



## The great implications of spatialisation: Grounds for closer engagement between political geography and political science?

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### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, the sociospatialities of political behaviour is a topic of growing debate across the social sciences. This paper contributes to this debate as it relates to the boundedness and fluidity of political behaviours, specifically by addressing calls from political scientists for closer engagement between political science and political geography over “the great implications of spatialization” for political behaviour research (Ethington and McDaniel, 2007, 130). Here, we critically evaluate one theoretical approach identified by these political scientists for spatialising research on this topic: new institutionalism. We begin by clarifying differing conceptions of spatialisation in the political geographic and political science literatures and their compatibility with new institutionalism. We then show how substantive new institutional research conducted on the European Union can be used to critically evaluate the prospects of Ethington and McDaniel’s cross-disciplinary spatialisation agenda. Our analysis confirms the scope and potential for spatialising new institutionalist studies, by demonstrating how fluidities of political behaviours predicated by post-structural accounts of place and space come to be ‘fixed’ within certain ‘sticky’ institutional places. Consequently, we argue that a spatialised new institutionalism offers promising conceptual and methodological possibilities for developing research collaborations between political geography and political science on the placing and spacing of political behaviours.

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### 1. Political geography and political science: grounds for closer engagement?

The sociospatialities of political behaviour is an area of growing debate across the social sciences (Jessop et al., 2008; Featherstone and Kopf, 2012; Merriman et al., 2012). We contribute to this debate here as it relates to the boundedness and fluidity of political behaviours, specifically to calls from political scientists for constructive engagement between political science and political geography over “the great implications of spatialization” for political behaviour research (Ethington and McDaniel, 2007, 130). To geographers, the invocation of space as a topic of collaborative inquiry will be thoroughly— maybe even wearily— familiar, with O’Loughlin’s (2000, 135) observation over a decade ago that “...the spatial perspective of geographers seemingly offers a common ground with political science”. The subsequent muted dialogue between the two disciplines has been attributed to a number of fac-

tors (Agnew, 2003; Murphy et al., 2004).<sup>1</sup> For political geographers, the toxic intellectual legacy of traditional geopolitics had led to “[political] geographers distancing themselves from the evolving debate in the field of International Relations [consequently]. ...What political geographers and IR scholars are currently writing. . . continues to display a chasm in terms of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and semantics being used” (Murphy et al., 2004, 627–628). For political scientists, meanwhile, “. . .the messiness of a world of regions that is constantly in the process of being reshaped and redefined by internal and external forces lacks appeal” (O’Loughlin, 2000, 135).

Notwithstanding these issues, however, influential political geographic arguments have gained ground in political science, including the reformulation of views within International Relations (IR) on territory’s importance as basis of political authority and

<sup>1</sup> cf. Berry’s (2009, p. 393) recent comment on the lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue in his own university: “It was clear that most of the . . . political scientists were focused inward, on their own disciplinary concerns, by and for political scientists, and it was equally clear that political geographers had similarly territorialized world views and had been quite willing to push certain topics to the margins of that territory.”

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power (Agnew, 1994). Furthermore, the last decade has seen a variety of cross-disciplinary initiatives emerge.<sup>2</sup> Important contributions include the widespread adoption of critical geopolitics perspectives, derived partly from post-structural approaches and work in IR (Dalby, 2005; O'Tuathail, 2006); collaborations offering new perspectives on state sovereignties (Biersteker and Weber, 1996) and the spatialities of political ideologies (Deudney, 2008); and work opening up new political economy dialogues on specific topics, for example on immigration within the European Union (EU) (Samers, 2004). The context for “a true crossing of the disciplinary boundaries” (Newman, 1999, 906) certainly seems more promising.

Impetus for bridging disciplinary interests has also come recently from political science, partly over practitioners' concerns over their discipline's apparent lack of public policy relevance (De Sousa et al., 2010; Stoker, 2010; Prewitt, 2009). This impetus takes three forms. First is growing engagement with broad-brush geographical notions as a context for political action – what has been termed by some ‘context-based’ research (e.g. Williamson, 2008; Carter and Goemans, 2011; Branch, 2011). An edited collection of essays from U.S. political scientists thus provides a radical reappraisal and reassessment of the importance of geographical context to political behaviour (King et al., 2009), leading one researcher to comment: “My conclusion is that contextual effects scholarship has conclusively demonstrated that context does matter. . . questions of context have contributed important insights into our understanding of political behaviour” (McDaniel, 2010, 3). Second, the latest political science scholarship reveals a deeper, more analytical and conceptually-driven interest in the “politics of space” (Hochschild, 2009, 249). The third element links with these issues, but is arguably more far-reaching: namely an explicit goal (albeit among a small minority of scholars) to use political science and political geographic approaches and techniques for collaborative study.

Political geographers, meanwhile, have been forging new ways of theorising space that cut across disciplinary boundaries and that seek to develop new conceptual approaches to space and the political (see for example Featherstone and Kopf, 2012). These contributions build on post-structural accounts of space as an inherently political resource, for while space is an abstract quantity, it is rendered meaningful through individual social acts and practices, conditioned by particular spatial imaginaries (Lefebvre, 1974). Thus political geography studies now testify to the fundamentally spatial implications of everyday and elite forms of politics (Agnew, 1997; Massey, 2005), with recent work focused upon the minutiae of everyday political process (Lawson, 2007); political decision-making and decision-taking (Allen and Cochrane, 2010; Clark, 2010); and calibrating the interaction between structure and agency within specific geographic contexts (Flint, 2003; Harrison, 2010).

Ethington and McDaniel's argument speaks to these recent developments. In a stimulating article in the political science journal *Annual Review of Political Science*, they (2007, 127) assert that “Political geography is one of the most exciting sub disciplines. . . in the social sciences [and] has deep implications for political science. . . Political geography has the potential to dramatically transform many areas of established political science research [through] (a) the study of “contextual effects” on political behaviour and (b) the study of governance by applying the ‘new institutionalism’.”

This is a positive and ambitious message, one we consider deserving closer attention for the following reasons. It is, to our knowledge, the first occasion that political scientists have called

upon political geographical expertise to clarify understandings of political behaviour and governance. Second is Ethington and McDaniel's foregrounding as an explicit area of collaborative study the spatiality of institutions over time in specific locations, an established feature of much cutting-edge political geographic research. Ethington and McDaniel thus provide a timely opportunity to explore the scope and possibilities for focussed cross-disciplinary initiatives at a time when public salience and policy relevance are, once again, rallying points across the social sciences.

In order to evaluate Ethington and McDaniel's argument, we begin by examining differing disciplinary conceptualisations of space from political science and political geographical perspectives. We then consider how compatible these are with Ethington and McDaniel's chosen approach for cross-disciplinary inquiry, new institutionalism, by examining substantive political geographic research on political behaviours in the EU. Based on this analysis, we critically evaluate the potential for their proposed cross-disciplinary research agenda on spatialisation.

## 2. Conceptualising spatialisation: political geographic and political science interpretations

Ethington and McDaniel (2007) argue persuasively for cross-disciplinary research on spatialisation, yet the authors use this term unconditionally, which is problematic as the term is freighted with different geographical meanings. Even if we take spatialisation at its simplest to mean ‘disciplinary understandings of space’, disparate epistemologies exist in political science and political geography, resulting in a myriad methodological forms and expressions. Certainly, the problems and pitfalls associated with concepts of space and place have bedeviled political science and political geographic collaborations. Traditionally in geography, examination of place foregrounds the collectivist associations of a specific location: how a site resonates with the activities and actions of particular actors, or communities of actors, over time. Space, by contrast, is viewed as an amorphous quantity, linked with the phenomena and multifaceted processes of globalisation and modernisation, leading to a privileging of space over place in much geographical analysis (Agnew, 1996, 2003).

Political science depicts space as essentially isotropic and planar – an abstract, uniform, featureless medium, upon which human political action is played out. This remains the dominant conception in the discipline, particularly in IR, where space has normative associations with nation-building and connotations of modernity (e.g. Sui and Hugill, 2002; Tir and Diehl, 2002). Only recently has a second perspective on space begun to emerge, emphasising the role of geographical context in explaining political behaviour. Ethington and McDaniel (2007, 127) describe this as a “contextual effects” approach that uses spatially aggregated data to support understanding of political action in a specific location, i.e. in place. This approach is epitomized by contributions from political scientists to the volume edited by King et al. (2009), where spatial categories of territory, city, region, and municipality are used as units of political scientific analysis.

From a political geography perspective, this “place-context” approach to spatialisation – the bounding effect that a specific territory has upon political process – is very familiar. It is an established geographical research focus, which views political actions as moderated fundamentally through place (Massey and Thrift, 2003; O'Loughlin and Sidaway, 2008), and reams of political geographic research exemplify its importance. Thus, the sub-field of electoral geography analyses voting behaviours, patterns and outcomes in specific territorial contexts, and, according to some accounts, has been responsible for revitalising “mainstream spatial analysis – indeed introduced it to the UK political science community” (Johnston, 2009, 392).

<sup>2</sup> At least six cross-disciplinary exchanges in political geography journals alone – see Agnew (1996), King (1996), Elazar (1999), Newman (1999), O'Loughlin (2000), Spiegler (2000), Kofman (2003), Mamadouh (2003), Murphy (2004) and Mamadouh and Djink (2006).

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