



Critical geopolitics and school textbooks: The case of environment–conflict links in Germany



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the conceptual and empirical utility of studying school textbooks from a critical geopolitics perspective. School textbooks bind together various discourses, modalities and genres and can reflect the dominant knowledge in a given society. They therefore have a high potential to reveal the citational practices resonating between the domains of formal, practical and popular geopolitics. Studying school textbooks can also enrich the literature on children's and young people's (political) geographies by analyzing how the political worldviews and agency of young people are shaped by teaching materials. Empirically, the study draws on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to study how environment–conflict links are textually and visually portrayed in German geography and civics textbooks. The results suggest that German school textbooks significantly reflect the depictions of environment–conflict links in political, media and (popular) science discourses and thus reveal crucial citational practices. Drawing on the environmental security literature, it is further argued that these textbooks convey problematic geographical imaginations: they overemphasize the risk of environmental conflicts, reflect ideas of spill-over effects threatening the global north, and portray people from the global south as irresponsible and threatening.

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1. Introduction

“Anyone inquiring into the ways and settings in which knowledge is acquired, stored, applied and altered must have an interest in consulting educational media, particularly in textbooks and curricula [...] they reflect the knowledge and values defined by a given society [...] as essential” (Lässig, 2009: 1–2)

Simone Lässig calls for all those investigating dominant knowledge schemes and discourses in a given society to draw on school textbooks and their associated curricula. Several studies suggest that school textbooks are in fact widely used (Fuchs, 2011; Fukuoka, 2011; Pepin, Haggarty, & Keynes, 2001), are perceived as authoritative by their users (Bar-Tal, 1998; Christou & Spyrou, 2016; Durrani, 2007), and are therefore crucial for the transmission of dominant discourses from one generation (of policy makers, voters, journalists etc.) to the next generation.¹

With in the discipline of geography (and also within International Relations), the analysis of school textbooks is especially

promising for the field of critical geopolitics as it strongly focuses on dominant discourses and their (geo-)political implications (Dalby, 2010). One of the central assumptions of this research field has been formulated by Mamadouh and Dijkink (2006: 360): “Any story of the world uses implicit geopolitical visions and images.” Consequentially, critical geopolitics focuses on the construction of geographical knowledge and geo-spatial identities (which can be summarized under the term geographical imaginations), the power relations they produce, and the practices they legitimize (Dalby, 2010; Müller, 2008). It is common to distinguish between the analysis of formal geopolitics (theoretical and scholarly geopolitical reasoning), practical geopolitics (statements and practices of policy makers) and popular geopolitics (geographical imaginations circulating in popular and mass media) (Dittmer & Gray, 2010). However, in reality, practices and discourses from all three domains overlap and shape each other. Bialasiewicz et al. (2007) argue that the interactions and resonances between different societal domains are most powerful in shaping political realities.

The main argument of this article is that school textbooks are interfaces of formal, practical and popular geopolitical discourses and thus well-suited to reveal the geographical imaginations which resonate between these three domains. This argument is

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demonstrated empirically by focusing on the depiction of the links between environmental stress and conflict in German school textbooks. I focus on Germany for a variety of reasons. Germany is widely accepted as an influential player in global environmental politics and increasingly also international security politics. Issues of environmental change and conflict/security have also gained much attention in public debates in Germany (Schäfer, Scheffran, & Penniket, 2015).

This article also puts forward two subsidiary points. Firstly, it contributes to the literature on the critical geopolitics of environmental change and on environmental security discourses (Dalby, 2014; McDonald, 2013). Several studies find that an inadequate portrayal of environment-conflict links can legitimize northern interventions in the global south and militarized foreign policies, among others (e.g. Brzoska, 2009; Hartmann, 2014). In the empirical analysis, I evaluate whether these claims are also true for German school textbooks. This study thus contributes to the core agenda of critical geopolitics as defined by Dalby (2010: 281): “critical geopolitics is about challenging how contexts are constructed to justify violence.”

Secondly, an emerging body of literature on children's (political) geographies is analyzing how young people exert political agency and how they not only receive and reproduce geopolitical discourses, but also actively influence and construct them (Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2013). Recently, several authors have argued that analyzing the discursive and material factors which shape and constrain young people's political agency would greatly benefit this area of research (Benwell & Hopkins, 2016; Kallio & Häiki, 2010). School textbooks are highly relevant in this context as they supposedly play an important role in the political and spatial socialization of young people.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: The second section will outline the theoretical foundations of this paper by drawing on the literature on critical geopolitics, environmental security and children's and young people's geographies. The following section (3) describes the methodology of the empirical part of this study. In the fourth section, I will analyze the depiction of environment-conflict links in German curricula and especially in school textbooks. By comparing them to the dominant discourses in the domains of formal, practical and political geopolitics, I find that school textbooks are indeed a good indicator of the citational practices resonating in a given society. I also show that the analyzed textbook passages contain various geographical imaginations that are strongly criticized by the literature on environmental security. Finally, the paper draws a conclusion and formulates recommendations for future research (5).

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Critical geopolitics and school textbooks

As discussed above, critical geopolitics is usually considered to deal with three domains:

“formal geopolitics, the domain of academics and advisors, and more grand narratives; practical geopolitics, the domain of policy making and geopolitical reasoning justifying concrete foreign policy actions; and popular geopolitics, the domain of the public realm and the media that foster support and legitimacy - or fail to do so - for foreign policy”. (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 355)

School textbooks can be conceived of as parts of all these three domains. Firstly, their content and distribution is clearly structured by political elites, especially by the government (Ingrao, 2009).

School textbooks are usually politically regulated, for instance when textbooks are published by the state or structured to comply with government-defined curricula, syllabi and examination content. In many countries, including Germany, the publication and use of textbooks is also dependent on permission from the ministry of education (EDU.DATA, 2015). This enables political elites, and especially governments, to influence the content of school textbooks (e.g. Bleiker & Young-Ju, 2007; Naseem & Stöber, 2014; Nguyen, 2014).

Secondly, not at least due to their enormous coverage, school textbooks can also be characterized as popular mass media, hence belonging to the domain of popular geopolitics (Dodds, 2008; Sharp, 2000). In the words of Lässig (2009: 2), “for millions of people they have been the first, and often the only, books that they had read.” In several countries, such as Germany, they are also not written by political or academic elites, but by teachers or employees of the publishing company (Bhattacharya, 2009; Macgilchrist & Marmer, 2015). Some authors argue that school textbooks are “perceived by students as authoritative and factual” (Bar-Tal, 1998: 725), thus contributing to the everyday (re-)production of hegemony in a given society (Ingrao, 2009).

Finally, the academic domain is usually deeply involved in the production of school textbooks, thus locating them in the domain of formal geopolitics. The persons responsible for writing and approving textbooks are usually teachers (as in Germany), publishing house employees and civil servants who have received some academic training, or academics themselves (EDU.DATA, 2015). Among others, school textbooks thus draw on academic debates and recontextualize them according to pedagogical/didactic (and political) criteria² (Klerides, 2010).

The divide between the three different domains of geopolitics has always been rather heuristic. In the lived realities of everyday and high politics, all three domains are usually closely intertwined. Various scholars have therefore emphasized the necessity of investigating how the different domains of critical geopolitics overlap, interact and shape each other (Ingram & Dodds, 2009; Saunders, 2012). According to Bialasiewicz et al. (2007: 409), “citational practices that are reiterated in cultural and political sites” are highly important for the production of knowledge and eventually political action. Dominant political and popular cultural discourses (e.g. Sharp, 2000; Weber, 2010) as well as dominant academic and political discourses (e.g. Heske, 1986; Livingstone, 2015) frequently shape each other, thus producing particularly influential geopolitical imaginations. Similarly, Weldes (2006) argues that intertextuality – that is the various cross-references and shared basic assumptions which underpin quite different texts – is crucial for an understanding of the broader cultural basis which enables and restricts foreign policies. Dominant geographical imaginations are hence produced through loosely associated discourses and practices which can be located in different domains and places, but which resonate with and reiterate each other, thereby creating a consensus about certain “facts” and worldviews (Connolly, 2005).

Taking the notions of citational practices, resonances and intertextuality further, critical geopolitics will benefit from the analysis of school textbooks because they are not only parts of, but interfaces between the domains of formal, practical and popular geopolitics. Textbooks combine various discourses (political, scientific, educational, media etc.) and modalities³ (descriptive texts, pictures, tasks etc.) and provide a mixture of various genres such as historical sources, newspaper articles or academic texts (Klerides, 2010; Otto, 2013). They are therefore well-suited to study the geographical imaginations which resonate within a given society and which are designated to be passed to the next generation. Textbooks certainly also reflect (place- and time-specific)

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