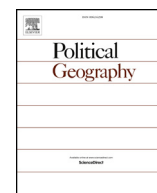




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# Thirty-five years of political geography and *Political Geography*: The good, the bad and the ugly

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## ABSTRACT

When Political Geography (Quarterly) was established in 1981, the field barely registered in the international social science community and had become a "moribund backwater". The journal has motivated and reflected a sizable body of published works for almost two generations. The impact of these articles, however, is muted for a variety of reasons including a large diversity of subjects and methodologies, a lack of sustained and replicable research on important contemporary subjects, a tendency to dilettantism, and a failure to achieve any coherent notion of what constitutes political geographic research. Because the discipline of political geography is so amorphous and opaque to both its practitioners and observers, the potential benefits of its approach are muted and its achievements enervated. The field's achievements can partly be gauged by a comparison of the journal's content to its original agenda. Notable missed opportunities for focus and impact are identified, especially in a failure to clarify the important role that context plays in political behavior. Publication expectations in academia have changed, propelling authors to try to rush to print, while not coincidentally publishing production standards have slipped. The likely trends are further centrifugal pressures on disciplinary staples and an erosion of what seemed like a relatively coherent sub-discipline in 1981.

## Introduction

The academic publishing world of 1981, when Political Geography (henceforth PG) was founded, was very different than today's hyperkinesis. It was also a time of notable change in publishing as the established disciplinary flagship journals, such as the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, were being joined by new specialist publications, usually owned by private corporations. Responding to a perception that growing research output demanded more pages, publishers, such as Robert Maxwell, elbowed their way into the staid environment of academia and scientific publication (Buranyi, 2017). In the 1970s and early 1980s, the number of major geography journals in the US more than doubled. In this new era, PG was one of a number of journals that reflected the balkanization of the disciplines and the inevitable specialization of researchers. Like its contemporaries, such as *Urban Geography*, the *Environment and Planning* suite, *Geographical Analysis*, and *Geoforum*, PG both reflected and reciprocally steered the new specialty groups that were then appearing, not just in geography, but in related disciplines such as political science. The age of the "geographer", one who would be familiar with many facets of the discipline, was over. The canon, if there ever was anything canonical in

geography, had been abandoned. To appropriate a hoary political geographic analogy about states, the centrifugal forces of specialization had trumped the centripetal disciplinary ones.

In this essay, I examine the content of PG (the journal) over the past 35 years, especially over the last decade, in order to track the research foci and the methods of the field that shares its name.<sup>1</sup> I highlight some successes of the journal but consider its failures and missed opportunities as well. I devote a large section to a frustrating attempt to find common ground between political science and political geography that privileges "context" as an important factor for the dynamics and outcomes of political processes. I finish by warning against two possible developments that threaten the journal and its reputation, and by extension, the field that supports it. My perspective in this essay is strongly influenced by my 35-year stint as editor of *Political Geography* that ended in December 2015.

## Thirty-five years of *Political Geography* (Quarterly)

The timing of the launch of *Political Geography* (Quarterly) is now understandable in light of growing interest in emerging fields by commercial publishers, though the timing seems peculiar (or optimistic

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<sup>1</sup> These are my own personal reflections and opinions, and almost certainly are not shared by my co-editors of the past 35 years. The remarks should not be associated with them, with the publisher, Elsevier, or with any official position of PG.

and heroic) if one considers the volume and quality of work then extant in political geography. It was just over a decade before PG's first issue that Brian Berry had labeled the field as a "moribund backwater" given its paucity of scholarship especially when compared to the contemporaneous boom in quantitative political science (Antonsich, Minghi, Johnston, & Berry, 2009). The sub-discipline had only one modern collection that could be used as an effective teaching text and even the chapters in that book were dominated by non-geographers (O'Loughlin, 2009). In many respects, Isaiah Bowman's admonition over three decades earlier to Derwent Whittlesey ("do not start a journal of political geography") (Minghi, 2002) was still applicable. The 1970s, however, had seen some green shoots as new (the globalized world economy) and renewed (electoral geography) subjects of interest and new approaches, especially quantitative and Marxist, began to appear in texts, research articles and dissertations. The eclectic content of the blooming sub-discipline is evident from a perusal of the chapters in the Burnett and Taylor (1981) edited volume that materialized from the Anglo-American political geography conference in early 1980. PG's successful debut and enduring success as the disciplinary "flagship" as the masthead claims, is a case study of the optimism expressed in the 1989 movie, *Field of Dreams*, "build it and they will come". Commercial backing was probably necessary in the initial success of the journal. Butterworths (by 1981, part of Maxwell's Pergamon Press) and the discipline both profited from the business plan, namely, that "If a serious new journal appeared, scientists would simply request that their university library subscribe to that one as well" (Buryanyi, 2017). Of course, this model depended on expanding library funding and was effectively placed under pressure within a short time due to budget shortfalls, and subsequently small publishers were bought out by the large publishing conglomerates (Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley).

Mooted as an outlet from its founding in 1981 that would appeal to non-geographers interested in the geographic aspects of politics across scales from the local to the global – from community level struggles to the geopolitical relations of great powers in the Cold War world – the journal has only been partially successful in meeting this goal. About 25–35% of the submissions in recent years have come from non-geographers but their acceptance rate is quite low due to the lack of engagement or understanding of the core tenets of geography on the part of the authors. The blame cannot be thrown completely on the shoulders of non-geographers. The field of political geography itself is chaotic and is lacking internal cohesion, agreement on core tenets, and is characterized by faddism and dilettantism.

With the establishment of PG(Q), the first paper in the first issue was a laundry list of what constituted "political geography" (Editorial essay, 1982). Peter Taylor, Andrew Kirby and I collected the themes suggested by editorial board members and tried to render them into coherent subjects. We did not attempt to set boundaries, preferences or emphases as we recognized the prerequisite of letting the content define the journal – and the field. Subsequent commentaries on the editorial essay, including that by Drake and Horton (1983) about the absence of a feminist perspective, indicated some key voids. Of the 21 main topics in the essay listed, it seems fair to state that only about half have proved enduring during the ensuing 35 years in terms of subsequent publications in the journal. Other noteworthy points are the relative absence of consideration of the scale of enquiry in the 1982 essay and the almost complete absence of individuals in making political geography. Instead, structures, governments, groups, and political parties were identified as the "agents of politics".

A comparison of the 21 foci identified under the "themes" and "perspectives" categories in the 1982 editorial essay to the chapters in the recent 2nd edition of the *Companion to Political Geography* (Agnew, Mamadouh, Secor, & Sharp, 2015) helps to pinpoint changes in the field of political geography over the past 35 years. Ten of the 1982 research foci reappear in the 2015 chapters, eleven if we add the feminist addendum by Drake and Horton. Borders, the state apparatus, territorial

institutional forms, contextual effects, nationalism, (critical) geopolitics, electoral geographies, feminist political geography, radical political geography and scalar considerations appear in both lists. Prominent research topics in 1982 such as locational conflicts, world-systems theory, dependency approaches to development, and classical geostrategic study have faded. Key modern concepts of political geography like territory, sovereignty, conflict, security, justice, power, citizenship, biopolitics, environment, and migration (all chapter titles in Agnew et al.) were not present in 1982.

Of course, a field should evolve and one like political geography would be expected to add new subjects of study because the world political map is not static and societies change. It would be unwise for our discipline to ignore major contemporary challenges like the nature of international refugee flows, citizenship debates, or political access to environmental resources. But what are the enduring themes of the field? Certainly the public expects political geographers to have something of value to say about border processes, about the distribution of violence and insecurity (both human and environmental), about national demands for territory, and about the variegated voting maps that are now prominently displayed on televised election punditry. But as we will see below, these themes are relatively absent in the articles in PG.

Flint (2003) wrote that political geography was "dying for a p" (as in political). I think that a bigger worry now is that the discipline is "dying for a g" (as in geography). I challenge any reader who did not know the disciplinary basis of the journal's provenance to read a random selection of articles in the last decade and come to the conclusion that this is a geography journal. The role of place as a site of politics has become severely short-changed. Research now is still conducted in and concerns "places" but usually place is a palimpsest, effectively erased as in a medieval manuscript, in order to tell a different story. Clarifying this point of what is and is not "geographic" is important for editors who try to maintain a journal's profile and remit and, of course, for the broader discipline, which has a big enough problem of invisibility especially in the US (more on this below).

## The good

By most metrics, *Political Geography* has been a successful journal. With over 300,000 downloads of articles in the journal in 2016, the readership is certainly robust. Like the authorships of PG articles, readership is focused in the Anglo-American world. Most social science disciplines display this regional concentration but unlike economics or the bio-medical sciences, the advance of political geography in certain world regions with more autocratic regimes is slowed by the very nature of the field with its near-taboo status in these countries. China, especially, is a difficult academic world to penetrate since social science publications from that country tend to avoid the controversial subjects that are the bread-and-butter of our field. According to An et al. (2017, 137) "endogenous Chinese geopolitical ideas are missing and/or misunderstood in existing literature." The number of scientific publications from China and Turkey are increasing quickly but this trend is not mirrored in *Political Geography*.

Of the 1824 citable items (articles, editorials, book reviews, etc.) in 35 years in PG(Q) after 1982, more than two-thirds have come from authors in the US (36.7%) and England (35.9%). This Anglo-American ratio reaches 90% if one adds authors from Canada (5.5%), Scotland (3.3%), Wales (2.6%), Australia (2.1%), Ireland (1.9%) and arguably, Singapore (1.8%). Paasi (2015) reached similar conclusions and advanced multiple reasons for this state of affairs. I have not made comparisons for other sub-fields of geography but my sense is that our sub-discipline is more Anglo-centric than most others. Broadening this regional base remains the biggest challenge for the journal for reasons of both countering an ethnocentricity that incorporates a myopic view of major political subjects of major public interest and for reducing the one-way traffic of information and influence from the Anglo-American

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