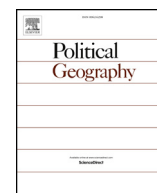




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Greater East Asia Geopolitics and its geopolitical imagination of a borderless world: A neglected tradition?



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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates one way to reconsider pluralism in international relations theory through Japan's appropriation of European geopolitics. It is argued that the absence of non-Western theory often suggests the absence of non-Western subjectivity in world politics. In this debate, Japan, the sole non-Western country that abuses geopolitics to become a colonial empire, is a conundrum, particularly in terms of the relation of power and space. This paper shows how geopolitical theory can be differently interpreted by local political practices and its historical language, and how such mutations have been overlooked in the wider debate by examining conceptual divergence in the theory. Japanese geopolitics during the Second World War, called *Daitōa Chiseigaku* (Greater East Asia Geopolitics), envisaged the state as a territory without borders, in contrast to common assumptions in Anglophone international relations theory that modern Japan followed the European imperial order of territorial states. By excavating this story of Japanese geopolitics, this paper neither wants to assert another Japanese exceptionalism, nor to exhaust the hidden richness of Japanese theory to propose an alternative geopolitical discourse. Rather, it wants to reconsider the ways in which even state-centric geopolitical theory can be diverse in order to better understand the complex development of the map of modern states.

1. Introduction

It is well known that wartime Japan misappropriated European geopolitical theories – best characterized as geographical determinism buttressed by white supremacist assumptions – paradoxically in order to become a sole non-Western, non-White colonial empire in the Far East (ÓTuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003). However, the question of why Japanese scholars successfully appropriated the deterministic theory despite the difference is a neglected one in both Japanese and Anglophone literature, and the question of what constituted that Japanese geopolitics has been only sparsely addressed (e.g. Takeuchi, 1974, 1986, 2000; Hatano, 1981; Miwa, 1981; Fukushima, 1997; T. Sato, 2005; Takagi, 1998, 2005, 2009, pp. 185–203; Shibata, 2006, 2007). The present paper addresses this question by unearthing an overlooked legacy of Japanese geopolitics and demonstrates how local political practices and geographical contexts mutated geopolitical concepts and accordingly theory, pointing out such plurality in geographical concepts of theory. In other words, the plurality it hopes to identify is *in* theory, not of theory.

In contrast to the Western geopolitical imagination of the state as a bounded territory, Japanese geopolitics imagined a borderless world, an 'outcome' of a particular conception of territory observed in Japan in the first half of the twentieth century (Elden, 2011, p. 305). By

demonstrating this, it draws attention to the manifold nature of subjectivity and language in geopolitical theory that has been largely neglected, by considering the diverse understandings and usages of territory and the (modern) state. As this paper shows, the concept of territory was absent until the late nineteenth century in East Asia and this absence made the understanding diverging from that in Europe. This divergence had allowed Japanese scholars to imagine a different conception of the state, and accordingly, the world. In this imagination, the modern state was conceived as borderless, to be dissolved into regions, and ultimately rendered as a singular world. This conception was possible because they historically understood their national land as something more qualitative than quantitative, calculative space (Elden, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013). On this basis, Japanese geopoliticians envisaged their wartime regionalism, known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS), as the attainment of a peaceful world order based on 'Eastern' ideals that would replace the conflictual Eurocentric world order of territorial states. This history is ignored by contemporary scholars because geopolitical contexts and political practices of the knowing subject are rarely thoroughly examined.

Classical geopolitics is argued to have originated through the work of the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel in the late nineteenth century. Its central tenet is the concept of the state as a living organism which expands its territory as *Lebensraum*. Because this theory was used

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by Nazi expansionist discourse, its legacy in international relations theory has been neglected to date. However, in wartime Japan, the geopolitical theory known as *Daitōa chiseigaku* was very popular as it theoretically supported the GEACPS. As notable geographers and political scientists became committed to the field, translations of the works of major European geopoliticians abounded, and there was even a specialized academic journal. Through these developments, geopolitics came to be domesticated as a Japanese theory before the Second World War to imagine a different world order.

This paper does not intend to argue for some hidden richness of the Japanese tradition to propose an alternative theory of the state. The history of the GEACPS has already exposed its crucial intellectual pitfall as it was used as a justification of Japan's imperial invasion. Rather, my concern is why the state has been apparently but invariably the subject of powerful geopolitical discourse despite a possible rejection of this in geopolitical thinking. By excavating Japan's geopolitics and its different conception of the state, my hope is to unearth the already-existing theoretical pluralism in world politics by using concept not just as a tool of abstraction, but as a heuristic device to understand the divergence of geopolitical traditions. In doing so, I provide a supporting evidence to Stuart Elden's claim that 'the categories with which people in other times and places thought' were, and possibly are, not 'the same as our own' (Elden, 2013, p. 18).

For this purpose, I, focusing on 'how geopower is actually practiced,' as Nigel Thrift (2000, p. 380) has described, examine how local practices activate the 'geo-power, the functioning of geographical knowledge ... as an ensemble of technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space' (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 7). This paper finds 'little things' to activate such technologies, particularly territory and state in Japanese geopolitics to understand the activation, whose power is however rather ephemeral. In Japanese geopolitics, it was *Lebensform* (form of living) – a forgotten geopolitical term firstly used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolph Kjellén – and not *Lebensraum*, that played a significant role. This indicates that Japanese scholars understood state territory as something more qualitative and less quantitative in comparison to European counterparts (Elden, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013). In this conception, territory was an unbounded space whose quality was crucial, rather than in the modern European commonsensical understanding of territory as a bounded space. This paper shows that it is this seemingly trivial difference that nonetheless played a crucial role in Japanese appropriation of European geopolitical theory.

Critical geopolitics claims plural geopolitical traditions (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Atkinson & Dodds, 2000). However, this point has been somewhat obscured as critical geopolitics has confined its inquiry largely to the United States and Europe (Atkinson & Dodds, 2000; Dodds, 2001; Hepple, 2001; Ó Tuathail, 2010; Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2013). An 'inability of critical geopolitics' to expand its scope of investigations to outside of the West has been acknowledged (Dittmer, 2015; cf.; Thrift, 2000; Hepple, 2001; Kelly, 2006). Some notable attempts have been made to remediate this concern (e.g. Slater, 1993, 1994; Sidaway, 1997; Megoran, 2006; Sharp, 2011; Ó Tuathail, 2010, 2011), but much are yet to be done. Gertjan Dijink (1996, 2004) argues that the efficacy of geopolitics as a category of political thought is that it could represent a specific worldview developed in a spatial community based on shared experiences, endowing the community with a 'missionary aim' (Dijink, 2004, p. 462). For this view, geopolitics is a discourse that 'describes and evaluates a country's position in the world' (Wusten & Dijink, 2002, p. 20). They maintain that rather than discerning the global history of geopolitics, studying local historical settings that give rise to a particular geopolitics could allow us to discern a more nuanced imaginative world map of political power (Dijink, 1996, p. 4; Wusten & Dijink, 2002). However, even this debate has not sufficiently pinned down what in the same theory of the state makes such geographical differences, rendering geopolitics eventually a theory of the modern (European) state. Yet it must be in this

conception of the state per se, which must be buttressed by the concept of territory, that a more fundamental source of difference be identified.

2. The question of the usage of concept, language, and spatial continuity

To demonstrate how different Japanese geopolitics was, I employ what John Agnew (2003) calls 'modern geopolitical imagination'. Providing 'meaning and rationalization to practice by political elites the world over', this imagination, Agnew argues, has defined 'ideological space' 'from which the geographic categories upon which the world is organized and works are derived' (Agnew (2003), p. 9). However, are the geographic categories all the same everywhere and every time in the world, composing the same space? My strategy to excavate this difference is threefold. First, the usage of a concept in relation to other terms is examined in terms of spatial difference. Theory and thought are continuous travelers that drift from place to place without boundaries, as Edward Said (2000, 2001) reminds us. It is often the case that texts, not authors, travel, ensuring to a certain extent reader's poesis (Sakai, 1997) through its comprehension. As Quentin Skinner suggests, we only discern the unknown in terms of the known (Skinner, 1969). Thus, any quest for origin must be questioned (Maruyama, 1992, 2003). As Agnew (2007) points out, seen in the short term, theory is the product of a particular geography. However, David Livingstone (2005) has demonstrated that, due to a 'fundamental instability in scientific meaning' (p. 392), theory's travel can be observed as a circulation in which it is incessantly mutated by locals' reading, rather than being a linear development. Following Oliver Ibert (2007), behind the fact that knowledge travels, there are the constant acts of knowing that makes travel possible. Then theory and concept as a product of a particular geography are always renewed in the course of the travel. Since my focus is on usage, what should be taken care of is 'how concepts do the work they do' in each destination (Somers, 1999), rather than what the concept means.

The hardly-ever acknowledged fact both in Japanese and Anglophone literature is that the term *ryōdo* in Japanese, the translation of territory in East Asia, was a creation in Japan of the late nineteenth century. Whereas Japanese language imported many political terms in Chinese characters from China, this term was forged out of similar existing concepts and then exported to China (Okamoto, 2014, 2017) and to Korea. We tend to posit that territory is the foundational component of not just the theory of geopolitics, particularly that of *Lebensraum*, but the modern conception of the state. However, some texts indicate that it was no earlier than the 1880s when the notion territory was acknowledged in Japan (Fukuzawa, 1884; Watanabe, 1930; Mutsu, 1941[1983]). This suggests that Japan as the modern state was established in the almost absence of territory. This establishment was only a quarter of a century prior to the appropriation of Japanese geopolitics in the twentieth century. This absence is provocative because if Elden (2005, p. 8) is right in arguing that 'space emerges in Western thought through a particular way of grasping place', and that Western notion of territory is a 'political corollary' of this way in which space is considered to be 'extensible and calculable', it indicates that in Japan, the state was established on the basis of a different way of grasping place, simultaneously alluding that Japanese geopolitics, not just theory of the state, but as theory of space and power, can be different in a fundamental way.

To clarify the points further, I rely on Richard Devetak and Ryan Walter (2016), and I look into 'the conceptual languages and idioms that were contextually available to a given author' (p. 527); once they are discovered, we have to 'investigate which of these languages the author used and how' (p. 527). In addition to these available languages, being interested in language in relation, my focus is on geographically different vocabularies that together compose the language. In a vocabulary, some words that are supposed to exist in another vocabulary are missing. This can affect theories' travel. As identified by the Japanese

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