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Subaltern Geopolitics: Special Issue of *Geoforum* (June 2011)

Introduction

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Inspired by postcolonial, feminist and anti-geopolitical interventions, this special issue brings together papers which present subaltern imaginaries that offer creative alternatives to the dominant (critical) geopolitical scripts. The concept of subaltern makes direct reference to postcolonial notions of power relations, suggesting a position that is not completely other, resistant or alternative to dominant geopolitics, but an ambiguous position of marginality as the term is used by bell hooks (1990). The papers collected together here focus on the various practices engaged with by people who have been marginalised by dominant geopolitics. The practices, whether strategies of survival or getting on with everyday life in Palestine, newspaper publication in Tanzania, or practices of peace-building in the Philippines or Colombia, are all ways of reworking dominant geopolitics not simply through critique, but through offering up lived alternatives. Thus, the notion of subaltern geopolitics used here both looks past the binary vision of geopolitical reasoning and much critical engagement with it, and also seeks to go beyond the endlessly critical nature of critical geopolitics, to offer alternative ways of imagining and doing geopolitics.

Critical geopolitical traditions

Critical geopolitics has, for the last twenty-five years, presented a series of engagements with the ways in which global politics is made and remade, through state, the media and the everyday. From the pioneering work of Ó Tuathail and Dalby which confronted the power/knowledge of statecraft have emerged various extensions of the concept of critical geopolitics: popular geopolitics has moved the focus away from proclamations of political elites, feminist geopolitics has challenged the masculinism of the tradition, and anti-geopolitics has critiqued focus on the formal structures of state politics. But, while there has been study of how those parts of the world marginalised by global politics have been represented through dominant political and media apparatus, there has been less consideration of the politics of representation from the margins. In an editorial in *Geopolitics* in 2010, Powers quotes Perry's summary of the state of political geography 23 years earlier as 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). Similar discussions have 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). Perhaps most prominently, Mohammed Ayoob (2002) has addressed the western-centrism of international relations theory through his concept of "subaltern realism" which challenges conventional accounts which insist that only the great powers need be understood by highlighting the fact that it is people in subaltern societies who make up the majority of global society, and thus it is their experiences which should count most. Ayoob also recognises the ambivalent role played by the state, enabling as well as constraining, and thus opens up a politics that is not simply resistant to the state. This is similar to what is proposed by "subaltern geopolitics", except that, like critical geopolitics more widely, subaltern geopolitics does not want to be confined by the scale of the state which realism, even in a critical form, does suggest. While

there are clear overlaps between subaltern geopolitics and feminist, anti, and alter-geopolitics (and all with critical geopolitics), I use this term to highlight a postcolonial emphasis bringing in the voices of those usually rendered marginal and silent in other accounts. Hence subaltern geopolitics is not an attempt to delineate and define a new approach from critical geopolitics *per se*, but instead is an attempt to privilege and focus on one aspect of the “geopolitics of geopolitical space” (Ashley 1987) that needs greater attention. Subaltern geopolitics then needs to learn from postcolonialism, drawing on Spivak’s call for “learning from below” (Kapoor 2008: 56).

As a convergence of postcolonial and political geography, I want to suggest that subaltern geopolitics refers to spaces of geopolitical knowledge production which are *neither* dominant *nor* resistant, because studying only the dominant accounts and those that absolutely oppose them, can have the effect of reifying this binary geopolitical structure rather than challenging it. As Woon puts it in his contribution to the issue,

Drawing strength from the concept of the subaltern that is distinctively tied in to postcolonial notions of power relations (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000), there is not only an insistence on giving attention to the marginalized but it is also premised upon an ambiguous position of marginality that refuses to be seen purely as the ‘Other’, as alternative, as enacting resistance.

Thus, unlike anti-geopolitics, subaltern geopolitics does not position its subjects outside of the state and associated institutions. Although subaltern geopolitics does not assume the state is the container for security, this does not mean that it ignores it (Sharp 2004: 98). Instead it is a positioning that recognises the possibility that political identities can be established through geographical representations that are neither fully “inside” nor “outside” (hooks 1990), and thus seeks a model of political subjectivity to challenge that perpetuated by dominant western geopolitics that does not rely on otherness. Hence, in my use of the term “subaltern” I want to return to the original military meaning of this as “a lower rank” (Childs and Williams 1997: 333) – neither the commander, nor outside of the ranks. This recognises the entangled nature of global political relations but in such a way that does not deny “the asymmetry of power relations and the reproduction of subordinating modes of representation” (Slater 2004: 194; Sharp *et al* 2000).

Precarity and the politics of the margins

Other forms of critical political writing have similarly sought ways of conceptualising the current global geopolitical situation. Judith Butler’s “feminist ethics of cosmopolitanism” (McRobbie 2006, in Mitchell 2007:5), has proved enticing for critical geographers seeking to understanding the geopolitics of the War on Terror, and, more importantly, devising alternative spatial imaginaries upon which to base political practice. Butler asks that we reimagine the “possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (2004: 20). Rather than a masculinist form of cosmopolitanism which “accepts normative framings of liberal democratic deliberation, and choice-making, self-reflective subjects, Butler sees subjects as endlessly (re)constituted through dialectical processes of recognition, within multiple networks of power” (Mitchell 2007:6) .

There is then a geographical imagination invoked in Butler's request: the ability to visualize and internalize this relationality across all kinds of psychic and material borders (Mitchell 2007: 5). Like Katz's (2001) scale jumping and Massey's (2007) extroverted sense of place, communities are stretched across state boundaries, but grounded in the recognition of their place in the remaking of identities and the possibilities of connection. Through this act of recognition, "one calls the Other and oneself into being simultaneously" comprehending vulnerability and unequal power relations. This is, of course, a powerful ethics. Moreover, it responds to the challenge of need for critical geopolitics to go beyond critique to propose progressive alternatives.

Koopman's contribution is a performance of one such feminist cosmopolitan ethics. Her term, alter-geopolitics, is a form of critical geopolitics that she has promoted for some time as a particular sort of feminist geopolitics which includes the work of non-academic grassroots groups who would not use this term. Yet, Koopman argues, "I am interested in connecting their work with this academic trajectory to find what each can offer to the other." Although Koopman does not use the term "subaltern", she shares the concerns of subaltern geopolitics to recognise the dispersion of agency through the political system, to see those outside of the formal circuits of power/knowledge of international relations and statecraft. Using the example of western volunteers undertaking "protective accompaniment", "a strategy of putting bodies that are less at risk next to bodies that are under threat", Koopman shows how the volunteers actively use the privilege assigned to their western bodies to protect precarious bodies, in this case in Colombia. This resists hegemonic geopolitics by creating their own practices of security by "by putting our bodies together for safety, by establishing our own people to people relations across place." This is an important development of the feminist geopolitical argument that

argues for the need to think of bodies as sites of performance in their own right rather than nothing more than surfaces for discursive inscription. Discourses do not simply write themselves directly onto bodies as if these bodies offered blank surfaces of equal topography (Dowler and Sharp 2001: 169).

Of course, Koopman is acutely aware of the fact that it is the very privilege that geopolitical discourse inscribes her western body with that means that she can act thus. In her paper she reveals that this is where most critical debate has emerged, from the fact that the companions are *using* the fact that their bodies/lives 'count' more to protect the bodies that do not through proximity – a performance, perhaps, of Butler's ideas about sharing precarity – and through this seeking "to build a world where everyone's lives 'count'". But, she wonders what the political implications of this move are: will such performances challenge the differential marking of bodies through this proximity of valued and abandoned bodies, or will it simply reinforce the value of western bodies?

This very deliberation, of course, highlights a sense in Butler's work, that it is still the agents in the west who are involved in the recognition, it is the others who are to be recognised. Power is still heavily invested in the "differential allocation of precarity" that Butler (2009:3) sees as central to "the point of departure for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics in ways that continue to exceed and traverse the categories of identity". But this means that, implicitly, agency is still denied to the other in this formulation. Instead, in this issue of *Geoforum* we are attempting to find space for this subaltern agency, to reverse the gaze, to look back. Both

Woon and Sharp highlight a form of security that explores connection rather than difference, within which, as Woon puts it, people in the Global South "place themselves in an extended tapestry of connection and belonging does not arise from an imagined fear of 'others' nor does it have exclusion as its basis". Woon's paper highlights the efforts of the Philippines communist rebel group, Rebulusyonyong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Mindanao (RPM-M) "in repudiating official terrorism discourse by emphasizing instead issues of state-induced vulnerability and marginalization." Woon highlights the subordination of the actual experiences of fear of people around the globe. Although at times in danger of simply replicating victimhood status, the Tanzanian media representations in Sharp's paper show a politics of recognition between "the wretched of the earth" and an attempt to persuade global political leaders to learn and forgive, rather than to rush to war. Focusing on Tanzania as an example which lies outside of the binary US-"terrorist other", but is still very much entangled within the discourses of terror and security at the heart of dominant geopolitics, the paper analyses the discourses through which the War on Terror is communicated to Tanzanians through the popular press to examine the extent to which a distinct postcolonial view exists which offers creative alternative, or subaltern, conceptualisations of security and geopolitics. Both Woon and Sharp take on Pain's challenge to better understand the multiple experiences of fear and terror, thus challenging westernised projections of "globalized fear" (Pain 2009) which ignore the fact that the impact of the War on Terror is often far greater outside the west, and the fact that, for many across the globe, there exist far greater terrors.

As noted earlier, the focus of subaltern geopolitics is on the margins, ensuring that the Other is not simply an example for "our" geopolitical theories but is allowed to challenge them too. However, this raises various challenges. Sharp questions her role in representing Tanzania recognising at the same time that the Tanzanian press clearly do not 'speak for' Tanzanian people in any direct or simple way. Sharp notes that to follow Spivak, subaltern geopolitics cannot be spoken; instead it is perhaps grounded in the quotidian embodied performances of "getting by" that Harker and Smith articulate in their contributions.

Harker's subaltern geopolitics are expressed through what he calls the "geographies of dealing with and getting by the Israeli Occupation". He seeks to go beyond the frameworks of power in critical geopolitics which sees political acts in the language of resistance, a move which can render places, such as his concern, Palestine, as "a place of violence and suffering, and in this process Palestinians themselves can become discursively erased as active subjects." He wants to consider violence and power through other epistemological registers. Even Ó Tuathail's (1996) "anti-geopolitical eye", he insists, leaves geopolitical scriptings within the "orbit of geopolitical discourse, which in the context of Palestine still turns around politics and violence", missing the complexity and richness of different places. This does not reject geopolitics, nor does it deny the violence of life in Palestine, but seeks to understand the range of actions and actors not always included.

Unravelling the discursive constructions of the family through Orientalist representations, Harker highlights the politics of the language and performance of such quotidian aspects of life as the family, suggesting that even the definition of what constitutes a Palestinian family has itself been debated and contested. And yet it would be wrong to suggest that these practices are simply acts of resistance:

these family practices constitute part of a micropolitics of living that 'deals with', rather than 'resists'... similar to Allen's (2008: 456) concept of 'getting by', her answer to the question: How can we acknowledge the power of violence in Israel's colonial project in the occupied territories without either assuming it to be all-determining of Palestinian experience, or championing every act of Palestinian survival to be heroic resistance?

Similarly Smith's paper seeks to centre the subaltern in conceptualisations of critical geopolitics. He seeks to challenge the usual narrations of Palestine as either a story of monolithic and unchanging political occupation, nor as a space of conflict emerging from the competing claims of sovereign states. Like all the contributors to this issue, Smith is keen to challenge a geopolitical gaze from "outside", and instead seeks to look back at dominant power from a marginal position "within". His narration of Palestine starts from everyday, embodied practices to ensure that Palestinians are not simply seen as victims of more powerful processes operating at another level, but also to recognise – again as many of the contributions have – that state power is not simply repressive and thus always and everywhere something to be resisted. Starting from this point leads Smith the concept of "graduated sovereignty", which describes the situation within which the "freedoms of individuals are mediated by the uneven support and repression of the state," but, recognising the spatial containment and everyday violence which makes up the everyday, and which limits the Palestinian state, he refers to this as "graduated incarceration".

Smith's subaltern geopolitics is a resoundingly three dimensional imaginary and practice, with Palestinians negotiating the street level, while the settlers walk 10-20 metres above them and the technological power that supports their dominance flows through and over in the form of irrigation water, cell phone signals and military flights. In the "microgeographies of occupation" Palestinians have to "get by" in Harker's language through a complex set of spatial knowledges and practices to negotiate this landscape of power. As in Harker's contribution, Smith recognises that such complex practices are not always articulated as resistance, nor can they be reduced to this, but they make up the interplay of making and remaking the geopolitical. As Harker puts it, they are not "experienced by Palestinians as forms of 'politics' (i.e. 'resistance'), and do not cohere around the territorial spaces and practices of nation-states (and nation-state like entities). Both Harker and Smith seek to provide a space for the 'voice' of Palestinians, in a way that renders them more than political resistance to Israeli occupation, a fine starting point for a subaltern reworking of critical geopolitics.

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