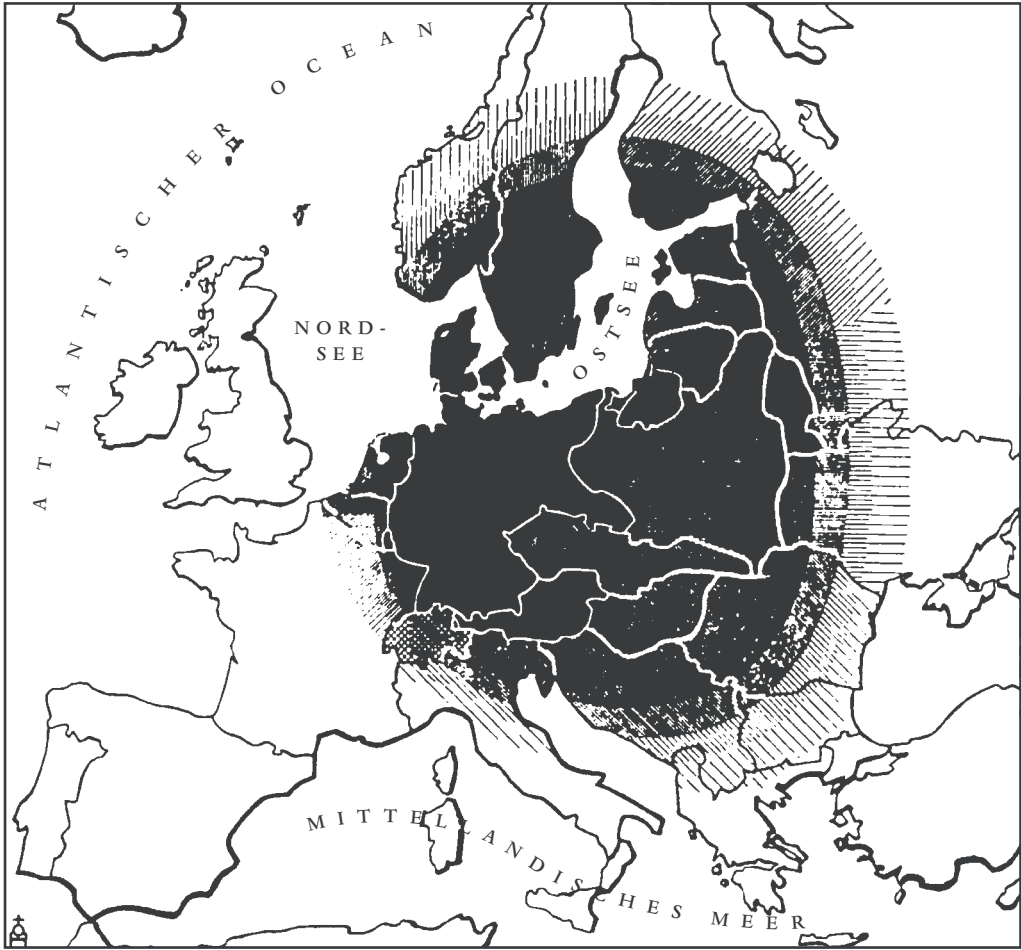


Figure 1 The Central European great economic space, from *Volk und Reich* (Wucher 1935).

borders and frontiers, for example, was inaugurated by Ratzel after the German wars of unification (1866–1871) had redrawn the map of Europe. The Berlin West Africa conference, convened by the German Chancellor in 1884–1885, signaled the beginning of a 15-year period in which the European powers carved up Africa and the islands of the Pacific and distributed them amongst themselves. Ratzel's *Political Geography*, which is often described as the founding text of geopolitics, described the political border as a dynamic, living “peripheral organ” rather than a static line (Ratzel 1923: section 6). Ratzel explicitly linked the mutability of international borders to the inherently

expansive, warlike nature of the state and the international system of states. This thematization of boundaries was given new urgency by the massive realignment of European national borders following World War I. Some of the most politically explosive changes in these boundaries were attributed to the “American Haushofer,” Isaiah Bowman, the geographer who helped to convince Woodrow Wilson to include a demand for Polish independence in his “Fourteen Points” of 1918 (Smith 2003: 125). These territorial losses to Poland were one of the central German grievances throughout the 1920s and played a huge role in Nazi propaganda and, eventually, Nazi policy.

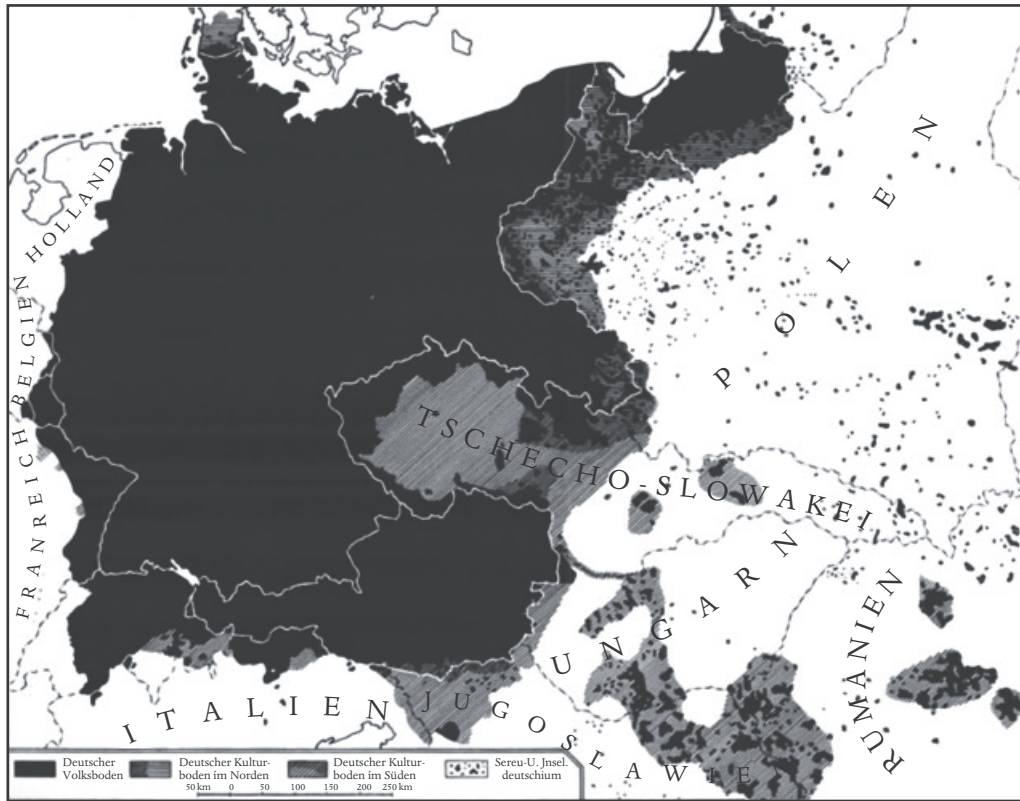


Figure 2 Map of German ethnic space and cultural space (Volksboden and Kulturboden), showing extension beyond German state borders (from von Loesch 1925, facing p. 72).

The frontier or border became, and has remained, a central theme in geopolitical writing in Germany (von Loesch 1922; Haushofer 1927) and France (Ancel 1935; Gottmann 1952; Febvre 1962; Raffestin 1974; Foucher 1980). According to Golcher (1927), the border had to be considered a “palpable and independent life form, an organism in its own right rather than simply the ‘skin’ of the state organism” (Murphy 1997: 32). Ethnosociologists Max Hildebert Boehm and Karl C. von Loesch founded the Berlin *Institut für Grenz- und Auslandsstudien* (Institute for the Study of Borders and Foreign Areas) in 1926 and published a yearbook, *Deutsches Grenzland* (German Borderlands), which documented ongoing “German border struggles” (Boehm 1938; Klingemann 1996: ch. 4).

Geopolitical planning sought to achieve informal hegemony over the “Central European greater economic space” (Figure 1) or, even more ominously, to realign German state borders with the much wider region of ethnic or racial Germanism, and eventually with the even wider lands of what they understood as “ancient German” settlement (Jacobsen 1979: 257) (Figure 2). The Nazi–Soviet pact and the German alliance with Japan were greeted by Haushofer, who accepted Mackinder’s argument that control of the Eurasian pivot area would guarantee global domination (Jacobsen 1979: vol. 1, 268). Haushofer was depicted in popular American publications like *Reader’s Digest* and *Life* as the scientific genius behind Hitler’s policies of attaining *Lebensraum* (living space) through conquest, and many Americans

became convinced that it was “smart to be geopolitical” (in the words of Strausz-Hupé 1943) or “*fas est ab hoste doceri*” (“it is right to learn even from the enemy”), in Haushofer’s favored maxim, from Ovid (Ó Tuathail 1996: 130). The US War Department created a Geopolitical Section inside the Military Intelligence service in 1942 (Coogan 1991: 201–212). Soviet success in World War II led to the American “containment” policies that were derived in part from Mackinder’s classic geopolitical theory. These policies sought to control the “rimlands” of Eurasia, “that is, Western Europe, the Pacific Rim, and the Middle East” (Klare 2003: 54), thereby creating a buffer zone of allied states between the “pivot area” and the Anglo-American “crescent of sea power” (see Figure 4).

The strong associations between geopolitical vocabulary and Nazism led to a disappearance of geopolitical discussion in Europe and a vehement opposition to it in the USSR after 1945. Carl Schmitt’s book *The Nomos of the Earth*, published in 1950, was fundamentally geopolitical in inspiration, but Schmitt largely avoided geopolitical vocabulary, coining his new concept of *Nomos* as an alternative, and while also continuing to use the originally economic category of *Grossraum* as an alternative word for a political sphere of hegemonic influence. Schmitt had transformed the idea of *Grossraum* into a political concept during the Nazi years, using it to describe a region of German political hegemony over Central Europe (Schmitt 1942; Ebeling 1994: 149–151; Hell 2009). Explicit geopolitical discussions faded away in the United States somewhat later, during the early 1960s (Kristof 1961). In 1963 an American text on political geography suggested that the “revival of the term geopolitics is probably premature and may remain so as long as most people associate the term with the ... Third Reich” (Pounds 1963: 410). Sempa (2002: 103) noted the “virtual eclipse of geopolitics in the American academic realm” from the late 1960s through the 1970s. But geopolitical ideas finally began to play a critical role in the “evolution of American national security policy during and after the 1960s” (Coogan

1991: 11) and the doctrines reemerged in the 1980s. Geopolitical ideas also flourished in the authoritarian states of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s: the future Chilean General Augusto Pinochet (1968) published an introduction to geopolitics, journals called *Geopolítica* appeared in Argentina and Uruguay, and the *Revista chilena de geopolítica* was created in 1984.

The next wave of explicit geopolitical discussion began in the 1980s in the wake of the escalation of the nuclear confrontation between the United States and USSR and the emergence of a new intellectual right wing in Europe. A conservative “International Institute of Geopolitics” (*Institut international de géopolitique*) was founded in 1983 in Paris. In response to the reemergence of conservative geopolitics, critical geographers associated with journals like *Antipode*, *Political Geography Quarterly* (1982–present, renamed *Political Geography* in 1992), and *Hérodote* attempted to capture the language of geopolitics for themselves. In Germany, where taboos on geopolitical discourse were much greater, geopolitics reemerged following the collapse of communism. Some writers rediscovered theories of Germany’s supposedly fateful “Mitellage,” or intermediate location, in the center of Europe (Calleo 1978; Zitelmann et al. 1993; Bassin 1996; Brill 1998). The German army created an “Office for Military Geontology” (Amt für Militärisches Geowesen) in 1985, which merged into the “Office for Geoinformation” (Amt für Geoinformationswesen) in 2003. According to its website, the areas of specialization of this Office include “Geopolitik”; its yearbook (*Jahresheft*) is called *Geopolitik*. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the American military responses to those attacks intensified skepticism about overly sanguine theories of globalization and the “flat earth,” inspiring a new wave of interest in geopolitics. Nowadays, universities in Britain, India, and the Czech Republic offer degrees in geopolitics, and serious newspapers like *Le Monde* use the language of geopolitics regularly. A French geopolitician even published a book called

Geopolitics for Dummies (*La géopolitique pour les nuls*; Moreau Defarges 2008).

One gauge of waxing and waning of geopolitics over time is the creation of journals with “geopolitics” in the title. The first journal specifically devoted to geopolitics was the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, which existed from 1924 to 1944. The Italian journal *Geopolitica* (1939–1942) emulated the German model. After the creation of the Latin American journals mentioned above, geopolitical discourse moved next to France, where the International Institute of Geopolitics launched the journal *Géopolitique* in 1983. *Hérodote*, a journal that had existed since 1974, followed suit and adopted the subtitle “revue de géographie et de géopolitique” (“Journal of Geography and Geopolitics”) in the same year. Since then France has seen the creation of several additional geopolitical journals, including *LiMes: Revue française de géopolitique* (1996–present) and *Outre-terre: revue française de géopolitique* (2001–present). The 1990s saw the creation of the British journal *Geopolitics and International Boundaries*, which changed its title to *Geopolitics* in 1998. Journals of geopolitics appeared in Italy, Russia, and Cameroon (*Limes: rivista italiana di geopolitica*, *Russkii geopoliticheskii sbornik*, and *Enjeux: bulletin d'analyses géopolitiques pour l'Afrique central*). Since 2004 new geopolitical journals have been founded in several eastern European countries, including Bulgaria (*Geopolitika & geostrategiia*), Poland (*Geopolytika*), and Serbia (*Geopoliticki casopis*). Interestingly, the two major countries in which there are still no journals with geopolitical titles are the United States and Germany (with the exception of the German Army yearbook mentioned above). In the United States, international relations has largely filled the place of geopolitics in the universities, while geography declined overall as a discipline, as discussed below. In Germany, *Geopolitik* since 1945 has been a word like race (*Rasse*), one that many people continue to see as too strongly associated with the Nazi era to be used in a neutral or scientific manner.

It is important to consider the field of geopolitics in sociological terms if we want to understand its peculiar history. A “sociological” approach to an academic field involves looking at its internal structure and differentiation and its relations to other disciplines and non-scientific powers. In order to understand the gradual shift over the last century from a more geographical to a more political emphasis within geopolitics, we need to consider the uneven development and prestige of the two main constituent disciplines that have contributed to it, geography and political science. Political science emerged somewhat later than geography as a university discipline, but it surpassed geography in status and size in the second half of the twentieth century. Academic geography grew out of eighteenth century learned societies such as the British Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (founded in 1788) and the French *Société de Géographie* (founded in 1821). The first half of the nineteenth century saw the pioneering work of university geographers like Carl Ritter and explorer-scientists such as Alexander von Humboldt. University professorships specifically dedicated to geography were created, starting in 1874 in Germany. By 1935 there were over 100 000 members of geographic societies worldwide (Capel 1991; Robic 2003). Geographical interest flourished in the United States and Europe during the two world wars (Smith 2003). During the second half of the twentieth century, however, academic geography declined rather precipitously. Geography departments were closed in a number of leading American universities, starting with Harvard in 1948 and followed by Columbia, Michigan, Penn, Stanford, Virginia, Yale, and many others (Murphy 2007: note 1). In Germany, geopolitical discussion was “taboo” (Brill 1998: 205) after 1945 and political geography was also largely discredited.

Like geography, political science also had ancient precursors, and it emerged from a set of established university disciplines such as *Staatswissenschaft* (state sciences) and Cameralistics, History, Law, and Economics. The first formal departments and university

chairs of political science were created in the final decades of the nineteenth century in the United States, and “the number of colleges and schools offering courses in international relations increased exponentially” in the inter-war period (Coogan 1991: 55; Farr 2003). In Germany, the first institution of higher education dedicated specifically to political science, the *Deutsche Hochschule für Politik*, was founded only in 1920 (Behrmann 1998; Bleek 2001), and political science did not become part of the established German universities until after 1945, partly as a result of the Allied military occupation (Plé 2001). The reputation of political science eclipsed geography in European and American universities during the second half of the twentieth century. The gradual shift in emphasis within geopolitics from an original focus on the determination of politics by the geographic environment, to a political determination of territory and space, is thus connected not only to developments in the world outside science but also to the shifting balance of power between geography and political science.

Another *intra-scientific* reason for the decline of geopolitics after 1945 has to do with the growing prestige of neopositivist, formalized, and mathematized forms of social science, especially in the United States (Steinmetz 2005b). These approaches tended to abstract from place and space as well as history, proposing universal models in a hypothetico-deductive format. The replacement of a language of geopolitics by the language of “international relations” in American political science was related not only to the rise of nuclear weapons and the informal character of US hegemony, but also to the increasingly powerful idea of a political science valid for all times and places (Gunnell 1986).

Even if geopolitics has rarely existed as a university discipline, it did occasionally cohere as a *subfield* within geography or political science (on the theory of subfields, see Steinmetz 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Geopolitical (sub)fields are usually dominated by their “heteronomous” pole, that is, by participants and institutions

oriented more toward political power and policy making than autonomous scientific production. In this respect geopolitics more closely resembles social work or public policy schools than traditional disciplines like history, philosophy, or even geography. The difference between political geography and geopolitics was almost entirely defined in terms of the latter’s applied and heteronomous character, that is, its dependence on political power. Moreover, geopolitics until recently was usually connected to conservative political actors, perspectives, and policies; it was a science of and for empire, which flourished especially during wartime (Murphy et al. 2004). In the history of geopolitics, politicians and policy-oriented academics like Mackinder and Haushofer have tended to overshadow the more autonomous, scientifically-oriented figures. Haushofer (1925: 93), a Bavarian general turned professor, described geopolitics as a “servant of the politically leading powers.” A recent discussion among four leading political geographers suggested that *nonacademics* still tend to be drawn to the more geodeterminist concepts of “classical geopolitics” (Murphy et al. 2004: 619, 621). By contrast, more autonomous geopolitical writers tend to emphasize the ways in which geographical *discourses* and *representations* shape world politics and the ways that states and politics shape space and territory (e.g., Brenner 1997, 1998, 2002).

The social sciences have often shown marked “national colorations” (Heilbron 2008), and this has perhaps been especially true of geopolitics, since it has been so closely linked to imperial politics. As Hans Weigert (1942: 733) observed:

There is no such thing as a general science of geopolitics. It does not have a singular form. There are as many geopolitics as there are conflicting states.

According to the editors of the *Handbook of Political Geography*, this field was “clearly, even self-consciously subordinated to the statecraft of particular nation-states” (Cox et al. 2007: 3; see also Cowen & Smith 2009: 25). The geopolitical approach itself suggests that there

must be a global geopolitics of the production of geopolitical knowledge. Theoretical and analytic approaches will vary spatially not just because of national scientific and intellectual traditions but because of the specific geopolitical stakes, conflicts, and regimes prevalent in each specific state or empire.

Explaining geopolitical discourse in a sociological manner also requires that we pay attention to the broader intellectual currents within which such discussions emerge. Geopolitics was directed in part against Marxism (Neumann 1943: 287), as Karl Wittfogel (1929) argued in a journal of the German Communist Party. Classical geopolitics was a non-Marxist form of materialism (Ó Tuithail 1996: 17). Another intellectual current that had an enormous impact on early geopolitics was Social Darwinism, without which Ratzel's concept of *Lebensraum* and his theory of the state as an organism are incomprehensible. Environmental determinism, in this respect, was the "geographic version" of nineteenth century Social Darwinism (Peet 1985). The first generation of geopolitical thinkers was mainly influenced by the natural sciences. This reinforced a tendency to make predictive forecasts on the basis of supposedly general geopolitical "laws."

After 1900, geopolitical thinking began to be influenced by the very different intellectual formations of neo-historicism (Mannheim 1952) and antipositivism (Steinmetz 2005c), which militated against any notion of general laws or strong predictions in the social sciences. Indeed, scientific naturalism had never completely replaced historicism within German geography. Carl Ritter (1834, 1862: 19) had described the Earth as a "cosmic individual" and "*ens sui generis*," insisting on the "historical element in geography." The geographer Hölzel (1896) discussed the idea of the "geographical individual." The phrase "geographical individual" harkened back to Ritter, and resonated with philosopher Heinrich Rickert's concept of the "historical individual" (Steinmetz 2010a). The German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband had argued that the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) such as history had to be

approached in a completely different manner than the sciences of natural phenomena. The main differences concerned the central role of *interpretation* in the human sciences and the idea of *individuality* – the irreducible particularity of events, historical processes, institutions, and actors. Rickert, whose thinking had a profound influence on Max Weber, argued that "the historical individual" was the typical object of analysis in the human and social sciences. Max Spandau, a student of Max Weber and Karl Haushofer, argued that "geography is related to history in terms of the unique individuality [*Einmaligkeit*] of its object" and that geography was "subject to 'historical' explanations in the sense in which this term has been used by H. Rickert because, like history, it is concerned with the 'unique facts of existence'" (Spandau 1925: 40). And as the émigré sociologist Werner Cahnman noted, Spandau insisted that "no general causal nexus should be implied in investigations ... into historic or geographic individualities" but should try instead to make a "genuine historical explanation" showing that "a unique complex of causes had brought forth a unique complex of facts in a unique field situation" (Cahnman 2007: 146).

The rejection of a "nomothetic" approach to geopolitics was not confined to Germany. French political geographers promoted a philosophical doctrine known as *Possibilism*, which resembled German historicism in emphasizing the human capacity "to choose between a range of possible responses to the environment" (Johnston 2000: 609). The leading geographical representative of this view was Vidal de la Blache (1923: 14), who criticized Ratzel's naturalism and insisted that:

a geographical individuality does not result simply from geological and climatic conditions. It is not something delivered complete from the hand of Nature. ... It is man who reveals a country's individuality by moulding it to his own use.

An even stronger adherent of "possibilism" was Lucien Febvre, the co-founder with Marc Bloch

of the French *Annales* historiographic school. Febvre insisted that “there are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities” (Febvre 2003: xi). The Scottish geographer and sociologist Patrick Geddes also defended a form of “possibilism” and practiced a form of “conservative surgery” on cities to make them more humane (Geddes 1947: 44–49). Even Mackinder saw geopolitical events as singular, meaning that geopolitics was not a nomothetic science (Parker 1985: 26). Isaiah Bowman attacked the geopoliticians’ insistence on geographic “laws” and their perverse mixing of scientific laws with a Nietzschean politics of the will (Bowman 1942: 648–649).

Since the 1980s, geopolitical discussions have been deeply influenced by neo-Marxism and poststructuralism. The Marxist geographer David Harvey discussed the “geopolitics of capitalism” and developed a partially geopolitical explanation of contemporary American imperialism (Harvey 1985, 2003). Yves Lacoste promoted a critical analysis of geography as “a language and form of power/knowledge,” emphasizing, for example, that the central geographic notion of *region* derived from the Latin word *regere*, meaning “to rule” (Ó Tuathail 1996: 161, 163). Geopolitical writers influenced by Marxism and poststructuralism have analyzed the geopolitical assumptions and “mental maps” that shape foreign policy making (Henrickson 1980), deconstructing geopolitical models such as the “view from nowhere,” hierarchies of place, and the distinctions between the inside-domestic and the outside-foreign (Agnew 2003). Geopolitical writers have also responded to the newer discussions of globalization (Lacoste 2003; Dodds 2007).

The beginning of geopolitics lies in a view of the state as “a living organism” whose territory is not a “definite area fixed for all time” and which “cannot be contained within rigid limits” (Ratzel 1896: 351). Ratzel started from the premise that “every living organism required a certain amount of territory from which to draw sustenance,” and he notoriously labeled this territory “the respective *Lebensraum*, or living space, of the organism in question”

(Bassin 2003: 16). The word *Lebensraum* became infamous once it appeared in the pages of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and subsequently appeared to guide some of the Nazis’ wartime policies (Lange 1965). Ratzel’s theory was a form of Social Darwinism, but in contrast to Darwin’s account, the struggle took place among states rather than individuals. As a state’s population grows, according to Ratzel, it requires a larger *Lebensraum*; and “as more and more states grow up, the nearer do they edge together, and ... act and react upon one another” (Ratzel 1897: 297). There is a natural tendency for states to engage in conquest and to expand: “in the long run, nature does not let a *Volk* remain immobile, it has to move forward or backward” (Ratzel 1882, vol. 1: 116). Since the Earth’s surface was considered to be completely occupied by states by the end of the nineteenth century, the necessary corollary of spatial growth by some states was the annexation and disappearance of other states. Ratzel argued that giant empires were both the starting point and the culmination of world history. He also developed the Greco-Roman idea of the *ecumene* as the inhabited part of the Earth, and distinguished between core (*Innenlage* or *Zelle*) and peripheries (*Ränder*) within that *ecumene* (Ratzel 1897: 205–208). This distinction between core and periphery resurfaced in Alfred Weber’s (1929) “industrial location theory,” Christaller’s (1933) “central place theory,” the “three worlds” model (Balandier 1956; Worsley 1984), Wallerstein’s (2004) world system theory, and many other discussions of core–periphery relations (e.g., Whittlesey 1944; Shils 1975). Ratzel also injected a *cultural* dimension into political geography, noting that “the more nations become conscious of global spatial relations, the more they engage in the struggle for space” (Ratzel 1897: 266). This idea suggested to later geopolitical thinkers that *perceptions* of space among political leaders and broader populations should be as central to analysis as the study of physical space.

The idea that history was driven by a constant international struggle for space had already been proposed by Ludwig Gumplowicz. Like

Ratzel, Gumpłowicz resisted thinking of the hierarchical cultural differences that lay behind states' differential success as biological or racial differences (at least after the 1870s; Weiler 2007). But Gumpłowicz's writing abstracted from the concrete territories in which these eternal struggles were said to be raging, while Ratzel focused precisely on the *spatial* aspects of the expansion and contraction, the rise and fall, of states and empires. Kjellén's analysis also hewed closely to Ratzel, positing a "Law of Healing" (Kjellén 1917: 61) whereby states seek naturally to compensate for the loss of amputated territories by regaining land. Mackinder (1887: 143) agreed that "the communities of men should be looked on as units in the struggle for existence." Some of the most influential contributions to the historical sociology of politics in recent decades (e.g., Mann 1986; Tilly 1990) have been inspired by the "military" state theories of Ratzel, Gumpłowicz (1883, 1909), Hintze (1907), and Oppenheimer (1919).

Mackinder's lasting contribution to this discussion was to focus attention on the globe in its concrete entirety and to analyze it as a political chessboard. Mackinder's model distinguished between the Eurasian "pivot" or "heartland" surrounded by an "inner crescent," which was itself surrounded by an "outer crescent" of sea powers (see Figure 3). This model remained influential for many decades. According to Mackinder's famous formula (1942 [1919]: 150):

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:
Who rules the Heartland commands the
World-Island:
Who rules the World-Island commands the
World.

Fairgrieve (1924) redefined the inner crescent as the "crush zone," a belt of small buffer states located between the sea powers and the Eurasian land mass (Figure 5). This approach was adapted by Spykman (Figure 4), who argued during World War II that the United States had to help Britain in order to avoid being surrounded by hostile powers on its Pacific and Atlantic rims (Spykman 1942;

Parker 1985: 108). Spykman and subsequent geopolitical writers reversed one key aspect of Mackinder's model, however, emphasizing control of the buffer zone or "rimland" by the outer world-island of sea powers as the key to global political control. Spykman's approach is often seen as the inspiration for George Kennan's containment doctrine. It urged the United States to support, control, and ally with the rimland states in order to contain Soviet expansion (Dodds 2007: 196). As Spykman (1944: 43–44) argued during World War II, "the heartland becomes less important than the rimland and it is the co-operation of British, Russian, and United States land and sea powers that will control the European littoral and, thereby, the essential power relations of the world."

Trampler (1932) and Cohen (2003) referred to a "shatterbelt" of eastern European states, a zone pressed between larger political powers and shattered into numerous small states. Similarly, Hodder et al. (1997) discussed the problems of *landlocked states*.

These sorts of classical geopolitical ideas continue to inform the work of American imperial policy-makers (Klare 2001, 2003). A number of post-1945 US foreign policy frameworks flow at least in part from geopolitical theories, including containment, the iron curtain, the domino theory, the ideas of the axis of evil and of "Old Europe versus New Europe," and Europe as Venus versus America as Mars (Kagan 2003), and the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1996). So-called realism in international relations theory, as Weigert (1942: 734) observed, is rooted in geopolitics. Contemporary "neorealist" theorists portray international relations as a realm of perpetual anarchy in which states attempt to gain as much power as possible (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). This approach is strongly reminiscent of classical geopolitics, even if it has shed the older biological and geological foundations.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, geopolitical thinking moved away from environmental determinism and organicist metaphors and toward an understanding

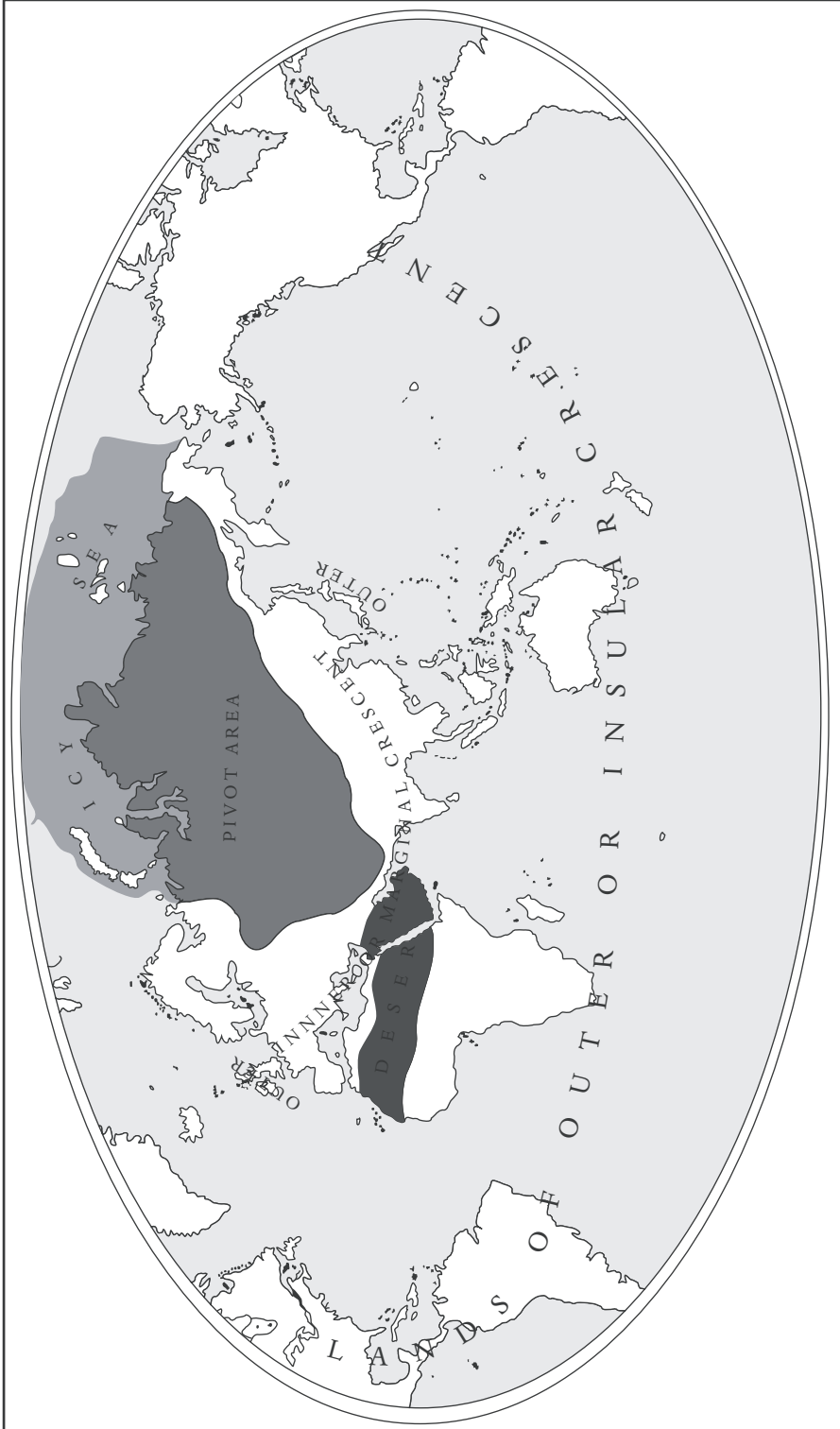


Figure 3 Mackinder's map of the pivot area, inner crescent, and outer or insular crescent.



Figure 4 Spykman's (1942) map of American "encirclement" of the pivot area through alliances with "inner crescent" (Europe, Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia).

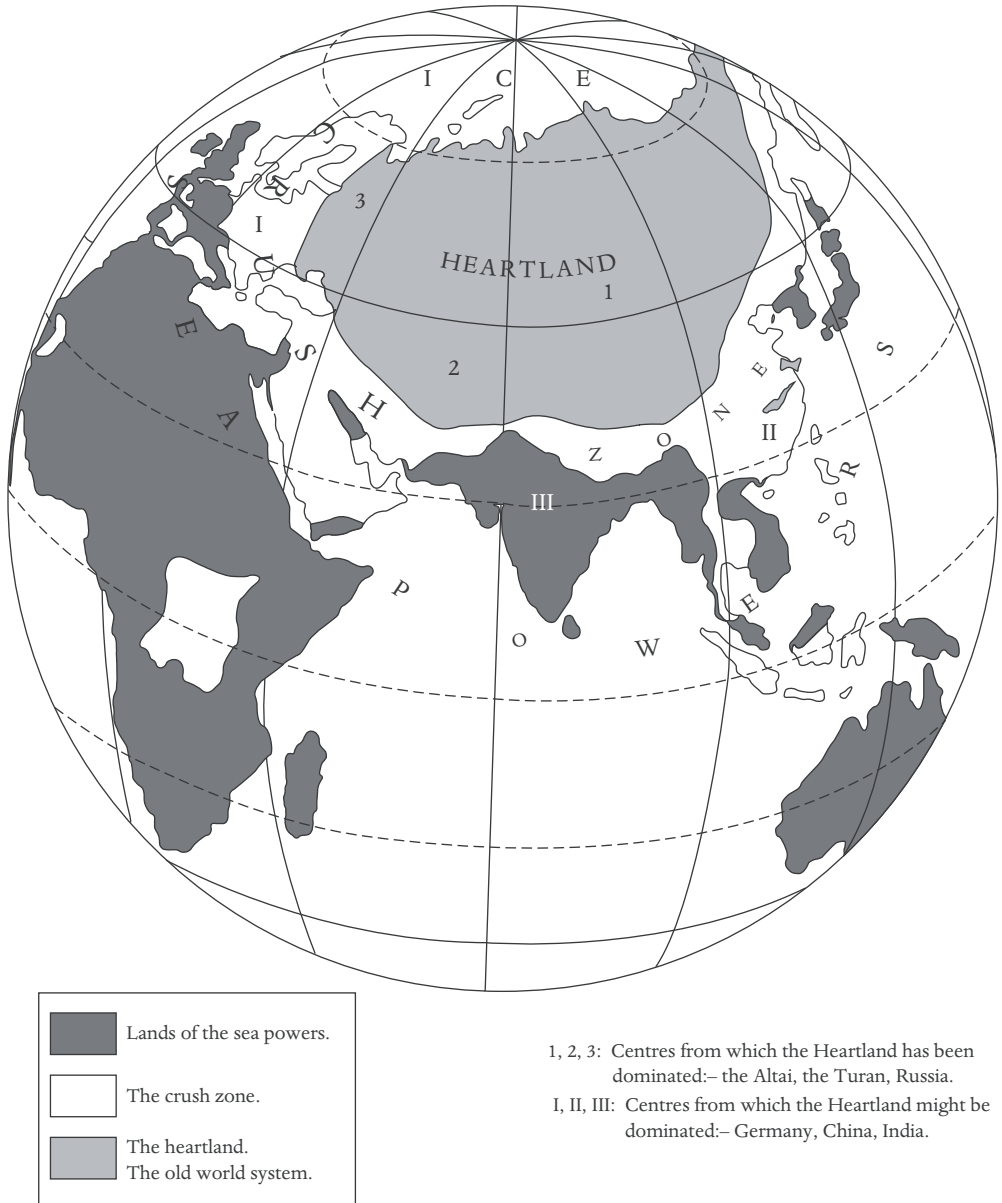


Figure 5 Fairgrieve (1924: 334), map of the world system, showing “crush zone.”

of the ways in which landscape and territory are shaped by politics. Max Weber (1891) analyzed the spatial layout of roads and properties in the Roman Empire, showing that they followed a primarily political and military logic rather than a natural or economic one. Max Spandau (1925) argued that political

geography encompassed not just “transportation and settlement” patterns “but even the geography of flora and fauna” since the “placement of transportation routes is often carried out purely according to the standpoint of the state (defense), transfers of population or are hindered by the will of the state.” The Austrian

geopolitical thinker Hugo Hassinger (1932) described the state as a “shaper of landscapes” (*Landschaftsgestalter*).

One of the most fundamental contributions of the geopolitical literature has been its intense focus on colonialism, and also on empires that are noncolonial in the sense of dominating foreign states indirectly without conquering them, seizing sovereignty, or governing directly in the place of indigenous populations or élites. Although all of the social science disciplines have dealt with empires, none of them has made empire the core object of analysis. This distinguishing feature of geopolitics has sometimes been overlooked by commentators, for at least two reasons. First, geopolitical analysts have themselves often characterized their field as being centered on the *state* as the central object of analysis, downplaying their own field’s interest in forms of political organization and strategy located at levels broader or larger than the individual state. Introductory texts on geopolitics from the interwar period typically begin with the category of the state rather than empire (e.g., Maull 1925; Hennig 1928). The second reason for this mischaracterization of the field is that the social sciences to which geopolitics has been most closely linked have themselves failed to recognize the importance of empires. Gumpłowicz, for example, did not refer to the largest or highest-order political organizations as empires except when he discussed the United States, which he saw as “seeking today to unify itself with the South American states into a large American *Reich* (empire)” (Gumpłowicz 1910: 157). German “state theory” from Hegel to Max Weber typically associated the idea of empire with ancient history and the idea of the state with modernity. This problem started to be corrected by theorists like Ratzel and Schmitt, but post-1945 American social science slipped back into the nineteenth century conflation of modern empires with “states.” Skocpol (1979: 47), for example, described and treated Tsarist Russia and Qing China as “old-regime *states*” rather than empires, thereby effacing some of the specifically imperial determinants of the revolutions she was analyzing.

Empires have been central to geopolitical discussions since the beginning of the subfield. Ratzel discussed colonialism and empires of conquest. A key chapter of Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals and Reality* concerned “the rivalry of empires” (Mackinder 1919). Adolf Grabowsky, the leading representative of geopolitics within political science during the Weimar Republic (and the author of a famous article on the “primacy of foreign policy”; Grabowsky 1928) wrote a book on “Social imperialism as the last phase of imperialism” (Grabowsky 1939) while in exile in Switzerland during the Nazi period. Otto Maull, one of the editors of the *Journal of Geopolitics*, discussed “colonial geopolitics” (Maull 1936: 51–54). Erich Obst, another editor of that journal, specialized in overseas colonialism. Obst discussed the “geopolitical divisions of Africa” and deployed the “*Grossraum* idea” to analyze “colonial imperialism” (Obst 1932, 1941). Even as Haushofer provided arguments for an imperial invasion of certain parts of eastern Europe, he called for an anti-imperialist alliance between Germany and Japan, China, Turkey, India, and the USSR against the powers of the “outer ring,” which were trying to suppress these countries’ self-determination (Jacobsen 1979: 268–269). Geographer Manfred Langhans (1924) discussed the “legal and actual spheres of influence of the great powers,” diagnosing an emerging pattern of informal imperial dominance. Langhans emphasized the usefulness of a geographic approach to the problem, calling for maps that could “convey an accurate picture” of the actual political reach of the various great powers (Murphy 1997: 111). Focusing on US policy in Central America, Langhans argued that “modern statecraft allows the more powerful (ruling) state to impose a protective relationship over the weaker (protected) state that is in many respects the equivalent of annexation, while carefully avoiding the appearance of being the actual ruler of the area it dominates” (Langhans 1924; see also Salz 1923: 569).

These models of informal empire were closely tied to German discussions of continental domination over central Europe. As the liberal imperialist politician Friedrich Naumann had

written in an influential essay on *Mitteleuropa*, the peripheral states in such a German-dominated system would “have their own life, their own summers and winters, their own culture, worries and glories, but in the grand world-historical scheme of things they [would] no longer follow their own laws but instead would work to reinforce the leading group” (Naumann 1915). During the 1920s these ideas developed into projects for a German-dominated *Grossraum* in the east (Figure 1). The legal theorist Carl Schmitt applied the idea of the *Grossraum* to imperial political formations, defining it as a modern approach to empire in which the controlling state renounces “open territorial annexation of the controlled state” but absorbs a “space far exceeding the boundaries of the state proper” into its own “spatial sphere” (Schmitt 1950: 252, 281). During World War II Schmitt began discussing the new American *Nomos* that he argued would install itself “upon the ruins of the old” ones (presumably the British, Soviet, and German *Nomoi*) after the war (Schmitt 1942: 59). Schmitt also held out the possibility of a “combination of several independent *Großräume* or blocs” that could counterbalance the American and perhaps also the Soviet *Nomos* (Schmitt 1950: 355). Geopolitics has thus been a theory of empires and supra-state political spaces as well as states, regions, and substate politics.

The most important development in the geopolitical literature in the past three decades is the emergence of several critical schools of geopolitics. Yves Lacoste and the *Hérodote* group rejected the pretensions of “disinterested” and “scientific” geography and argued that “geopolitics is not just the consideration of planetary-scale superpower strategies but also involves a form of reasoning that can contribute to anti-hegemonic resistance. ... There is more than the geopolitics of *raison d'état*; there are other forms of geopolitics” (Lacoste 1982: 4, 1984). Rather than channeling their work toward ruling politicians, they took a “distanced and skeptical view of the political status quo” (Bassin 2004: 621). But these critical geopoliticians did not necessarily strike an entirely

apolitical stance; instead they directed their advice toward social movements and progressive parties. The central thesis of the *Hérodote* group was that:

geography was a form of strategic and political knowledge, central to military strategy and the exercise of political power, but that this strategic discourse had become hidden behind the “smoke-screen” ... of academic geography. Geographers needed to cast off the limitations of their “mystified and mystifying discourse,” and become militant and critical analysts of strategy, working to unmask the geographical structuring of power and assisting in the development of counter-strategies. (Dodds and Atkinson 2000: 268)

Lacoste (1993) was interested in contributing to counter-hegemonic and democratic movements by analyzing the ways in which politicians are guided by geopolitical ideas and by offering alternative ways of visualizing political space. In this respect Lacoste responded directly to the geopolitical tradition of visual, especially cartographic, propaganda. Halford Mackinder attempted to make people “think imperially” by visualizing global space (Dodds 2007: 121). Karl Haushofer (1928) promoted an evocative new form of cartography, which he labeled “the suggestive map,” aimed at a “politically emphatic” visual message (Hell 2009). Like some of the Anglophone critical geographers, Lacoste promoted an alternative cartography. During the Vietnam War, Lacoste mapped the US bombing of dikes protecting the rice paddy fields of the Tonkin River Delta in order to “systematically destroy the farming basis of the Vietnamese economy” (Claval 2000: 244). More recently he presented a map of trajectories of “postcolonial immigration” into France that reminds viewers of the colonial origins of France’s current “domestic” conflicts, and that evokes a ghostly memory of older maps of colonial Africa that depicted the colonies of each European country’s power in a different color (Lacoste 2010: 15).

Lacoste’s version of geopolitics, like the Anglophone school of critical geopolitics, has

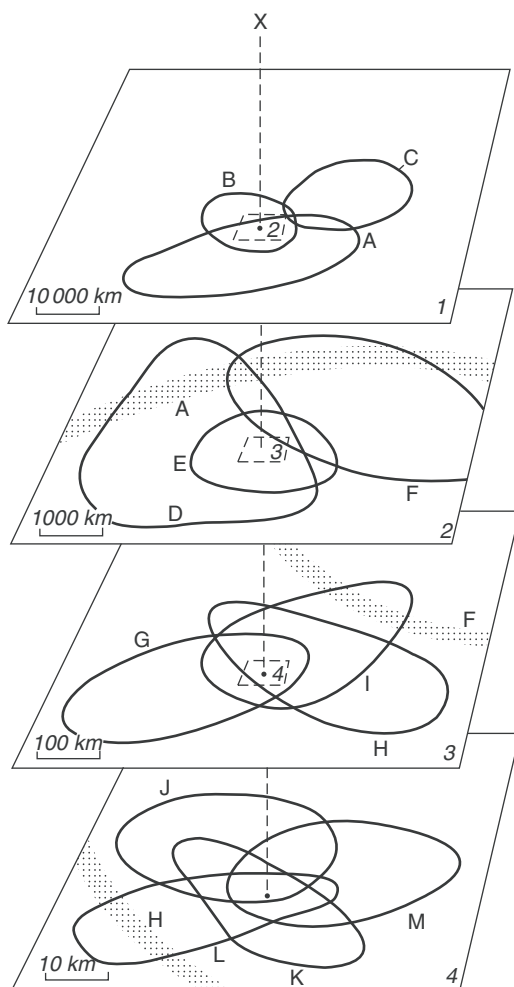


Figure 6 Lacoste (1985: 73): different levels or scales of spatial analysis.

applied geopolitical ideas to new objects and scales of analysis. As Lacoste wrote, “states do not have a monopoly on geopolitics” (1986, vol. 1: xiii). Geopolitics is not only about international or imperial politics but is also about “internal” geopolitics within nation-states (e.g., regionalism), urban relations that transcend national boundaries, popular geopolitical and nationalist discourse, and the construction of the very distinction between the foreign and the domestic (Foucher 1980). Lacoste suggests analyzing each point in political space at a variety of different scales (Figure 6).

We can identify at least seven areas of valuable geopolitical research and theory for the present and the future. The first has to do with continuing to identify the spatial form of evolving imperial strategies. Geopolitical theory warns against ignoring or de-emphasizing the role of both states and supra-state (imperial) forms of political domination when theorizing empire (as in Hardt & Negri 2000). The second agenda involves analyzing states and politics as shapers of space and territory (Brenner 1997), a project that continues the pioneering work of Hassinger and others from the interwar period. The third involves thinking in terms of shatterbelts, crushbelts, and other spatial concepts of international relations. Fourth, there is a need to continue developing the dialogue with neo-historicism that existed in German geopolitics before 1933, in order to resist the idea that such relations can be explained by a general theory or that geopolitics is likely to take a universal form. A fifth, related point is that geopolitics can help to resist the temptations of economic reductionism in social science.

Sixth, geopolitics has a critical and reflexive agenda of understanding, criticizing, deconstructing, and offering alternatives to official government geopolitical imaginaries. Explicit, conservative geopolitics continues to flourish in imperial settings like the United States and post-Soviet Russia, and in new geopolitical formations like the European Union. Whereas geopolitics had been “persistently demonized during the days of the Soviet Union” as a “heinous capitalist ideological device” and an instrument of “military adventurers,” a “fascist” theory “in the service of American (and West German) imperialism,” geopolitical discourses “returned with a vengeance” in post-Soviet Russia (Erickson 1999: 242). North American imperialists have also argued that traditional geopolitics should be brought back (Ignatieff 2003: 20). Critical geopolitics “puts us on our vigilance for crude ‘reterritorializations’” (Taylor & Flint 2000: 103) that try to represent a complex world of massive social and political change in terms of simple models and concepts.

Finally, insofar as geopolitics refers to discourses and practices concerned with rivalry among states, empires, or regions over the control of territories and the resources within them, it provides an important corrective counterpoint to discourses of globalization. As Blouet (2001: 7) wrote, globalization usually suggests “the opening of national space to the free flow of goods, capital and ideas,” whereas “geopolitical policies seek to establish national or imperial control over space and the resources, routeways, industrial capacity and population the territory contains.” Geopolitics suggests spatial bounding as the necessary counterpart to spatial unbounding. The word globalization usually stands for the decline of states, the transnational circulation of culture, commodities, and people, the disappearance, weakening, or crossing of borders, and “deterritorialization.” By contrast, geopolitics emphasizes the continuing power of states and empires and the importance of power struggles among these entities; borders, lines, distinctions between cores and peripheries; and (re)territorialization (see Clarno 2008; Brown 2010). There are deep contradictions between the free flows of finance, commodities, people, and ideas that characterized the post-Fordist era (and globalization) and the tendencies toward imperial closure that have come to the fore in recent years, though both are dialectically linked (Steinmetz 2003, 2005a). Rather than an end of geopolitical practice or of the relevance of geopolitics, what we are currently seeing (as in earlier periods) is a rearrangement of the nature and importance of different forms of political closure, borders, and domination and a rescaling of geopolitics. As in the 1920s and in earlier periods, globalization and geopolitics move hand in hand. A more adequate form of globalization thinking would integrate it with a geopolitical sense of the strategies being used to create and strengthen states, empires, and borders, and new forms of enclosure and territorialization.

SEE ALSO: Borders; Colonialism; Deterritorialization; Imperialism; Political globalization; State autonomy; War.

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