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Some considerations about the methods and the nature of Political Geography and Geopolitics*

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The present paper deals with the fields of Political Geography and Geopolitics and their association with the more broader field of study, namely that of International Relations. It's my intention to trace the basic contents as well as the historical and present methods of these disciplines. In so doing, the aim of this paper is to highlight some of the vast bibliography about the two concepts and its study, briefly investigating the origins and development as well as pointing to future directions in both disciplines.

Geopolitics (and Political Geography) has been witnessing in the present a period of redefinition since the mid-1970s, after being forgotten by the academic community because of the uses and abuses by German authors and practitioners of statecraft during the interwar period and until the end of the second world war; Germany used Geopolitics with aggressive and expansionist intentions in order to rationalize and even conduct territorial expansion with one orientation towards geographical and environmental determinism, which rested in biological evolution laws and on the theories of organic growth of the State developed by German geographer and social scientist Friedrich Ratzel during the last decades of the 19th century.¹ Both terms have experienced a renewing of their contents, so that they are used today to describe such phenomena as territorial disputes, ethnic conflicts and nationalism, the structure of the global finances and the internationalization of economics, or increasing forms of regionalization and cooperation processes that actually cross the fixed/rigid boundaries of States.²

Geopolitics was originally coined by a Swedish political scientist, Rudolf Kjellen, in the final year of the 19th century, and notoriously developed by this Swede during the First World War in *Der Staat als Lebensform* (1916), in which he viewed the State as a living organism, assigning to Geopolitics the function of studying the State as a geographic organism or an appearance in space. Soon the neologism was able to accommodate to *Realpolitik*, that is, to the political action of the States in the world and the reality that surrounds them, in one fight between world powers and their desire of reaching global primacy.³ Kjellen believed that in order for a State to be strong and mighty, its government had to put in practice five complementary types of policies: *Ekonomopolitik*, *Demopolitik*, *Sociopolitik*, *Kratopolitik*, and finally, in order to conduct with success its natural expansion, *Geopolitik* – here meaning the study of the State considered as a geographic organism, a spatial phenomenon, that is, a land, a territory, a space, or a country.⁴ Thus, bearing in mind the propositions of Kjellen, the aim of the discipline was to appeal attention to the statesman and decisionmaker upon the role of the geographic characteristics in the conception of the State and the practice of statecraft.⁵

In this text I want to characterize Geopolitics and Political Geography in their present state and survey some of the vast literature about these two disciplines. It is clear now that Geopolitics and Political Geography have recently completed one century since the first

publication about the subject, *Politische Geographie*, published by Ratzel in 1897. This text served to give a status of scientificity to politics and provide a theoretical framework for the intentions of Germany at that time – the expansion of both territory and population, the search for a "place in the sun", that is, the search for world primacy, therefore challenging the might of Great Britain and its military, particularly naval power.

According to Ratzel, the State is a territorial entity with two essential coordinates: the space, *Raum*, here included as the total surface or extension, and the position, *Lage*, understood as the situation of the territory in relation to other States. Other relevant considerations are the elements that Ratzel adds to the concept of Space, namely the sense and meaning of space, *Raumsinn*, and the notion of vital space, *Lebensraum*, that underlies from the first concept.⁶ Firstly I shall trace the differences about both disciplines, as there often arises confusion about the meaning of each of them.

Both disciplines have in common the search and identification of an area of study that concerns the connection of geography with politics and their mutual interactions.⁷ Political Geography deals with the study of the existing relations between spatial facts and the political processes, and therefore constitutes the spatial analysis of political phenomena. It concerns to the spatial attributes of the political process or can be seen as the study of existing relations between spatial facts and political processes.⁸ Whereas Geopolitics, a notoriously difficult concept to define, focuses on and is an approach to international politics that insists on the significance of geographic territory and its resources. It represents the study of the geographic distribution of power among the States of the international system, focusing on the rivalries of the major powers.⁹ Another vision and appropriate definition of Geopolitics rests upon the theoretical postulate that States' foreign policies are determined by their location, natural resources and physical determinants.¹⁰ Thus, Geopolitics and geopolitical analysis constitute the study of international politics seen from a spatial or geocentric perspective; the understanding of the whole is simultaneously its objective and justification. Where Political Geography handles with the interaction of geographical factors and politics, the interactions of political power and space, Geopolitics tries to provide a geographic interpretation and studies the geographical aspects of political phenomena. It is therefore one discipline that is inserted on the realist tradition of International Relations theory and constitutes a method of interpretation of politics, with a vocation to perception and definition of aims, interests, conditions and factors of power.

I find one definition of Geopolitics to be particularly clear expressed. In the words of Tuomi, the Geopolitics that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century is by no means comparable to the old framework and theoretical point of views, namely the eternal confrontation between sea power and land power developed during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Tuomi:

*Theoretical Geopolitics studies the relation between physical space and international politics, develops models for the spatial division of the world into cooperating and competing parts for historical, economic and political reasons, and analyses how the participants interpret the political, economic and military consequences of this division (...) The Geopolitics of a state or other territorially defined society means its pursuit of geographically dimensioned aims that are connected with its economic and political position, security and culture.*¹¹

In its origins Geopolitics combined historical knowledge with a sophisticated capacity for theorizing, in the way that the outcome established one powerful analytical structure. In the other hand, the geopolitical dimension signifies the importance of geographical factors in the management of human issues. Cohen proposes a dynamic definition for the geopolitical analysis in the way that for this actor it rests upon the relationship of international political power and the international scene, to the extent that geopolitical perspectives vary with the changing geographic landscape and with the interpretation that man does of the nature of this change.¹²

With the end of the second world war, new perspectives emerged for the study of Geopolitics and Political Geography. The international system of the post war changed dramatically the notion of balance of power and introduced strategic bipolarity and nuclear deterrence, which were responsible for the ideological, political, cultural and geographic confrontation between the two superpowers and the respective spheres of influence and blocks of allies. It was on this period that geopolitical theory cut drastically with the international situation that had prevailed till then. The world assisted to the development of new weapons, strategies and techniques of conducting war and conflicts. The cold war had started and was to last nearly four and a half decades, that is, from 1946 till 1989/91.¹³

The resurgence of both disciplines began on the late 1960s, early 1970s, as they cease to be mere instruments in service of the military establishment/sphere and start to be objects of analysis by academics and think tanks, researchers and universities who wanted to construct critical reasonings and discourses with respect to the disciplines in question; the renaissance has been particularly manifested after the end of the 1980s if compared with the exclusion and distancing that it suffered after 1945 and approximately during three decades. As one legitimate area of study, Geopolitics and Political Geography deal nowadays with complicated if not problematic issues like globalisation, deterritorialization and constant flows of information and finance, transnational phenomena that transcend the boundaries of States and seem somehow to erode the concept of sovereignty. We live in a world that is becoming boundless, without physical and territorial borders, it seems, that bases itself on an increasing, more frequent and perceptible interdependence. In this sense, some authors speak about the end of Geopolitics, because of profound impacts created by economic globalisation. Information technologies and communication are progressively forming and reforming domestic politics and foreign relations of States, so as to say that frequently one doubts about the existence of borders, boundaries, territorial demarcations and sovereignty in itself.

One major change in the study of Geopolitics and geopolitical analysis occurred starting from the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s. I'm referring to critical Geopolitics, that is, a reasoning that demonstrates that geopolitical issues and themes can be found and are to be located in popular culture, movies, or mass media, i.e. the press, TV and music; these same issues are therefore seen as important forms of popular Geopolitics. In comparison to formal Geopolitics, the insights on critical Geopolitics try to determine in what manner and to what extent geographical labels do not imply a strong causal relation between physical geography and the behaviour of the State and its political structures, but actually enter in itself in popular and formal discourse.¹⁴ For Jauhiainen, critical Geopolitics takes issue with the traditional theories of Political Geography and opposing positions of geopolitical theories by analysing their discourses and their role in spatial formation and development.¹⁵ In order to achieve an alternative form of Geopolitics, one that intends to serve as the equilibrium in the hegemonic balance, the critical approach offers an examination of the suppositions that sustain particular geopolitical constructions, that is, production and use of geographic knowledge in various orders of power and space. In doing so, critical Geopolitics tries to uncover the hidden geographical assumptions in foreign policy decisions and actions.

After the period comprising 1989/1991, a new phase characterized the international system of States in consequence of the end of rigid bipolarity and the implosion of the Soviet Union, thus paving the way for the end of communism as a socio-economic doctrine and an orientation in foreign policy issues in general. The revival of Geopolitics and Political Geography after years of relative neglect has highlighted primary concerns like the role of geographical scale in establishing political identities and sometimes fuelling more aggressive or violent forms of nationalism.¹⁶ New threats to world security emerged, like regional conflicts, violent nationalism, religious fundamentalism/integrism and sharp inequality between the rich north and the underdeveloped south.¹⁷

The chaotic situation that can be found in the vast space of the former Soviet Union shows how dangerous regional conflicts can be. Some authors say that we live today in a more

unpredictable and unsafer world. The desintegration of the soviet empire has created a vacuum on the huge landmass that in the past used to be the territory and country with whom the United States were struggling for global primacy. In regard to the present situation in Russia, Geopolitics has gained special attention by russian scholars and policy makers in comparison to the cold war days, when the discipline had been banned from study and analysis.¹⁸ Again, the concept of *Heartland*, developed by the british geographer and politician Halford Mackinder in the first two decades of the 20th century, retains credibility with respect to the russian authors.¹⁹ Here is demonstrated the high interest on Geopolitics in post soviet Russia, as well as the Eurasian theory in the country. The simple definition of this concept rests on the belief that Russia is a unique power and it does not need to westernize in order to "obtain" and reach modernity. On the other hand, the orthodox version means that the Eurasian *Heartland* is, in geographical terms, the milestone for the formation of an anti-western movement, which aim is ultimately to expell the "atlantic" influence from Eurasia.²⁰

The impartiality of geopolitical analysis concerning political systems and political philosophy aims the discipline towards the realities of international politics and those of geography. Geopolitical realities are conceived as durable physical determinants of foreign policy.²¹ Following this reasoning, Geography should be separated from the social, political and ideological dimensions of international politics. Nonetheless, the irony of geopolitical analysis seems to be its significative ideological depth and profound politized form.²²

Returning to the concept of critical Geopolitics, I would like to point to the plurality rather than singularity that characterizes this particular and alternative form of Geopolitics. According to O'Tuathail, it refers to a plural ensemble of representational practices that are diffused throughout societies and it is a form that seeks to disturb the objectivist perspectivism found in the history of Geopolitics and in the practices of foreign policy more generally.²³ The objective is to uncover the statist approach of traditional Geopolitics, the one that dominated in the practices of States and has prevailed during at least the first half of the 20th century in the vast inventory of literature and academic work. By identifying the roots of Geopolitics and its practices, the aim is to challenge the conventional approach of the past, a reasoning that based itself on the suppositions about the inherent character and proprieties of certain parts of the (territorial) surface or the validity of strategic imperatives. An interesting aspect to be underscored is the innovative project that critical Geopolitics can offer to the establishment of a dialog between geography and other social science disciplines, namely Political Science, contemporary History and International Relations. In this sense, I would like to point to the conditions derived from the present instable world political map; that these cast a light to a discipline, Geopolitics, which still bases its method and nature in intuition and empiricism, according to many present-day authors. The analysis of power relations in space and the influence of territorial factors upon the strategies built by the State actors, the study of problems through the (inter)relationship between political power, political structures and territorial configuration applies even today to political realism in the overall study of International Relations, its contending theories and streams.²⁴

In order to achieve a linkage in the academic and research dialogs, the role of international relations theory and its respective geopolitical tradition should be redefined so that an efective encounter between both can occur. An aditional form of knowledge can be decisive in order to elaborate an interdisciplinary work with success; in this sense, communication skills and inter/multi-disciplinary ability added to what has been reffered beforehand can constitute an appropriate point of start in the dialog between both disciplines, according to Thompson Klein.²⁵

Critical Geopolitics has taken some time before it could be seen as an analysis and a practice, with an imediate focus on statecraft and on the role of geopolitical reasoning, as, in order to be effective, it had to assimilate and relate itself gradually with conventional practices of geopolitical understanding. It pretends to revise the historical analysis of Geopolitics by means of a discourse that, in a certain way, distances itself from the conventional academic narrative that

used to be utilized by geopolitical games: concepts like domino theory, chess boards, containment/expansionism, buffer states and so on.

After the end of the cold war, the complexity of themes handled by this critical methodology have converted the discipline into an analysis in which its analytical presence is undoubtful. That is, the critical methodology of understanding and revisioning the world owes to the conceptual weakness that past geopolitical methods have offered. The old reasoning is overlapped by the reality of a world living under intense interdependence, with constant flows of speed and technological/scientific risks originally coming from uncertain and undeterminant places, creating a vertigo picture of the international system. The present formula of critical Geopolitics rests upon a refined methodology, where we can assist to the huge differences between formal Geopolitics and the new, recent critical approach, that occupies with the analysis of the first reasoning (the formal one), and at the same time tries to decipher the framework of geopolitical figures, as well as the textual and language strategies used in the writings of intellectuals, scholars and institutions from the traditional period.

Geopolitics is, nowadays, a concept that refers to a plurality of issues in the study of International Relations and its theoretical framework, as has been noted earlier on this text. In a widely interdependent and in rapid transformation world, characterized by extreme complexity, geopolitical perspectives can be of very useful utility to define the international system, to the extent that Geopolitics provides some explanations and afinities, and points out barriers and obstacles, also detecting potencialities and vulnerabilities. In this sense, Geopolitics should be taken for seriously as it constitutes in itself a social element and a technological reasoning that helps in the construction of imaginations about the world. This imagination has provided meaning and rationalization to practice by political elites, to the extent that it has defined the ideological space from which the geographic categories upon which the world is organized and work are derived, to borrow the words of John Agnew.²⁶ Geopolitics and Political Geography then simultaneously justify and legitimate a confrontation like on the days of the cold war, or give a picture of the inequalities that characterize the present (and past) world economy with regard to the representations of a world without limits, borders and boundaries.²⁷ In the present state of the world, frontiers and borders seem to vanish because of the changes around the notion and function of territoriality, so as to point as well the processes of globalization, a term highly used (and abused), but as well a sometimes ill-defined one, that increments all forms of economic, political and cultural angles. The functions of the border and the sovereignty of the State are rendered less important and are therefore reduced to a somehow more irrellevant perspective. Be it as it may, this happens in a world where flows seem to dominate International Relations and international politics and in that sense casts light to a new significance and evolution of both disciplines that serve the purpose of this paper.

According to Paasi,²⁸ the new rhetorics in Geopolitics bases itself on the mutation of global links and in the perception of borders and limits as representing symbols of a past and rigid world that will be replaced by a more dynamic one. This same world is being gradually substituted by a concept that indicates more dynamism, but at the same time it is a world that is turning out to be a lot more complex to define and discipline.

In a form of conclusion, I should like to express the importance of the work done and pursued by the critical stream of the "new" Geopolitics that has been developing in the past years; it seems to inspire on more traditional approaches to the extent that the critical form manifests the necessity of displacing these same themes, texts and discourses through a framework that, having much or less of subjectivity, ends up difusing a Geopolitics that one cannot not want nor avoid. Critical Geopolitics offers a continued examination of supositions that underlie specific geopolitical constructions, that is, the production and usage of geographical knowledge to different political and spatial orders. The recent devolopment implies the realization of a careful analysis of the disciplines, be it by the traditional methods and topics, or by the ones that have been erected more recently, especially after the major changes that occured in the

international system of States since the *annus mirabilis* of 1989. Anyway, it is my conviction that the task implies the refining of Geopolitics and Political Geography and its respective silenced forms, in what can be seen as an impulse and a desire for a certain configuration of superiority and domination. One can exhaustively affirm that Geopolitics is an object of imperialist power of States that in other times were yearning to aspire for world primacy, but then again one should bear in mind that the same disciplines actually constitute an indispensable method and reasoning for the political conduct of any State.

* The present work draws on a previous research project conducted by the author while being enrolled in the Master Degree of International Relations and Communication at the Faculty of Information Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid, during the academic year of 1999/2000. It only intends to be a short review and comment of both disciplines, and in that way the aim is to point out some considerations that might be of interest for future analysis. This paper was first outlined and discussed in Helsinki in late March 2001. The present version has been revised and builds upon the draft one. The revised form of this text was finished on 30 October 2001. I would like to thank the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, who gave me some support to undertake this research work and provided me their facilities for the production of this paper. Special thanks also for the valuable suggestions of an anonymous referee.

¹ In this sense see S. D. Brunn and K. A. Mingst, "Geopolitics", in, Michael Paccione (ed.), *Progress in Political Geography*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp. 41-42; More recently, one valuable account is Franco Farinelli, "Friedrich Ratzel and the nature of (political) geography", *Political Geography*, vol. 19, no. 8, november 2000, pp. 943-955. Ratzel published *Politische Geographie* in 1897. It was the first outline in the construction of a systematic (general) conception of a new branch of geography.

² See for instance John Agnew, *Geopolitics – revisoning world politics*, London, Routledge, 1998; David Newman (ed.), *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity*, London, Frank Cass, 1999; Peter J. Taylor and Colin Flint, *Political Geography: world economy, nation state and locality*, London, Prentice Hall, 4th edition, 2000; Gerard Toal, Paul Routledge, Simon Dalby (eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998.

³ In Geopolitics *Realpolitik* means the precepts that arise from the imperatives that are dictated by the nature of the geographic space occupied by a certain state. Cf. John Agnew (ed.), *Political Geography – a reader*, London, Arnold, 1997, p. 93.

⁴ See the account of Pierre Gallois, *Géopolitique – les voies de la puissance*, Paris, Plon, 1990, pp. 25-26.

⁵ A complete and valuable account of german Geopolitics, the origins and developments of the discipline is to be found in the recent study of a german author: Stefan Fröhlich, *Zwischen selektiver Verteidigung und globaler Eindämmung*, Baden-Baden (Germany), Nomos, 1998, esp. pp. 37-54 for an outline and examination of the concepts of Political Geography and Geopolitics, their definitions and origins.

I would like to emphasise the broad scope of this study. In it one can learn about the unfolding of north-american Geopolitics during nearly all of the 20th century until the final years of the Reagan administration (and so the beginning of the end of the cold war), and capture insights of the containment policy of the US, its security imperatives and foreign policy strategies, items/themes that are all widely discussed and analysed.

⁶ The vital space included not only the necessary space for survival of the community, but as well the space that was appropriate to the full display of the *Raumsinn* to the extent that the people that showed the best sense of space would therefore need more vital space. Vital space was thus perceived as a necessity and a legitimate right. Cf. Martin Ira Glassner, *Political Geography*, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1993, pp. 223-224.

⁷ Geoffrey Parker, *Western Geopolitical thought in the twentieth century*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, p. 1.

⁸ Cf. Martin Glassner, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁹ Taylor and Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 371. Taylor defines geopolitical analysis as the revelation of fundamental truths about global geographic restrictions on the behaviour of States on, Geopolitical world orders, in, P. J. Taylor (ed.), *Political Geography of the 20th century – a global analysis*, London, Belhaven Press, 1993, p. 33.

¹⁰ In this sense see Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World politics – trend and transformation*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston and New York, 8th edition, 2001, pp. 57-59. In the glossary of this work one loose definition of Geopolitics is to be found: *The relationship between geography and politics and their consequences for states' national interests and relative power*. Cf. *Idem*, p. G-6.

¹¹ Cf. Osmo Tuomi, "The new Geopolitics – the World System and Northern Europe seen from a modern geopolitical perspective", *Finnish Defence Studies*, no. 11, National Defence College, Helsinki, 1998, p. 28.

¹² Cf. Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a world divided*, New York, Random House, 2nd edition, 1973, p. 29.

¹³ A good analysis about the concepts of geopolitical order geopolitical codes after 1945 is to be found in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of the Containment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982.

¹⁴ See Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics in a changing world*, London, Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 161. For a wide study on critical Geopolitics see also, Gearoid O'Tuathail and Simon Dalby (eds.), *Rethinking Geopolitics*, London, Routledge, 1998, and G. O'Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics – the politics of writing global space*, London, Routledge, 1996. Here O'Tuathail traces his ideas, stating that geopolitical content is implicit in the very practice of foreign policy. For O'Tuathail critical Geopolitics as a methodology implies an analysis of geopolitical issues and facts by way of an heterodox approach; more complex visions of reality, hence more critical of institutional practices and discourses, are therefore possible to analyse or explain.

¹⁵ Cf. Jussi Jauhiainen, "A geopolitical view of the baltic sea region", in Hiski Haukkala (ed.), *Dynamic aspects of the northern dimension*, Turku (Finland), Jean Monnet Unit, University of Turku, 1999, p. 54.

¹⁶ In this sense see John Agnew, "Global Political Geography beyond Geopolitics", *International Studies Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, spring 2000, pp. 91-99.

¹⁷ See Susanne Peters, The "West" against the "rest": Geopolitics after the end of the cold war, *Geopolitics*, vol. 4, nr. 3, winter 1999, pp. 29-46, for a valuable outline about the state of Geopolitics after the end of the cold war, the north-south divide and the Huntington thesis of the clash of civilizations, among other issues.

¹⁸ About the recent interest of Geopolitics in Russia and by russian scholars and policy practioners, see the accounts of Charles Clover, "Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland, the reemergence of Geopolitics", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 2, march/april 1999, pp. 9-13; John Erickson, "Russia will not be trifled with: geopolitical facts and fantasies", in, Colin Gray and Geoffrey Sloan (eds.), *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, London, Frank Cass Publishers, 1999, pp. 242-268.

¹⁹ I would like to refer the importance that rests still today in the neat geopolitical formula used by Mackinder in the beginning of the 20th century: *Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World Island commands the World*. It belongs to the study made by Mackinder in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, published originally in 1919.

²⁰ Cf. Clover, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ "Geography, in such a scheme, is held to be a non-discursive phenomenon: it is separate from the social, political and ideological dimensions of international politics". Cf. G. O'Tuathail and John Agnew, "Geopolitics and discourse: practical geopolitical reasoning in american foreign policy", in O Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge (eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 79.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ See O'Tuathail, "Introduction: towards a critical Geopolitics", in, O'Tuathail and Dalby (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 4. For a good analysis, written in a readable style, about the history of Geopolitics see the different contributions on the theme in Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson (eds.), *Geopolitical traditions – a century of geopolitical thought*, London, Routledge, 2000.

²⁴ For a spanish view of this issue, see Monserrat Huguet, "Historia del Tiempo Presente y Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales", *Ayer*, (AHC - Madrid) nr. 42, 2001, pp. 43-69, here pp. 59-60.

²⁵ Cf. Thompson Klein quoted by Yosef Lapid, "Where should we begin? Political Geography and International Relations", *Political Geography*, vol. 18, no. 8, november 1999, pp. 898-899.

²⁶ About the geopolitical imagination and its modern form see especially Agnew (1998), *op. cit.*, here pp. 5-6. See also pp. 125-127.

²⁷ In this sense a good analysis is Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics – past, present and future*, London, Pinter, 1998.

²⁸ Cf. Anssi Paasi, "Boundaries as social processes: territoriality in the new world of flows", in Newman (ed.), *op. cit.*, here p. 71. See pp. 69-88.