



# Towards a geopolitics of atheism: Critical geopolitics post the ‘War on Terror’



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## ABSTRACT

Political geography has an established tradition of engaging with religiously-driven *geopolitik*. However, despite the remarkable growth in professed atheist beliefs in recent decades and the popular expression of an imagined geopolitical binary between secular/atheist and religious societies, the geopolitics of irreligion have received almost no attention among academic practitioners. This paper outlines the core tenets of ‘New Atheist’ philosophy, before addressing how its key representatives have taken positions on the ‘Global War on Terror.’ In particular, we critically interrogate the works of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens and identify a belligerent geopolitical imagination which posits a civilizational clash between an existentially-threatened secular, liberal West with responsibility to use extraordinary violence to protect itself and the world from a backwards oriental Islam. The paper concludes with four possible explanations for the paradox that the New Atheist critique of religion for being violent acts itself as a geopolitical incitement to violence. In so doing, we seek to navigate debates about the nature and purpose of critical geopolitical research given that the historical, intellectual and political contexts in which it was formed have changed.

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## 1. Introduction – Imagine no religion?

In February 2013 Richard Dawkins, retired biologist and author of global best-seller *The God Delusion*, tweeted ‘Haven’t read Koran so couldn’t quote chapter & verse like I can for Bible. But often say Islam greatest force for evil today.’<sup>1</sup> Dismissing criticism that it was unscientific to make such a startling claim in ignorance of the primary source material, he tweeted back, ‘Of course you can have an opinion about Islam without having read Qur’an. You don’t have to read *Mein Kampf* to have an opinion about nazism.’<sup>2</sup>

These comments triggered a debate concerning whether the arguments of Dawkins and likeminded atheist authors had, as *Lean* (2013) contended on *salon.com*, ‘slid seamlessly into xenophobia.’ He claimed that this ‘rant’ had exposed ‘a disturbing Islamophobic streak’ in the work not only of Dawkins, but fellow best-selling ‘New Atheist’ writers Sam Harris and recently-deceased

Christopher Hitchens (*Lean*, 2013). Writing for *Al-Jazeera*, Hussain went further, accusing this group of giving ‘a veneer of scientific respectability to today’s politically-useful bigotry.’ To this extent, he argued, they were the heirs of the European Enlightenment’s ‘scientific racism’ (*Hussain*, 2013). Referring to outspoken ‘New Atheist’ support of George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terror,’ Hussain added that this racism was being used ‘to justify the wars of aggression, torture and extra-judicial killings.’

This exchange illustrates and frames the key concern of this article, the geopolitics of ‘New Atheism.’ We enquire how the critical geopolitics of religion and religious geopolitics (*Sturm*, 2013) can make a distinctive contribution to assessing what we term ‘the John Lennon thesis’ – that an atheist utopia in which we can imagine ‘no religion’ would necessarily be one where ‘all the people’ could live ‘life in peace.’<sup>3</sup> A geographical version of this thesis has recently been advanced by Simon *Springer* (2016), who argues that atheism is a better basis for pacific spatial emancipation than is religion.

We begin by asking what the nature and purpose of critical

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<sup>1</sup> @RichardDawkins 28/2/2013.

<sup>2</sup> @RichardDawkins 25/3/2013.

<sup>3</sup> John Lennon, *Imagine*, 1971.

geopolitical research is, given that the historical, intellectual and political contexts in which it was formed have changed. Arguing that there remains a role for the textual study of elite militaristic mappings of global space, we then examine the relationship between geographical study and religion, and note the lack of geographical engagement with atheism. We briefly sketch some notes on the meaning and history of atheism to provide context to the 'New Atheists' as inheritors of a Western Enlightenment tradition. The substantive section of the paper then examines their writings on the War on Terror, showing how their stark Orientalist imaginative geographies (Gregory, 2004) acted as an incitement to violence. The conclusion attempts to make sense of the apparently-paradoxical finding that New Atheism's most prominent spokesmen criticise religion as a cause of political violence, yet openly advocate contentious military resolutions to the geopolitical scenarios they construct.

For New Atheist thinkers, the argument that religions begets violence is not merely historical. For them, the belief that violence is ontogenetic to religion translates into a normative vision that is expressed in political and geopolitical terms, framing contemporary geopolitical insecurities as the inevitable consequence of a single bitter root – religion. This vision leads some of them to articulate vociferous support for the Bush and Blair-era War on Terror. This reduction and repackaging of complex and multi-layered geopolitical issues as a vociferously-trumpeted essentialism is, in its illusory monocausality and seductive simplicity, as misleading as the classical geopolitics of Mackinder and Ratzel.

The specific question addressed by this article is: "*What is the relationship between geopolitics and New Atheism?*" This focus is important because (somewhat unusually for public intellectuals) New Atheist writers not only trumpeted support for the 'War on Terror,' but have also reached a mass market with their geopolitical visions by 'stratospheric' global book sales (Sparrow, 2015). There is thus a disciplinary as well as a political imperative to interrogate their work and thereby contribute to considering the broader question of how deeply-held beliefs are productive of geopolitical visions of peace or violence (Megoran, 2013). We begin with the relationship between geographical thinking and irreligion.

## 2. Critical geopolitics: beyond the text, beyond the Global War on Terror?

This paper is a critical geopolitical analysis of texts about Islam and the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) produced by New Atheist writers mostly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Because the focus of critical geopolitics has shifted to conflict zones since the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and because critical geopolitics itself has developed significantly since that period, it is perfectly legitimate to ask whether the analysis that we undertake in the way that we do is still both politically useful and intellectually valid. Before continuing, it is therefore necessary to address these concerns: and in so doing, we make an argument for the continued relevance and indeed the urgent importance of a critical geopolitical engagement with elite textual mappings of global space in core capitalist states. It is a truism that how we see the world affects how we act in it. Critical geopolitics translates this basic insight into the contention that our imaginative mappings of global space affect the way we see ourselves and others and thus 'do' global politics.

Critical geopolitics emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as "the moniker for the writings of a loose assemblage of political geographers concerned to challenge the taken for granted geographical specifications of politics on the large scale" (Dalby, 2010, p. 280). Rooted in critical International Relations theory's rejection of realist paradigms of understanding the international

(Krause and Williams, 1997), its particular contribution to this project is the interrogation of how geographical reasoning is used in the service of state power (Dalby, 1996, p. 656). Emphasising the systematic analysis of texts as discourse (Toal, 2003), its initial concerns were to critically revisit foundational classical geopolitical sources (Ó Tuathail, 1996), and use this analysis to critique reworkings of classical geopolitical reasoning in the Cold War (Dalby, 1990; Sharp, 2000) and post-Cold War world (Campbell, 1992).

From 2001 onwards, GWOT occasioned a renewed and urgent reapplication of critical geopolitical thought to the mappings of global space that allowed the Al-Qaeda Islamist terror attacks of September 2001 to be translated into the disastrous US and UK-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This invasion provoked a global upsurge in retaliatory Islamist terrorism, precipitating the rise of the apocalyptic and genocidal Islamic State group (Cockburn, 2014). ISIS proclaimed the reestablishment of a Caliphate whose tyranny rapidly expanded from Iraq to fill unstable voids from Nigeria and Libya to Syria and Afghanistan, as well inspiring murder across Europe, Norton America and Australasia. How did a deadly criminal attack by a marginal and extreme militant Muslim group lead to this (ongoing) catastrophe? The conceptual and analytical tools developed by critical geopolitics proved adept at providing answers, explaining how the mapping of 9/11 onto a global cartographic imagination of safe and dangerous places made sense of a complex world, reasserted identities, and justified the cataclysmic violence of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Dalby, 2003). Further, these texts insisted with Dalby that "geopolitical scripts could have been otherwise" (Dalby, 2003, p. 65): in other words, these outcomes were not inevitable and critical geopolitical scholarship has a moral and political obligation to challenge them and thus point the way to less violent ways of doing global politics.

Critical geopolitics has been primarily shaped, then, by the challenge of using Critical International Relations theory to interrogate how elite texts discursively geo-graphed three major conflicts: the imperial rivalries culminating in the 1914–18 and 1939–45 World Wars, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror. Critical geopolitics could have been a niche concern of a small number of scholars located in a particular geopolitical and theoretical moment in the 1990s. However, its demonstrable purchase on contemporary events meant it became more mainstream in the academy. Given both the changing nature of global geopolitics, and the broader range of perspectives and topics with which it engaged, it was inevitable that the frameworks set by its beginnings would prove inadequate, opening the field to a range of critiques and new directions.

The majority of these interventions critique the inadequacy of critical geopolitics' perceived focus on particularly textual representations as a key to understanding elite geopolitical thinking, often expressed as a frustration that the materiality of the 'everyday' is obscured. For Thrift (2000), in a key intervention drawing on non-representational theory, our 'mesmerised attention to texts' obscures attention to 'little things' such as the human body and the dialogic significance of the utterances themselves. Meanwhile Amore (2006) and Bialasiewicz (2012) show how bodies become the expressions of geopolitical space through militarised and technologized apparatuses and infrastructures of surveillance and control. At the same time the emotional (Pain, 2009) and affective (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Toal, 2003) dimensions of understanding geopolitics have been advanced.

Critical Geopolitics has been faulted for an ethnocentric focus on the international relations of core capitalist states (Megoran, 2006). Methodologically, researchers have shown how ethnography can illuminate the experiences of non-elites in non-spectacular contexts (McConnell, 2009; Megoran, 2006) and emphasised the need

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