

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

Published in *Political Geography* Vol 65 2018, 143-151

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*Acknowledgements:*

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Anthony V. Williams, my PhD adviser at Penn State. He encouraged my nascent interest in political geography at the beginning of my graduate work, though he cautioned me that it was a field that had experienced a reputational turn for the worse after the 1940s. Pete Taylor took a chance on me when he invited me to become the journal's "Associate Editor for the Americas" in early 1981. He and Ron Johnston initiated the idea of a specialist political geography journal and negotiated the first contract with Butterworths. Dick Morrill, Julian Minghi, Stan Brunn, Andrew Kirby, Saul Cohen, and Kevin Cox were instrumental also in giving the journal early credibility while supporting my editorial work as I learned on the job. My co-editors at the journal have labored hard and cooperatively, though many academics and publishers do not appreciate the sacrifice of time and research-activity that the poorly recompensed editorial grind demands in order to provide a valuable public good. My graduate students at the University of Colorado and colleagues in the Institute of Behavioral Science and elsewhere were usually bemused by my expressions of frustration but provided a sounding board anyway. My belated apologies to them.

## 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.

*Keywords:* content analysis, journal metrics, replication, context in political geography, public awareness, commercial publishing

*Abbreviated title:* Thirty-five years of political geography and Political Geography

## INTRODUCTION

The academic publishing world of 1981, when Political Geography (henceforth PG) was founded, was very different than today's hyper-kinesis. It was also a time of notable change in publishing as the established disciplinary flagship journals, such as the *Annals*, *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 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 *et al* 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 was dominated by non-geographers (O'Loughlin 2009). In many respects, Isaiah Bowman's admonition three decades earlier to Derwent Whittlesey ("do not start a journal of political geography") (Minghi 2008) 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. As it began to bloom, the eclectic content of the 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 are 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 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *Companion to Political Geography* (Agnew et al 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* (2016, 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) made 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 world. A comparison of the topics of political geography papers presented at the International Geographical Union with those presented at the Association of American Geographers and the Institute of British Geographers-Royal Geographical Society illustrates the point. One major point of contrast between the two academic communities is the emphasis on current developments regarding borders and challenges to governments and residents in terms of adjustments to them in the international arena and the relative paucity of such work in Anglo-America. The distinction was noted by Newman and Paasi (1998) almost 20 years ago but their view is a little outdated, given contemporary developments in migrant and refugee flows that have generated urgency in understanding the security politics, bio-politics and electoral politics of the era of mass movement.

A content analysis of the 177 research articles that PG published in the 5 years from January 2011 to November 2015 provides clear insights into the research priorities, data sources and methodologies of authors. (The count does not include interventions, editorials, commentaries or book review essays)<sup>2</sup>. About 10% (18) of the articles can be characterized as 'data-free' as they were either theoretical pieces or agenda-setting plenary papers. Of the remaining articles, about one-quarter (39) examined quantitative data, almost exclusively of aggregate data based on geographic units. Only 6 of these 39 papers were written by geographers since political scientists dominated this category. Conversely, only a small handful of political scientists have published non-quantitative papers. A similar number of papers (40 in total) reported research based on interviews and field work. These qualitative papers disproportionately reported work in Asian settings (16) while Latin America (3) and Africa (5) were relatively unrepresented. Four papers were based on field-work but concentrated on landscape elements and did not present interview material. By far, the largest ratio of research articles (76 out of 177 or 43%) was text-based papers. Most frequently, these texts are government or NGO documents but they also include secondary sources (field reports from other researchers or organizations), films, art and memoirs. As many articles (39) cited Michel Foucault as presented the results of quantitative data analysis.

Citation metrics are helpful in penetrating the murky world of "impact" if one does not drill down too far into scores that are based on a pitifully small N. One also has to consider the disciplinary norms of citation. Geographers tend to cite more than other social sciences; this is why the rank of PG's impact score in the political science journals

(over 160 of them) is always higher than the same score in geography journals (about 75) in the *Web of Science* indexes. This claim is supported by the median impact factor score for Geography journals, which stands at 1.124 and is far higher than journals in political science (0.734), economics (0.860), anthropology (0.690), sociology (0.783), international relations (0.709) and area studies (0.412). (All of these values and other metrics here are from the *Web of Science* updated to mid-March 2016). I don't know why geographers cite so much but it certainly adds to the bloat of our publications. One (optimistic) reason could be that we tend to read and cite works outside of our home discipline more than more insular academics in related disciplines. Another more pessimistic reason could be a certain sense of inadequacy and lack of confidence in our own research that requires the imprimatur of excessive citation and attendant endorsement. A third reason is also plausible – articles in human geography tend to be (overly) decorated with theoretical references and a large number are excessively weak on empirical evidence and presentation of new material. In effect, geographers compensate for lack of empirical heft with over-the-top referencing.

For *Political Geography*, the impact factor is usually about twice the size of the one for the whole discipline; the 2015 figure was 2.733. PG has fluctuated between the 80th and 95th percentiles in the impact factors of all journals in its category over the last 20 years. (Data are from the Incites™ Journal Citation Reports). The h-index for PG is also good when viewed in the light of other specialist journals in geography. A value of 61 indicates that 61 papers since the journal's founding have had at least 61 citations (Web of Science numbers). This score can be placed in perspective by noting that PG has

published about 1000 research papers over the past 35 years. The average PG paper has 10.2 citations. Comparative values for *Urban Geography* (h-index of 40 and average citations of 6.3), *Geographic Analysis* (50 and 16.2), *Applied Geography* (47 and 7.6), *Economic Geography* (64 and 10.6), *Gender, Place and Culture* (24 and 3.35), and *Cultural Geographies* (25 and 4.81) show that PG ranks well. (While the h-index is affected by the length of time the journal has existed, the average citation value controls for this temporal bias). *Global Environmental Change*, a truly interdisciplinary but recently established journal on an emerging subject, has an h-index of 90 but an average citation count of only 3.57. An interpretation of these values is that PG tends to publish relatively few high impact papers but its average contribution attracts modest interest, as reflected in citations.

Like other human geography journals, the top 10 most cited PG papers, are either review papers or present a theoretical argument with a brief empirical illustration. The themes of these articles range from territory and the significance of the local context to the nature of political processes (Cox, 1998; Escobar, 2001) to enduring (political) geographic emphases on scale (Delaney and Leitner, 1997) and theorizing borders in a new world order (Amoore, 2006; Sparke, 2006). Articles on human-environment relations, especially resource conflicts, have emerged as the most downloaded and cited papers in the journal in recent years. This trend was presaged by a welcoming approach to political ecology scholars by the journal about 20 years ago with agenda setting papers by Le Billon (2001), Goodman (2004), Bulkeley (2005), and

two papers from a special issue on climate change and conflicts, those by Barnett and Adger (2007) and by Reuveny (2007).

Review of the articles in PG over the past twenty-five years indicates that the journal has occasionally published on many issues of high public interest, especially about borders, migration, climate change, electoral processes, and conflicts. The editors have not been very attentive to the likely resonance of the submissions in the arena of public opinion, though on rare occasions, an article gets picked up by a journalist for a wide readership. A recent example is the examination of the spatially-polarizing rural US electoral geography by Scala, Johnson and Rogers (2015) which was the basis of a long article in the *Economist* (2015). There is no longer much doubt that our research is now partly evaluated on the basis of whether it can help contribute to solutions of important problems that have earned the public's attention. No longer will the kudos of colleagues or the placement of articles in prestigious academic journals be sufficient as we are increasingly mandated to contribute to matters of public debate.

#### THE BAD

This brief content analysis of PG illustrates the divide between political geography and political science<sup>3</sup> authors, evident from the respective preferences for information sources and methods of analysis. In this section, I distinguish what I believe are some major disciplinary concerns, and by extension, involve the journal. These are data and research practice, especially a lack of transparency; the lack of engagement with important and prominent questions of domestic and international politics; and the

complex and critical intersection of research interest about the role of context in shaping political behavior.

A lack of attention to the growing demand in the public and academic words for transparency in data collection and analysis can be recognized in most PG papers. While quantitative papers clearly indicate the data sources and the analytical methods, now incorporating a raft of robustness checks and graphical displays, the qualitative papers are mostly silent on how many interviews were conducted; on the characteristics of the interviewees; the settings, length, and style of interviews; on how the respondents were identified, through some initial contacts, snowballing or other means; on which organizations were promoting or sponsoring the work; on the nature of the questions; on the inducements, if any, to take part; and on the method of recording (notes, tape-recorders, video, etc.) The sloppiness and either deliberate or disdainful under-elaboration of qualitative information collection is troubling and reflects poorly on PG's referees and editors. A proper presentation, either in the text or as an online appendix, would look like Table 1 in the paper on violence in the Lake Naivasha region of Kenya by Lang and Sakdepolrak (2015) where they provide general demographic information for their 57 respondents while maintaining their anonymity. As discussed below, geography is increasingly out of step with transparency in other social sciences, even with qualitative work in anthropology, in hiding their sources and covering their studies with opaque and vague statements about how they approached the research.

Like other branches of human geography and identified as a wider disciplinary development over the past quarter-century (Rundstrom and Kenzer 1989), articles

based on fieldwork is the exception rather than the norm in the field of political geography. If we do not count visits to archives as fieldwork, less than about a quarter of research articles fit this category. The trend identified by Toal (2003) is visibly continuing in political geography. In a sense, we are abrogating our birthright, as the essays in Delyser and Starrs (2001) highlight. Multiple pressures and preferences could underlie this trend including a reduction in funding for field research, especially abroad; an obsession for textual analysis of easily accessible archival materials; a preference for an easier and less time-consuming path to publication without the necessary heavy burden of primary information compilation; or a penchant for the inevitable foregone deduction on the basis of the preferred theoretical trampoline. I suspect all these elements play a part. Skepticism about theory, methods, information and conclusions has been suspended and a new kind of order (self-reflexivity) dominates the political geography community. (For a critique of a different kind of "order", the spatial science one in geography in the 1960s and 1970s, see Szymanski and Agnew 1981).

In marked contrast to political science, psychology and economics, geography seems immune to the pressures to become more transparent in its research practices. The American Political Science Association (APSA) has launched the DA-RT (Data Access-Research Transparency) project, promoted by recent presidents of the association. It mandates that all papers published in 27 political science journals, both APSA outlets and other prominent ones, be supported by the data on which the paper is based and which must be placed in a publicly accessible depository before publication. The Initiative is motivated by three contemporary trends, viz. to be transparent about

scholarly integrity at a time when numerous abuses have become public, including an egregious case of falsified data on political preferences (Bohannon 2015; also see *RetractionWatch.com* which identifies 500-600 retractions in a year in scientific journals); to demonstrate that scholarship is buttressed on plausible and accepted research foundations; and to meet expectations from funding agencies and government agencies that are increasingly requiring transparency, including data depositions and management. While most political scientists have accepted the depository requirement, it has been opposed by non-quantitative scholars who believe it is not sensitive enough to the protection of human subjects and the complexities of qualitative information. Recognizing that qualitative work cannot be immune from these wider social pressures, NSF has funded a Qualitative Data Repository at Syracuse University (<https://qdr.syr.edu/about>) to develop procedures and guarantees for sharing such data (Elman and Kapiszewski, 2014; Lupia and Elman 2014).

Even within the necessary privacy protections balanced against the push towards data sharing, qualitative scholars could promote more transparency. Concerns about opaqueness in research practices motivated the editors of PG in 2015 to add a requirement for submission that authors had to identify all the support they received for the project, both monetary and non-monetary. (O'Loughlin *et al*, 2015). Much research reported in PG receives support for fieldwork from local non-governmental organizations and the line between research and advocacy is frequently unclear. Few authors are as forthright as Baird (2015, p. 62, fn 7), "Although I did not generally see my role as supporting indigeneity per se, I have worked in support of the rights of



upland minorities through developing alliances supportive of indigenous rights.” In many parts of the world, scholars need backing either from local groups or government agencies, including research permissions, but a clear declarative statement about this support should be an expectation in all articles.

The perils of the dearth of clear guidelines on data ethics, transparency and replication in our discipline were illustrated over a decade ago when I commented on the Beck (2003) paper that reported on the search for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. In the paper, the author claimed that he could not share the information that guided his conclusions since the matter was a matter of national security. My retort was that he is welcome to advise the Pentagon but that authors cannot publish in academic journals unless they are able to share such sensitive information (O’Loughlin, 2005). Beck’s (2005) reply was that some data are too sensitive to share when the political situation is so tense and hazardous. A DA-RT standard for geography journals would have stopped the original publication. Slow to move of its own volition, a standard is now being foisted on the discipline by external forces. The AAG ethics standards still fall short of those of ancillary disciplines, as is evident in the 'Oaxaca incident' (Voosen 2016) with claim and denial about informed consent in indigenous community mapping in Mexico (Agnew, 2010; Bryan, 2010; Herlihy, 2010).

An illustration of the intersection of public interest and social science research can be gaged from the success of the *Monkey Cage blog* at the *Washington Post*.<sup>4</sup> Starting out in 2007 as a modest effort to translate the arcane results of political science research into accessible texts for public readership, it moved to the *Washington Post* in

2013 and is now daily publishing 3-5 posts by academics, after editing by a professional journalist who is paid by a foundation grant. Political scientists now see the *Monkey Cage* as an important outlet for summarizing and highlighting interesting results from their research articles, as a fast way to share results especially survey data, or as a forum for informed commentary on current events. The blog posts now number over 2.5 million downloads per year with readership doubling during election seasons (Kafka, 2016). About 1840 authors wrote posts in the three years from October 2013 to October 2016 (Sides *et al* 2017). Since funding agencies, especially the politically pressured National Science Foundation, are now mandated to show the public value of the work they support, outreach that attracts the attention of the funders is now almost mandatory.

On the stage of public awareness, geography in the US is hardly visible. The AAG presidents yearly bemoan this invisibility (e.g. Murphy, 2006), seemingly as part of their obligations of office, and recurrent initiatives to promote the discipline as relevant to policy debates in the public eye (Murphy *et al* 2005) seem to drive straight into an informational cul-de-sac, if one judges the eventual impact. One measure of this invisibility is seen in the graph that plots for 5 year periods (since the founding of PG) from 1981-2015, the number of times each practitioner of peer social sciences is identified in stories in the *New York Times*, the most influential newspaper in the US. “Geographer” is noted only as a small fraction of “political scientist” and only “geologist” can be seen as approximately an equal, though its recent score is more than triple that

of “geographer”. All values, except geologist, go up over time, especially after the late 1990s, as the newspaper added many online stories and posts to its printed version.

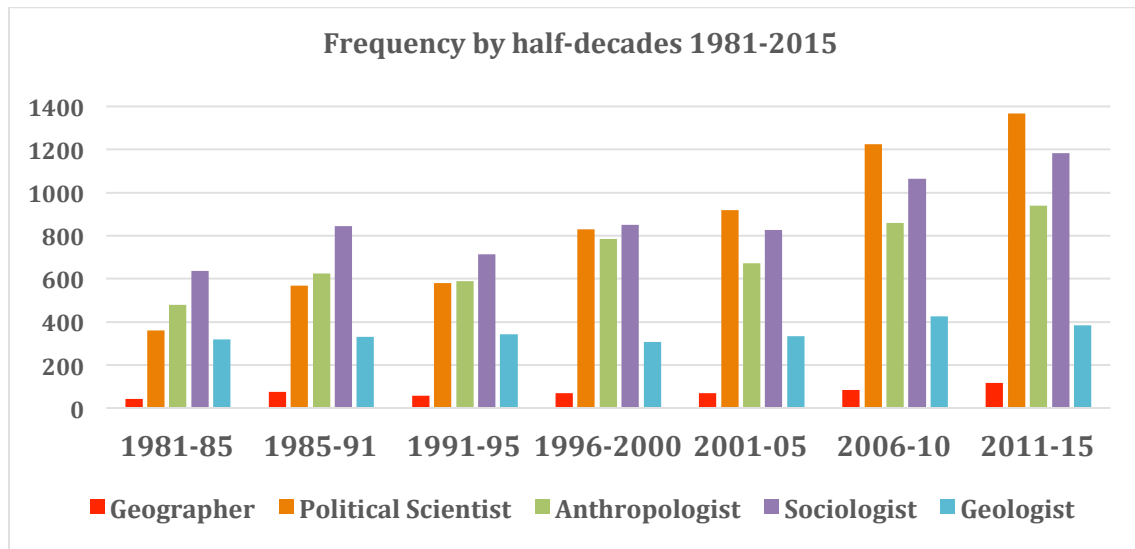


Figure 1: Frequency of terms for different social sciences and earth sciences by half-decades in the New York Times 1981-2015

Why are the values of “political scientist” on the graph more than ten times that of “geographer”?<sup>5</sup> And if one thinks that is an unfair comparator for geography, consider that the value for “economist” is seven times that of “political scientist”. One might attribute the relative standings to the sizes of the respective pool of disciplinary practitioners, though membership of the American Political Science Association at just over 13,000 is not much greater than AAG membership at just over 10,000. One could also attribute the difference in public recognition of expertise in the respective subjects, with elections especially drawing additional and focused attention to the musings of political scientists. But this attribution highlights the failure of geographers to comment authoritatively on subjects where they should show proficiency, such as about climate

change, environmental damage, international migration, voting preferences, regional disparities in income, and cultural landscape changes. Geography as a discipline and as the intellectual home of experts on these and other contemporary challenges is simply not on the radar of the journalists and editors at key media centers, the "gatekeepers" of the public interest

### Context as Canon: Bridging the political geography - political science divide<sup>6</sup>

I subsume this discussion under the "bad" category since the disciplinary divide and the "talking past each other" continues. Political scientists are discovering the value of mapping political phenomena as part of a recognition that graphical displays are both more accessible to readers and more attractive than alternative representations, such as tables or graphs. Ariotti and Crabtree (2016) counted a 250% increase in maps in the three general discipline journals from 2012 to 2014, though they disparaged the quality of the cartographic displays. They and King (1996) reiterate the argument made by Harold Sprout (1931), a prominent political scientist who dabbled in political geography, about the value of geographical knowledge as background to political research. This recognition of geographical methodologies unfortunately extends only to simple mapping or to removing the spatial dependency that is omnipresent in aggregate political units. "Geography" (an unfortunate choice of term that political scientists stereotype a lot) is viewed as a nuisance to be filtered away. (See Franzese and Hays, 2016 for a useful introduction of spatial methods for political scientists).

Almost two decades ago, I published a paper in which I claimed that the divide between the disciplines of political science and political geography was large due to divergent disciplinary emphases and norms (O'Loughlin, 2000). If anything, this gap has widened in the intervening years despite the efforts of a small handful of individuals, especially Ron Johnston and John Agnew in geography, and a larger cadre of conflict researchers in political science, to bridge the divide by paying close attention to the methods, theories, and literature in the other discipline and by publishing in its journals.

Setting aside issues of quality and proper research design and analysis, the main reason why papers from political scientists did not get accepted in *Political Geography* during my tenure as editor was due to their narrow and outmoded conception of space. A typical decision was a desk rejection. These submissions were no different in average quality than others that were reviewed and/or accepted and probably would have a higher success rate in a journal with a broader remit. But a political geography journal obviously has a goal and an orientation that demands attention to its tenets. The issue then revolves around the definition of these tenets.

Editors can be accused – often with reason – of disciplining authors by summarily rejecting works as outside the remit of their journals and by dismissing authors as not appreciating key concepts in a certain manner. (For more on this, see Häkli, 2003). To be fair to those outside the discipline, trying to grasp the essence of political geography is a protean task because of our pluralist bent and the apparently-chaotic contents of the journal. Unless authors make a sincere effort to engage with the perspectives and literature of the discipline to which they wish to contribute, it should not be surprising

that their submissions will be harshly judged. In the case of political geography, unfortunately, many outside the discipline continue to hold a spatial analytic view that, in its most extreme form, has evolved into what I have called "political geometry". This is a Cartesian coordinate approach that privileges "space" to the detriment of "place" in understanding the geography of politics.

The distinction between space and place has been extensively discussed and debated in human geography for the past three decades. It harks back to the debates in Anglo-American geography in the 1950s and 1960s whether the discipline should emphasize and study the complexity and unique features of the Earth's human and physical mosaic (its traditional niche in the academic institutions) or whether it should become more scientific, concerned with comparison, generalization and nomothetic emphases (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016). This distinction will be familiar to scholars of comparative politics and it was especially tetchy after the end of the Communist regimes in the early 1990s. Place has taken on the aura of exceptionality while space retains the appearance of connectivity exemplified in idioms like spatial relations, spatial dependency, spatial filtering, spatial contiguity or spatial distance. It is this latter trait of geography that has found an audience among political scientists who want to consider spatial analytical methods in their toolkit.

Arguments for the meaning of places and regions for understanding human activities and attitudes have been evident in geography for decades (Murphy and O'Loughlin, 2009). According to Johnston's framing of the regional project, regions are constantly engaged in the processes of self-reproduction, context-definition, autonomy-

definition, resource structure and conflict-mediation. This does not equate to the kind of search of proper and accurate regional definitions that consumed human geography before the 1960s but as Johnston reasoned (1991, 67), we do not need regional geography but we do need regions in geography.

There is little doubt, however, that spatial analysis is a minority camp in political geography despite increasingly sophisticated investigative tools and a methodological orientation to generalization. Among the contents in a major recent review of the field in Agnew *et al.* 2015, only one chapter (Linke and O'Loughlin 2015b) of thirty-seven is allocated to this approach. Like political science, the chasm between quantitative and qualitative research is getting wider. Unlike political science, the majority of work in political geography can properly be categorized as qualitative. Since the "cultural turn" of the late 1970s/early 1980s, human geography including political geography has been more similar to cultural anthropology and most researchers have turned decisively away from spatial statistical analysis. If one were to summarize the disciplines in caricatures, one could claim with substantiation from the papers published in the respective journals that political geography is becoming more like anthropology in its devotion to detailed ethnographies as political science is becoming more like economics with emphasis on formal theory and statistical modeling. Ironically, this development happened simultaneously to a powerful integration of spatial analytical methods into geographical information science, especially in the advancement of user-friendly software that allows a ready cartographic display of the coefficients and values (Goodchild *et al.* 2000).

Spatial analysts in political geography are caught uncomfortably in the middle since they diverge from the dominant view in political science that seeks generalization and relationships that hold in all settings as geographers remain interested in local and sub-national trends. In this respect, we have a lot in common with our disciplinary colleagues who follow a qualitative approach and a focus on the local. Most and Starr's (2015) promotion of domain-specific laws in the study of international relations is the closest that quantitative political scientists have come to this view. Geographers generally abhor pure fixed effects modeling (with one predictor and one outcome) of geographically-based information that is now *de rigeur* in economics and political science. This methodology is focused on controlling for unknown and even unknowable factors that complicate the bivariate test of the key relationship of interest so that the models contain dozens or even hundreds of dummy variables for the geographic units in an aggregate study or for individuals in a survey. It is the complications and heterogeneities that are controlled in fixed effects models that motivate our geographic work and our interest in local nuances.

The difference in mentality between the emphasis on a general model of political behavior and a more complex one was evident two decades ago in the difference of opinion between Agnew (1996) and King (1996). In modern statistical language, King's disapproval of geographers' fixation on context was the common critique of omitted variable bias. While the technical repair of fixed effects modeling might resolve this bias to the satisfaction of political methodologists, it erases the lure of places and the meaning of regions that drives our discipline. Agnew (1996) argued



for examination of a "thick or strong" context approach that considers macro-social processes such as the effects of economic dislocations on communities, the nature of government responses, and historical political traditions, including separatism or autonomy demands. Study of these processes is likely to require a more-than-statistical modeling approach or at least, a search for archival and similar material that would not be typically available in census or other governmental records, a "historical-geographical approach" according to Agnew (1996). King (1996) and other political scientists do not reject the possibility of contextual effects that complicate the usual socio-demographic or ideological predictors of political behavior but adopt what could be called a "weak" contextual view. Often they attribute such effects to friends and neighbors or other social contacts (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995) and increasingly in the US, an outcome of the self-preferences that motivate people to seek out others with similar preferences and socio-political profiles (Gimpel and Hui, 2015; Tam Cho, Gimpel and Hui, 2013).

But if context has remained a mantra in political geography (at least amongst some of us), how do we measure its importance? What spatial or distance range around the point of interest should we use? Let's suppose the point is a voter's residence. What is his/her neighborhood or social milieu that is comprised of networks of friends and neighbors? What about non-neighborhood influences such as workplaces or even recreational spots? The lack of precision and measurable quantities on these matters has bedeviled spatial analysis and frustrated political scientists trying to get to grips with what is increasingly accepted as an identifiable omitted variable - a knowable unknown in the parlance of Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>7</sup>

The demarcation of context is generally understood to be a specific case of MAUP (Modifiable Areal Unit Problem) in geography. Depending on the scale of analysis and the chosen aggregation of smaller spatial units into larger ones, the statistical results can vary greatly as first highlighted by Openshaw and Taylor (1979). In an empirical example of attitudes about violence in the North Caucasus of Russia, the regression coefficients for the context measure (amount of violence in the respondent's locality) varied a lot depending on the distance metric used to define his/her context. More noteworthy, the choice of a distance metric - as for a control measure, for example - changed the coefficients for other predictors from insignificant to highly significant (Linke and O'Loughlin 2015a). In a similar vein, "bespoke neighborhoods" that Ron Johnston and colleagues (Johnston *et al*, 2007) constructed by to effectively measure the friends-and-neighbors effect in electoral choices by matching small areal census data to survey respondent residences. These bespoke context data now accompany individual survey data in British Election Studies.

No doubt these examples are frustrating for researchers who are searching for generalizable results for individuals whose demographic characteristics are present in survey data but viewed another way, they can be the beginning of a different style of work. Understanding why a confined geographic range is more important than a wider definition in affecting political attitudes and why the effects are heterogeneous across a region probes the implications of place effects. Geographers hold that the uneven patterns of such effects should be examined with an eye to appreciating historically contingent processes that transpire in places (Pred 1984). A similar emphasis on

“articulations of social relations... which are not only internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere” (Massey, 1995, 182) in a historical context runs through the writings of geographers who elaborate the concept of place. What should be especially noted is that places are never non-dynamic, isolated, or singular in their character.

While not all political geographers are enamored by the lure of place as a disciplinary marker, there remains general dissatisfaction with the unchallenged acceptance in political science of existing borders and territorial lines. John Agnew (1994) refers to this as the "territorial trap" that is predicated on three assumptions, namely, states as fixed units of sovereign space, the polarity between domestic and foreign affairs, and a view of states as containers of societies, an especially dubious assumption in a globalized world. The original article was written as an invective against the mainstream IR perspective in a world where fixities were collapsing and the territorial trap critique has been broadened to motivate scholars to question the immutability of borders and lines, to understand the effects of political-territorial divisions on the lives of citizens, to study the historical circumstances that led to a particular formation, and the political uses of borders.

Most political geographers agree with those who chastise mainstream IR and quantitative political science for its narrow consideration of national security as the critics want to extend the usual military and economic definitions to include such subjects as environmental, food, health, and human rights. A broader view would consider a larger variety of actors beyond states to include NGO's, and post-positivist perspectives to include feminist and other critical ones. Fifty-nine percent of US scholars

of international relations (47% worldwide) characterize themselves as "positivists" according to a recent survey (Maliniak *et al.* 2012). My sense is that the ratio of "post-positivists" and "non-positivists" in political geography is much higher than the respective values (21% and 20%) in this survey. In political science more broadly, between one-fifth and one-third of articles in the main journals in the US and UK adopt a non-positive perspective (Marsh and Savigny, 2004), a much lower ratio that one typically sees in the geography journals that include PG.

Expected common interests between political geographers and political sciences are undermined by different principal epistemologies. A common ground is a considered re-evaluation of the variable importance of context for different research topics. Most extant studies have examined electoral choices in Western democratic settings. It is past time to extend the research into other domains and world regions.

### THE UGLY

What's goes on behind the editorial decisions of journals is often not transparent to authors, especially younger scholars. In the past, editors retained a great deal of autonomy and were relatively immune from external stresses. This is no longer true in this era of electronic dissemination and pressures to publish emanating from rating bodies. Two developments, one that is manageable and one that seems increasingly out of control, face journals like PG.

The out of control development concerns the pressures to publish and the incentives to commercial publishers to rush to print. Because the incentives to the individual and to publishers to get papers into print are substantial and because the

incentives to contribute to the academic public good by reviewing are nearly non-existent, the combination results in both lengthy review processes and then an expedited rush to online publication. Elden (2008) and Hay (2015) have already explained the difficulties facing editors who are compensated in a near derisory manner for their grind. Some publishers, including Elsevier, have taken the sequencing of articles, the compilation of issues and the timing of the publications out of the hands of editors. Despite protests by the editors of PG over the past decade, the physical appearance of the journal and the specific way that papers are selected for publication have been standardized to Elsevier production formats without regard to the specific interests of editors and authors of individual journals. The unseemly haste to rush to publication has pushed aside production standards and even standardized referencing since hyperlinks are expected to be more useful and accessible than a lengthy bibliographic entry. Academics have examined (Coombes, Moore and Breau, 2017) and pushed back against the growing control of the research publication activity, the enormous profits of commercial companies, the sloppy production standards, and the attendant costs of accessing articles by supporting open access. It appears that despite protests, the current model will remain due to government policies that have essentially caved into the publishers' interests. Only the length of the embargo on papers behind paywalls seems to be open to discussion and decision. We should continue to push for as short an embargo as possible, say six months for social science journals.

A second worry is the avowedly politicization of academic research. A "political" journal like Political Geography will always attract politically-motivated papers. Many

authors cannot seem to distinguish between their own ideological predilections and what should constitute scholarly work where conclusions and opinions are supported by evidence. PG receives many submissions which are not much different than a personal blog post or an op-ed in a newspaper. The journal obviously wishes to publish research on important contemporary political subjects and thankfully, none of the egregiously biased submissions made it to print. In a similar manner, editors have to be on guard regarding the return of evidently-biased reviews. PG was in the newspaper headlines in 2002 when an editor refused to consider a submission from Israeli authors in the early days of the academic boycott. This action provoked widespread comment and stories on major international broadcast and print media (Beckett, 2002). The event allowed the editors and publisher to certify the openness of the journal to all authors, regardless of provenance (O'Loughlin 2004), though US regulations prevent editors in the US from handling submissions from Iranian government institutions. The incident continues to resonate in light of calls for academic boycott of Israel and the arguments made in the journal's pages 2004-05 are still relevant (Slater, 2004; Storey, 2005; Waterman, 2005) PG must continue to carefully guard against bias and ideology perverting the pluralist and scholarly reputation that it has built up but that it could so easily lose due to one careless decision. By its title and its scope, PG will likely remain the target of potentially biased research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 1982 editorial essay was clear in its pursuit of a pluralist scope for the new journal. “This essay does not profess to define a new orthodoxy. In fact, we argue for quite the opposite ...The most healthy aspect of the recent growth in political geography has been its pluralism (Editorial essay, 1982, 2). Given the setting of this lecture in San Francisco, close to the city across the bay, Oakland, it is appropriate to consider the Gertrude Stein analogy. When asked about Oakland, she supposedly said “there is no there there.” What is the “there” in political geography? Or do many ‘theres’ sit uncomfortably within the fuzzy dimensions of the field? The easy answer is to claim that it does not matter as “political geography is what political geographers do”.

Unfortunately, it now matters more than ever given the increased competition for resources between departments within academic institutions and the pressures to be relevant and vocational. As I have shown, geography in the US has a very low profile and there is no reservoir of knowledge or good will to the discipline as there is to other school subjects to which students have been exposed. Even the most well-known exponent of geography in the US, the National Geographic Society<sup>8</sup>, has been advised in focus groups to change its name because “geography is so old-fashioned.” The centrifugal tendencies in the geography discipline have reached the point where the core subjects, if they ever really were substantive, are so diluted with few researchers in each specialty that coherence is seemingly now unattainable.

At the Los Angeles meetings in 2002, panelists in the forum on “political geography in question” offered thoughtful commentaries on the direction of the field (Low, 2003). None of the challenges identified then have been resolved; in all

probability, there is even less consensus now that there is a reason to alter current trajectories. If everyone is "doing their own thing" so to speak, the options for producing a cumulative and sustainable body of work on any subject are very narrow. Impacts can be more forceful if argument is bolstered by evidence and research is replicated, especially in different settings where the underlying regional distinctions that lead to different outcomes are studied. Unfortunately, such a style, is seen in other social sciences, remains an uncomfortable fit in political geography.

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## Notes



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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.

<sup>2</sup> Some papers reported different kinds of information, typically both government documents and interviews. I used a generous measure for interview data and if the paper was based on any interview material, formal or informal, I counted it in the 'qualitative data' category. The content of the journal for 2016 is similar in relative composition of the kinds of papers categorized here.

<sup>3</sup> Almost all political scientists who submitted to PG during my editorial term examined quantitative data. Few papers came from the critical IR or other post-positive perspectives in that discipline. When I am comparing political geographers and political scientists, I am using these PG submission data.

<sup>4</sup> With Gerard Toal, I have written 6 posts for the *Monkey Cage* blog between 2014 and 2016. It was his initiative that allowed our entry into the blog that is written almost exclusively by political scientists.

<sup>5</sup> "Political geographer" is only found 4 times between 1981 and 2015, two of these referring to Saul Cohen who was also prominent in New York state education circles.

<sup>6</sup> Much of this section is a fuller version of a piece titled "Space and place in political geography" (*Comparative Politics* newsletter pages 90-92) that I wrote for a symposium on the "Politics of Space."

[http://comparativenewsletter.com/files/archived\\_newsletters/newsletter\\_spring2016.pdf](http://comparativenewsletter.com/files/archived_newsletters/newsletter_spring2016.pdf). Thanks to the editor Matt Golder for allowing this modification and publication.

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<sup>7</sup> Former US Defense Secretary who said on 12 February, 2002 that "because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." (Transcript of Defense Department News Conference, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>)

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication from a National Geographic Society officer November 2014. In the interest of full disclosure, I have served on the National Geographic Society's Grants Program Committee from 2010 to 2018.