

More drilling, more transparency and less skipping; A reply to the commentators

John O'Loughlin

Institute of Behavioral Science University of Colorado Boulder, CO 80309

*johnno@colorado.edu*

*Published in **POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY** 65 (2018), 158-160.*

I understand that it was difficult to comment on all the kvetching about the state of political geography and the character of *Political Geography* (the journal) that I included in the plenary lecture (O'Loughlin, 2018). My thanks therefore to the commentators for picking up on some elements of my dismay and they respectively elaborate and improve on them (Toal) and challenge them (Secor and Jackson). I think that we all four agree that the sub-discipline is both a more dynamic and interesting subject area than it was almost 50 years ago, when I first encountered it. I was disheartened then at its lack of vitality and quality, despite the potential contribution of sound research on the fundamental issues that have been continuous from those long-ago years to contemporary times (civil rights, US foreign engagements, etc.). I believe that the gap between what's possible in political geography and what is currently being achieved is still wide, as we remain small in number, secluded in the academic and the public domains, and continue to pursue research in incoherent and incoherent ways.

Answering two former students (Anna Secor and Gerard Toal) is a bit like reverse graduate examinations; the examiner is now the examinee. Secor's comments are more critical than Toal's and focus on the qualitative-quantitative gulf, the "let the hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" (Mao Zedong) mentality that pervades contemporary Anglo-American geography, as well as the changed epistemologies and higher diversity of branded political geographers. Toal helpfully extends my argument about the case for public engagement in the face of increased public skepticism about the

nature, emphases, and the cost of academic research, a prerogative now viewed as an opportunity cost at the expense of teaching. Patrick Jackson comments from the joint position of a political scientist and an international studies scholar and overlaps in his characterization of the DA-RT (Data Access -Research Transparency) initiatives with Secor as a "disciplining" mechanism and a scientific model that fits uneasily with the trends in political geography (and human geography more generally).

On Toal's elaboration of my argument for more public visibility for political geographic work and his identification of some areas where geographers are engaged in policy work, it is helpful to remember the same debate played out in the pages of *Professional Geographer* decades ago. In response to a re-initiation of the possible policy engagement from then Association of American Geographers president, Gilbert White (1972), Harvey (1974) asked the pertinent question "what kind of geography for what kind of public policy?", a query that has popped up periodically in our prominent journals (Abler, 1987; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005; Barcus and Trudeau, 2018). No definitive answers are possible given the diversity of the geographic discipline, the proclivities and ideologies of the participants, and the varied monetary and academic incentives. I'm generally leery of policy avocation as I typically question the writer's motives, the quality of the evidence (and lack of evidence), the choices made in framing and carrying off the research, and the disregard or dismissal of alternative explanations by the engaged academic. Clarifying for Jackson, I don't naïvely trust that a post on the *Monkey Cage* blog will change any policies (nor would I want that) but I think a middle-ground can be reached by translating our work into accessible readings that can inform the public about the dimensions and complexities of the decisions that they are asked to support or oppose. Of course, the public response is often hostile (for example, in the comments on the blog posts) since academic nuances sit uncomfortably with obdurate (geo)political preferences.

International Studies (IS) also boomed and diversified at the same time and at about the same pace as political geography. Jackson is correct when he notes a similar absence of core concept coherence as I believe to be the case for political geography. Like political geography, the International Study Association (ISA) meetings have balkanized over the past 25 years or now incorporate all sorts of panels that would have been classified in the past as comparative politics, area studies, critical theory, as well as formal models and

international relations which dominated sessions a generation ago. The call for proposals for the 2019 ISA meeting in Toronto lists as one of the "Reinvisioning Questions" the contemporary conundrum: "How do we re-envision International Studies and its thematic subfields? Are there more integrative and inclusive ontological and epistemological possibilities that do not compromise diversity?" The attractions of a diverse line-up is that there is something for everyone and in that sense, the ISA meetings parallel *Political Geography*, the journal.

Jackson is commenting from a position that straddles political science and international studies and seems to be critical of the former because of its methods fetish and admiring of the latter because of its pluralism. I too wish that political scientists did not adhere to such an inflexible, instinctive formula for presenting results in their journals (and when they submit to *Political Geography*) - formal theories, 2-3 hypotheses and sub-hypotheses, statistical models (woe betide the author who might have endogeneity in the model), and lots of checks for robustness in model formulation and data alternatives. But at least, such an approach accompanied by data deposition encourages replication, extension, and accumulation of results that can build towards a clear conclusion regarding some important political questions. In geography, including its political sub-discipline, kudos are more likely for research in some under-researched location, "discovery" and elaboration of the benefits to the topic of some theorist (preferably not well known to geographers), and intensive use of archives. Typically, little substantial fieldwork supports arguments, assertions, claims, declarations, and conclusions. Contra Secor's critiques, I wish that there was more substantial ethnographic work and that authors would be more expansive in their accounts of the substance of the evidence (including data deposition and online appendices). I reject methodological conformism but I am catholic in data collection approaches and article presentation styles.

None of the commentators picked up on my identification of "context" as a possible bridge between political geography and political science. Though it remains a slippery concept to insert into the usual methods of political science, I remain convinced that context matters a lot in our attempts to understand political behavior, from electoral choices in stable democracies to the gamut of violent actions across the world and in its regions. As well as the methods' challenges, Mike Ward has correctly mused that

geographer's preference for nuance in the form of context definition and understanding of its variable meaning sits uncomfortably in a discipline (political science) that privileges generalization and theory. "For political geographers, the context, often local context, matters more substantially than does the general proposition. As a result, explanations may be so contextualized that some have argued that social science should give up on wide-ranging generalizations. As a result, a class of models and approaches have built up to take into account these contexts (Ward & O'Loughlin, 2002). If context is king, what is theory?"(Ward, 2017)

Anna Secor is understandably aggravated that new expectations by funding agencies and publication outlets for full explication of data collection procedures and deposition of qualitative data will require a lot more time for data management as well as anonymization of interviewees - with probably little benefit to anyone. But as the well-known story of the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead's illustrates, her conclusions about adolescent sex behaviors among islanders in Samoa was later called a "hoax" by Freeman (1997) after re-examination of her notes and further interviews with her informants from the 1920s. "(After being) grossly hoaxed by her Samoan informants, and Mead, in her turn, by convincing others of the "genuineness" of her account of Samoa, completely misinformed and misled virtually the entire anthropological establishment, as well as the intelligentsia at large" (Freeman, 1997, 68). Freeman's characterization of Mead's work, a bombshell in cultural anthropology, was later challenged by Shankman (2009, 2013) who supported Mead after careful reading of both Mead's and Freeman's interview materials with the key informants. Jackson can castigate the DA-RT requirements as "disciplining" into a science model of replication and verification but I welcome it.<sup>1</sup> At a minimum, it will require researchers to be more careful with their data collection, their field conduct (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018), and perhaps be more modest in their conclusions that are often extended beyond the basis of questionable

---

<sup>1</sup> Another form of "disciplining" seems to be gaining traction in political science as the use of "positive words" in articles has risen four-fold over the past few decades, mimicking the use of such terminology in the sciences and also, seemingly increasing the odds of acceptance of the submission (Weidmann, Otto and Kawerau, 2018).

information. Like it or not, more transparent procedures and information are coming (Martin and Peterson, 2016).

My plenary lecture argued for transparency in both the article elements (data, conclusions and so on) and the author's motivations, funding, non-financial backing, and related considerations. Unlike medical and other scientific journals, financial conflicts-of-interest are rarely important in political geography but many articles implicitly (and sometimes openly) advocate certain strategies and political positions. Scientific journals are now more cognizant of such non-financial interests and *Nature* and Nature Research journals have now implemented new rules about their disclosure (*Nature* 2018). I would like to see a similar policy in geography journals so that authors can be judged not only on their research but also whether their conclusions are warranted and believable in light of other background factors. I hope we can all agree on such openness.

## References

Abler, R. F. (1987). What shall we say? To whom shall we speak? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77 (4), 511-524

Barcus, H. & D. Trudeau (2018). "Introduction to Focus Section: Out in the world: Geography's complex relationship with civic engagement." *Professional Geographer* 70 (2), 270-276.

Cronin-Furman, K. & Lake, M. (2018). Ethics abroad: Fieldwork in fragile and violent contexts. *PS: Political Science and Politics*. doi:10.1017/S1049096518000379

Harvey, D. (1974). What kind of geography for what kind of public policy? *Transactions of the Institute of Geographers* 63 (1), 18-24

Martin, E. & Petersen, J. (2016). Most political scientists will have to change their habits when the new transparency standards start - as of this month. *Monkey Cage blog, Washington Post*, January 4. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey->

[cage/wp/2016/01/04/most-political-scientists-will-have-to-change-their-habits-when-the-new-transparency-standards-start-as-of-this-month/](https://www.nature.com/news/cage/wp/2016/01/04/most-political-scientists-will-have-to-change-their-habits-when-the-new-transparency-standards-start-as-of-this-month/)

*Nature* (2018). Editorial: Outside interests - Nature Research journals will ask authors to declare non-financial interests. *Nature* 554 (February 1), 6.

Shankman, P. (2009). *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Shankman, P. (2013). The “fateful hoaxing” of Margaret Mead: A cautionary tale. *Current Anthropology* 54 (1). 51-70

Staehele L.A. & Mitchell, D. (2005). The complex politics of relevance in geography. *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 95 (2), 357-372.

Ward, M.D. (2017). Do we have too much theory in International Relations or do we need less? Waltz was wrong, Tetlock was right . In W. R. Thompson, ed. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.301.

Ward, M.D. and O'Loughlin, J. (2002). Spatial processes and political methodology: Introduction to the special issue. *Political Analysis* 10(3), 211–216.

Weidmann, N.B, Otto, S. & Kawerau, L. (2018). The use of positive words in political science language. *PS: Political Science and Politics*. doi:10.1017/S1049096518000124

White, G.F. (1973). Geography and public policy. *Professional Geographer* 24 (2), 101-104.