



Geopolitics at the margins? Reconsidering genealogies of critical geopolitics[☆]



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A B S T R A C T

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Critical geopolitics has become one of the most vibrant parts of political geography. However it remains a particularly western way of knowing which has been much less attentive to other traditions of thinking. This paper engages with Pan-Africanism, and specifically the vision of the architect of post-colonial Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, to explore this overlooked contribution to critical engagements with geopolitics. Pan-Africanism sought to forge alternative post-colonial worlds to the binary geopolitics of the Cold War and the geopolitical economy of neo-colonialism. The academic division of labour has meant that these ideas have been consigned to African studies rather than being drawn into wider debates around the definitions of key disciplinary concepts. However Nyerere's continental thinking can be seen as a form of geopolitical imagination that challenges dominant neo-realist projections, and which still has much to offer contemporary political geography.

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We, the people of Tanganyika, would like to light a candle and put it on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, which would shine beyond our borders, giving hope where there was despair, love where there was hate and dignity where before there was only humiliation. *President Julius K. Nyerere on Tanganyika's independence, 1961.*

Critical geopolitics has become one of the most vibrant parts of political geography since the concept was first introduced by Gearoid Ó Tuathail in the late 1980s. From its initial concern with the scripting of global geographical political relations in the formal realms of statecraft, critical geopolitics has undergone a number of revisions and reworkings; broadening from the rarefied workings of statecraft to the ways in which hegemonic geopolitical narratives are established in wider society, and shifting from a focus on the statements of (male) political elites to the embodied experiences of scalar politics by a range of people and publics.

However, through all of this, and although not the initial intention,¹ critical geopolitics remains a particularly western way of knowing which has been much less attentive to other traditions of thinking through international politics and the role of the nation and citizen within these narratives. I wish to return to the 1960s

and 1970s and to the discourses and practices of Pan-Africanism which sought to forge alternative post-colonial worlds to the binary geopolitics of the Cold War and the geopolitical economy of neo-colonialism – what I have referred to elsewhere as “subaltern geopolitics” (Sharp, 2011b, 2011c). Specifically, I want to discuss the geopolitical vision of the architect of post-colonial Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, who, as the opening quote suggests, offered a geopolitical vision of hope and inclusion, one that recognised shared precarity rather than sought to shut out difference. The geopolitics of the academic division of labour, so brilliantly explained by Pletsch (1981), has meant that Nyerere's ideas have been consigned to African studies rather than being drawn into wider debates around the definitions of key disciplinary concepts. I suggest that Nyerere's contribution to geopolitical thinking is significant; his continental thinking is a form of geopolitical imagination that challenges dominant neo-realist projections. While the optimism of the heyday of Pan-Africanism might have dissipated in the face of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, such visions may still have much to offer contemporary political geography.

Genealogies of critical geopolitics

The study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialisation of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 192).

In an editorial in *Geopolitics* in 2010, Power quotes Perry's summary of the state of political geography 23 years earlier as

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still being largely relevant to the subdiscipline today: “Anglo-American political geography poses and pursues a limited and impoverished version of the discipline, largely ignoring the political concerns of four fifths of humankind” (Perry, 1987, quoted in Power, 2010: 433). Despite the global gaze of political geography, it is still, in many ways, subject to “parochial forms of theorising” (Robinson, 2003). Although, of course, there is much political geography based outside the west (see, for example, Sidaway & Simon, 1993; Slater, 2004), Darby’s (2004: 6) critique of the core concepts in international relations theory is equally relevant here: the “decolonisation of the international has barely begun” (see also Tickner, 2003). More specifically, James Tyner has argued that “Our geographies, and especially our political geographies, remain largely distant from non-European theorists and theories. Our texts on nationalism and identities, in particular, are woefully ignorant of Pan-African nationalism and other African diasporic movements” (Tyner, 2004: 343; see also Gilmore, 2008).

Slater (1998), following Chakrabarty’s (1992) insistence of the need to “provincialise Europe”, argues that it is necessary to go beyond an image of the Third World as a conceptually empty space to be filled with western knowledge, on the one hand, and as a place full of resistance to western ways and ‘indigenous knowledge’ on the other. Third World² scholars should be regarded as theorists in their own right, not only offering reflection on local conditions (see also Mignolo, 2002; Pletsch, 1981). Despite their suggestion of universalism, conventional western accounts of cosmopolitanism have tended to marginalise other expressions of transnational connection. Expanding on this point, Featherstone (2007: 434) outlines a subaltern cosmopolitanism which “emphasizes the multiple geographies through which different forms of cosmopolitanism are constituted [which...] permits a focus on the diverse forms of political identity and agency constituted through different forms of cosmopolitanism”. While his work focuses on rather more “unruly patterns of flows”, his description is also apposite for challenges such as Pan-Africanism which he suggests “evokes types of political activity that have contested dominant forms of globalization, but have eschewed, challenged or exceeded bounded forms of the local” (Featherstone, 2007: 435, 2012; see also Slater, 1998). The importance of recovering these alternative networks of global connection is to challenge even the most critical forms of cosmopolitanism in which, “it is the privileged and hospitable ‘we’ that extends the invitation to liberal planetary consciousness when cosmopolitanism is normalised as universality; cosmopolitanism itself becomes a ‘god trick’” (Jazeel, 2011: 84). The challenge is to recognise difference without rendering it purely as exotic.

Similar discussions have also been taking place in international relations theory, which has been characterised as equally struggling to think past Western IR, to paraphrase Bilgin (2008; see also Guillaume, 2007). Among the challenges to classical realism is Mohammed Ayoob’s project of proposing a “subaltern realism” which highlights the dominance of subalterity: “It is the common experience of all human societies that these are the elements that constitute the large majority of any members of any social system” (Ayoob, 2002: 40–41). Certainly in the post-colonial era, the vast majority of violent conflicts have taken place in the territory of subaltern states, even when dominant states have been involved in, or indeed have been the driving force behind, conflict. Ayoob’s (2010: 129) perspective offers a different set of principles for international relations; as he puts it, the “tension between the hegemonic and subaltern perspectives of international order can be summarised in the following fashion: While the former emphasizes order among states and justice within them, the latter stresses order within states and justice among them”.

Ayoob’s realism is one which acknowledges the interdependency of international and domestic politics, but insists that,

despite the importance of other scales of political activity and identity, the state is still the preeminent actor, and thus the goal for Third World societies; after all, Third World societies came into post-colonial being as states – however false their boundaries – and have had to struggle for independence. Thus, subaltern realism is a critique of conventional realism which considers only the experiences of the Great Powers as having relevance to the unfolding of world events. Realist champion Kenneth Waltz famously argued that ‘Denmark does not matter’. Such accounts serve to perpetuate the western-centrism of IR theory as they are complicit in hiding the myriad ways in which international politics is made and remade. The alternative is not to suggest that Denmark – and Tanzania – always matter in and of themselves, but is instead to challenge the ontological basis of much IR and geopolitical theory. John Agnew (2007) has argued that IR has been dominated by US and European understandings of the state and world-economy and so has argued for the need for attention to be given to the geography of knowledge in international politics:

Such geographies, however, are not ends in themselves. The point is to understand the ontological bases of knowing from perspectives that do not either privilege a singular history of knowledge associated with a specific world region (a typical relativism) or presume conceptions of knowledge that implicitly or explicitly assume their own self-evident universality (a typical positivism) (Agnew, 2007: 139).

Instead, Agnew (2007: 146) highlights the fact that “knowledge is made as it circulates; it is never made completely in one place and then simply consumed as is elsewhere”.

Recognising these tensions, Ayoob’s concept of “subaltern realism” presents an apparently oxymoronic pairing of terms, tying together a position of structural weakness with a dominant way of seeing, ordering and organising the world and it is this tension that I wish to bring to ‘subaltern geopolitics’ too. My intention is not to appropriate ‘subaltern’ nor, in some grand gesture, to claim to offer up some conceptual space for the term. Rather, by combining the notions of subaltern – a presence relegated to the lower orders – and geopolitics – a dominant form of knowledge that has attempted to order and regulate – I seek to present a term with the same kinds of internal tensions and contradictions intended by “critical geopolitics” (but perhaps now forgotten given the ubiquity of the term (see also Dalby, 2010)). Subaltern geopolitics aims to draw out a complex and entangled geographical imagination which recognises that western thought has always been – and must always be – so much more marked by its apparent other than has been recognised, just as the history of contact and exchange means that the idea of an unchanging other presence is an equal fiction. However, so much of the ‘subaltern’ has been silenced in global discourse, where only the concerns of the great states are noted. So, subaltern geopolitics is an attempt to write against a logic which is always and everywhere tending to write a ‘universal,’ to see instead how things might look otherwise if we admitted that Denmark *did* matter (to return to the famous example), that women matter, that during the Cold War, non-aligned states mattered, that various imaginations of Pan-Africanism matter. It is not, then, an argument for the inherent value of any one projection but instead for the need for a political geography that is open and engaging with a number of voices.

While studying political resistance and opposition to statecraft is clearly important, it is necessary also to consider the ongoing struggle over the role of the state as this formal politics must not get completely overlooked as critical scholarship looks to ‘alternative’ spaces of politics. The postcolonial grounding of subaltern geopolitics offers a challenge to those accounts which simply reject the state and formal politics, recognising the ongoing lived importance of such ‘scales’ while simultaneously highlighting their

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