



Heretical geopolitics of Central Europe. Dissidents intellectuals and an alternative European order



Kacper Szulecki

Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1097, Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 February 2015

Received in revised form 24 June 2015

Accepted 9 July 2015

Available online 15 July 2015

Keywords:

Critical geopolitics

Dissidents

Central Europe

Détente

CSCE

Peace movement

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the emergence, spread and demise of a coherent program of radical geopolitical revision developed in East European dissident circles in the 1980s. Its foundation was the insistence on the need to completely overthrow the post-Yalta, bipolar division of Europe, combined with an emphasis on the priority of human rights in political and peace issues, as well as the belief in the value of the CSCE process. It was also marked by explicit consent for the reunification of Germany as well as the insistence on the need for a democratic Russia to be part of a wider European setup. Through seminal documents, such as the Prague Appeal of 1985 intellectuals, like Jaroslav Šabata, as well as his Czechoslovak, Polish and Hungarian counterparts, were able to convince large parts of the western peace movement and some political circles to adopt the “heretic” perspective. The paper also shows how a seemingly “cultural” discourse of Central Europe, put forth by intellectuals and artists can, together with the “Yalta debate” of the mid-1980s, be read as a specific (critical) geopolitical project. Finally, the post-communist foreign policies of the dissident-led governments are investigated in an attempt to explain the partial demise of “heretical geopolitics”.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The year 1985 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Yalta Agreement, in which Europe's post-war division was outlined. By then, the division seemed almost natural, and its sudden collapse at the end of the decade is brilliantly expressed in the title of Alexei Yurchak's book: “Everything was forever, until it was no more” (Yurchak, 2005). Three generations of Europeans were raised in an all-encompassing geopolitical paradigm, which made a strict division between the “West” and the “East”. In that atmosphere, additionally spiced up by nuclear fears, a network of intellectuals originating from “Eastern” Europe worked out a project of geopolitical revision, which can be called a “heretical geopolitics”. Going against contemporary orthodoxy, the project proposed an alternative that reached beyond the Cold War era. Grasping a historical opportunity provided by the revolutions of 1989, many of those thinkers took up leading roles as statesmen and put some of their “heretical” ideas to life.

This article traces the emergence, spread and demise of this radical project. The Czech dissident Jaroslav Šabata is presented as the most important thinker in this current, along with more

famous figures like Václav Havel, George Konrád, or Milan Kundera. The naturalized character of the East–West division was challenged with the narrative of a historical “Central Europe”, incompatible with the Yalta arrangements and the Iron Curtain. In the imagined cultural-political space of “Central Europe”, East European dissent began to flourish in domains which were previously outside its “apolitical politics”: foreign policy and geopolitics.

What were “heretical geopolitics”, what were their roots and in what sense were they a heresy in the Cold War context? What was the role of the discourse of Central Europe, and how is it related to the Yalta debate? To what extent were these heretical geopolitical ideas put to life, and why were they never fully realized even when many of the former “heresiarchs” reached positions of power? On a more theoretical level the paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *doxa* to conceptualize the process of challenging the Cold War imaginary, and asks about the role of ideas in shaping geopolitical paradigms, and contributes to the debate on the influence of intellectuals on foreign policy. This echoes Kuus's call to “provide a more ‘peopled’ account of the production of geopolitics and to throw light on human agency in this process” (Kuus, 2007a: 242; compare Crampton and Ó Tuathail, 1996). While the methodology is close to history of ideas, the object of the revisited debates is relevant for a history of geopolitics.

E-mail address: kacper.szulecki@stv.uio.no

2. Theorizing heretical geopolitics: Intellectuals, culture and denaturalization

Dissidents and geopolitics? This combination sounds almost oxymoronic. What influence intellectual heretics and idealists have on Great Power politics?¹ Foreign policy and geopolitical discourses are traditionally considered the domain of *intellectuals of statecraft*. The alternative figure is the critically minded *dissident intellectual*, conceptualized by Ó Tuathail as one who is “less interested in obtaining and exercising power than in challenging the prevailing ‘truths’ of geopolitics” (1998: 10). The dissident’s geopolitics is of an *anti-geopolitical* nature, understood according to Drulák, as a “subversive discourse which emphasizes the social role of ideas, human agency, and the possibility of profound social change transcending the straitjacket of objective conditions” (2006: 422; compare Routledge, 1998). Geopolitics here is defined in its *critical* understanding, not as a “scientific” and “objective” science of the political importance of space, but rather as a discursive practice by which intellectuals and politicians *spatialize* international politics “to represent it as a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1998: 80).

What if certain intellectuals, as is the case here, go all the way from dissent to statecraft? Among the people discussed here are: two presidents, four ministers of foreign affairs, three ministers of defense, as well as several other future ministers and statesmen. Kuus calls such Central European statesmen with artistic, humanist and often dissident credentials, able to sell their cultural capital as geopolitical expertise, *cultural politicians* (2007a).² Far from a Central European peculiarity, European politics in general accepts ideational inputs from sources outside the state apparatus, since foreign policy is firmly anchored in popular narratives of geography and identity. Diplomatic and military elites to not operate in a vacuum (Checkel, 1993), yet there are different levels of geopolitical reasoning. *Critical geopolitics* differentiates between three: *practical*, *formal* and *popular geopolitics* (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). These three are generally the domains of respectively politicians, experts and popular culture, but are all different areas of representation of space and social relations. As such, they are arenas for ideas and discourses. Ideas “emerge from different people and institutions to suit their interests and, depending on their position in hierarchies of authority, their persuasiveness, their ability to communicate their idea and their similarity to the ideas of others, some ideas will be successful and will change the world while others will be forgotten” (Painter and Jeffrey, 2009: 198).

But how can (public) intellectuals engage in geopolitical discussions? Public debate provides a sphere in which dissidents can challenge institutional experts and political leaders (cf. Ward, 2007: 1060). That is true for democracies to a larger extent than for autocratic regimes, suppressing dissident opinion. In the case of “East” European geopolitical heretics, the Western public sphere was the scene, even if their intended audiences were also (or mostly) at home. This resembles the “boomerang effect” of

transnational activism (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 13), while the circulation and diffusion of alternative geopolitical visions and ideas was enabled by Western media outlets, exilic journals, radio and TV broadcasts as well as direct contacts with intellectuals and statesmen and last but not least – secret police reports – all mattered.

This explains the means by which a challenge could be initiated, but does not yet tell us anything about the mechanism through which the existing order was challenged. That mechanism was *denaturalization*, but to comprehend it, we need to first conceptualize the way a given reality becomes taken for granted. As already noted, Cold War geopolitics and the Yalta mindset created a vision of European politics and international interactions that was natural and taken for granted. To use the conceptualization of Pierre Bourdieu, it was *doxa*. “Every established order tends to produce – according to Bourdieu – the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (Bourdieu, 1993: 164–170). In this case, the bipolar system and the geopolitical division of Europe, which are the *doxa*, make theorizing and questioning the knowledge about geopolitics – “a major dimension of political power”. Challenging the *doxa* opens a *field of opinion* in which there is not one naturalized truth, but “different and equally legitimate answers”. Central European intellectuals arguably had the greatest “interest in pushing back the limits of *doxa* and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted”. Against the prevailing geopolitical orthodoxy, they constructed a heterodox alternative – a heresy – expanding the universe of possible discourse and *denaturalizing* the natural.

Denaturalization can occur through explicit challenges to the formal geopolitics of experts or the practical geopolitics of politicians (building on first order representations of reality) but it can also work at a deeper and more implicit level of culture. There it becomes a challenge for the deepest roots of *doxa* in the realm of popular geopolitics. Popular culture may have a naturalizing effect (Neumann and Nexon, 2006: 19). We should not limit the understanding of popular to plainly “pop”, since “high” culture too contributes to naturalization, and perhaps to a greater extent than “popular” culture carries the potential for de-naturalization, due to the different kind of audience engagement (cf. Drulák, 2009: chap. 7).

The essay, balancing between scholarship and prose, was the main genre of geopolitical heretics, but poetry, novels, even performance art played a role. Culture here is both an instrumentally called up reference point, “a political tool by which meaning is constructed through statements made in its name” (Kuus, 2007a: 242), but also the core of the *social imaginary* of the group in question – the intellectuals challenging and shaping political realities in Europe (Taylor, 2002).³

3. The *doxa*: Yalta, détente and East European dissent

At least since the 19th century, in an Orientalizing process of “othering” many Western scholars were involved in the creation of an “Eastern” Europe as the “West’s” doppelgänger (Wolff, 1994; compare: Neumann, 1999b: 233). Geographic realities, like the fact that “Prague is more to the West than Vienna”, had little influence.⁴ The post-War political settlement in Yalta and Potsdam grounded that intellectual project in political, if not material realities. In that bipolarity “the Soviet Union was represented as an

¹ This problem, also in relation to East European independents, was signaled early on by the peace movement historian Lawrence Wittner (1987).

² The concept of *cultural politicians* is taken from Anatol Lieven (1993). Unfortunately, Kuus adopts a peculiar definition of a “humanist”, with arbitrary criteria according to which, for example, political scientists (widely considered humanists in the East European academic tradition) are excluded, while vaguely defined artists are included, which leads to strange conclusions when those criteria are applied to actual cultural politicians. Some concepts are better off when defined but not operationalized, it seems. Her argument also implicitly echoes conservative intellectuals of statecraft suggesting that a special “training” or “skill” is needed to conduct foreign policy, one which “humanists” dealing rather with ideas and identities supposedly lack.

³ Charles Taylor uses the concept drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ rather than ‘imaginaries’ as understood by Cornelius Castoriadis.

⁴ That argument was used by Jan Kavan, one of the founders of the *East European Reporter*, when he and his colleagues tried to call the periodical Central European Reporter – meeting resistance from the sponsors. Interview with J. Kavan, 20 April 2010, Prague.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073790>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073790>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)