



Opening the black box of the organization: Socio-material practices of geopolitical ordering

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ABSTRACT

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Despite their implication in almost all aspects of the field, organizations remain a black box within critical geopolitics. The majority of the literature looks at organizations from the outside, either treating them as producers of geopolitical representations or as geopolitical actors. An explicit engagement with what organizations are, what makes their actorness and what fashions them with power is missing. This contribution draws on ideas from actor-network theory (ANT) to conceptualize organizations as socio-material networks that emerge from continuous processes of ordering. Tracing these processes along the associations they establish should be an important task of a critical geopolitics. The paper sketches a research agenda around four nodes for such a focus on the socio-material practices of ordering: the circulation of geopolitical ideas, the production of geopolitics, governance at a distance and technologies of ordering.

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Introduction: the black box of the organization

Whether it is foreign ministries, universities, newspapers or think tanks, the EU, the UN, NATO, Al-Qaida, or NGOs, grassroots initiatives and social movements, or the church – organizations fundamentally shape geopolitics. They are birthplaces for geopolitical strategies and future diplomats, they command troops or resist violence, start wars or negotiate peace, forge regional cooperation or force regional splits, protect the environment or exploit resources, orient public opinion and protest injustice. There is no major geopolitical issue in which organizations are not involved.

Yet, despite their indisputable importance for geopolitics, critical geopolitics all too often just assumes organizations as given actors without looking at what exactly fashions them with agency. Often, we simply accept that the EU has influence in its neighborhood, that NATO can command troops and that newspapers come up with and disseminate new, influential ideas. We focus our attention on the action or the word itself and tend to ignore what makes an action or utterance possible in the first place. Behind the façade of organizations, however, a plethora of humans and things need to be coordinated and brought together to make an organization capable of acting. Organizations are precarious entities and

require permanent stabilizing and ordering to maintain their actorness (Law, 1994; Weick, 2001).

This contribution argues that critical geopolitics would benefit from looking what happens behind the organizational façade, at the inside of organizations. This would mean laying bare the manifold socio-material processes of ordering by which organizations are assembled and become more or less coherent entities. Such an undertaking calls for explicating how particular contexts become the conditions of possibility for the emergence of organizations and organizational action (Kuus, 2011b). It is some of the original description of the task and purpose of critical geopolitics that resonates well with the intent of this paper: critical geopolitics writes against “organized totality” (Ó Tuathail, 1994: 528) and seeks to unravel how geopolitical power is exercised; it intervenes against the God trick of seeing everything from nowhere in favor of a situated reasoning (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998).

Opening the black box of the organization then must be at the heart of the critical geopolitics agenda. I use the metaphor of the black box in a dual sense here. First, in the classic one of calling for examining and theorizing the inside, the mechanisms of organizational agency and, second, in the specific sense that Michel Callon and Bruno Latour use the term to think of organizations as macro-actors which are no more than the sum of a multitude of smaller elements linked together.

A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of

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thoughts, habits, forces and objects – the broader the construction one can raise. ... Macro-actors are micro-actors seated on top of many (leaky) black boxes (Callon & Latour, 1981: 285).

After a review and critique of work on organizations in critical geopolitics, the paper mobilizes ideas from actor-network theory (ANT) to develop a concept of organization as the ordering of socio-material networks – arrangements of human and material elements that work together toward a shared mission. These actor-networks are heterogeneous, i.e. made up of human and non-human elements – a proposition which is the hallmark of ANT – which are to be treated symmetrically in an analysis that seeks to ascertain “which associations are stronger and which are weaker” (Latour, 1987: 140; see also Law & Hassard, 1999; Murdoch, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). The paper concludes by sketching out a research map around four nodes that could orient future work on the socio-material practices of ordering that constitute organizations: the circulation of geopolitical ideas, the production of geopolitics, governance at a distance and technologies of ordering.

Organizations in critical geopolitics

Studies of organizations and their behavior and role in world politics are the traditional domain of the discipline of international relations (IR). After all, the relations between sovereign states are often conducted through international organizations and global problems are addressed through them. According to one perspective, “international governance is whatever international organizations do” (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986: 756). Even for those who do not subscribe to this all-encompassing take, international organizations play a crucial role in establishing regimes of international governance. They can create norms and thus coordinate action in the international state system which might ultimately result in avoiding or settling conflicts and facilitating cooperation between states, for example with respect to common goods.

Most of this research, adopting a statist–functionalist approach, has treated international organizations as serving the interests of and deriving power from states (e.g. Haas, 1964). This situation has been conceived through a principal-agent model, in which international organizations are hired as agents to perform certain tasks for the principals of state governments (Nielson & Tierney, 2003). As such, the degree of authority and autonomy granted to them has

been rather low (cf. Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). Studies looking at organizational processes and the dynamics inside organizations are rather the exception than the rule (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: ix; Ness & Brechin, 1988). Approaching organizations from a sociological perspective has only recently gained some currency, perhaps most prominently in Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) pioneering work on international organizations as authoritative bureaucracies.

For critical geopolitics, too, organizations are of central importance. In its call to move away from the state-centric analysis that had characterized classical geopolitics (e.g. Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998), critical geopolitics planted the seed for the engagement with organizations beyond the state and has thus extended the scope of research subjects considerably compared to IR. While governmental, transnational and international organizations represent an important type of organization (Bachmann, *in press*), new actors have entered the geopolitical scene. Though organizations such as NATO, the United Nations or the EU are among the standard fare, NGOs, social movements, non-state armed actors such as guerillas and paramilitaries or religious bodies have considerably extended the circle of the usual suspects as new loci of geopolitical power (e.g. Jeffrey, *in press*).

Work that features organizations in critical geopolitics can be classified into three broad categories. In the first, organizations are producers of discourse and the analysis focuses on the content of meaningful geopolitical representations. In the second, organizations are treated primarily as geopolitical agents. In the third, the focus is on the inside lives of organizations viewed as bureaucracies. Fig. 1 presents an attempt at situating these three categories in relation to other fields and perspectives on organizations.

Organizations as producers of representations

The strand of research that looks at organizations as producers of representations commonly adopts an interpretive perspective, where the focus is on the creation and analysis of shared symbolic meaning – a perspective that is also prominent in the field of Organization Studies (cf. Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983 and Fig. 1). Often, these studies operate with the concept of discourse as a linchpin and are concerned with how language becomes productive of geopolitical space (cf. also Grant, Hardy, Osrick, & Putnam, 2004 in Organization Studies). A number of studies can be classified into this rubric. Some pinpoint single organizations,

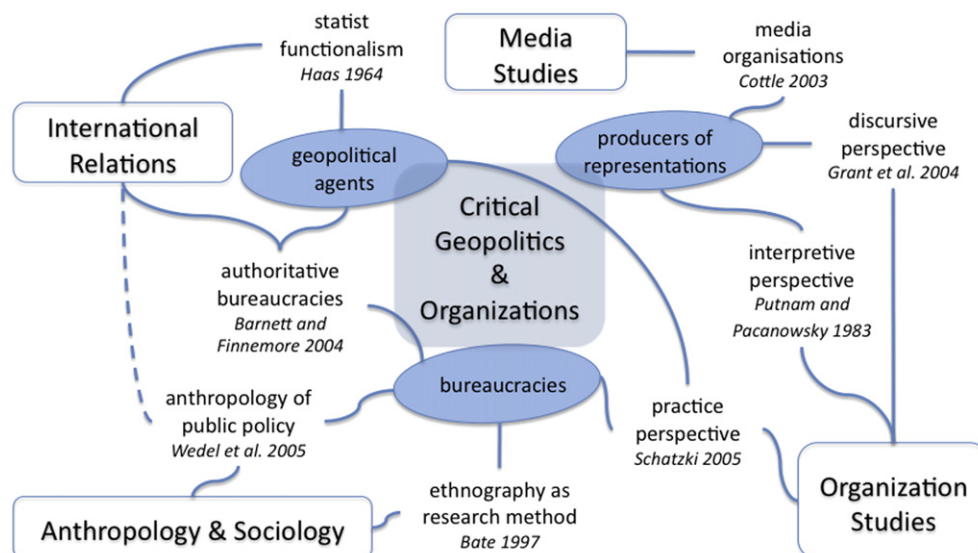


Fig. 1. Research on organizations in critical geopolitics with links to related fields and perspectives.

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