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Editorial

Where the tradition meets its challengers

Political geography is now beginning to reflect the underlying conflict endemic to the politics of the societies it studies. This inevitably leads to the employment of very different assumptions in theory and model-building and it is in this realm of activity that modern political geography departs most fully from its one-dimensional heritage.

– Editorial essay (1982: 2).

A reading of the contents and directions from the first issue of *Political Geography* in 1982 to the present is an instructive journey. It shows how *Political Geography* has been broad from the outset. The reading also reveals what political geographers have done well, what they perhaps could have done better, what items listed in 1982 they have ignored or neglected, and what concerns them in a given time or place. What one concludes is, of course, largely a matter of taste and custom. A pessimist reads complaints about the fuzzy focus of the discipline as evidence of a crisis. A lack of an agreement among the practitioners of political geography about what *really* is important thus constitutes a weakness. From an optimist's perspective, each entry that has shed light on little explored or previously dismissed approaches has contributed to a field in the making. Here, opportunity sprouts from diversity. One may argue that the pessimist and the optimist can happily live together.

Reviewing the contents of this journal since it began as *Political Geography Quarterly* in January of 1982, [Stanley Waterman \(1998: 387\)](#) concludes that:

“[c]onceivably there is still a lack of focus in the new political geography. Though this may arguably frustrate the more doctrinaire members of the discipline concerned with dogma, it is still, in general, to be welcomed. The papers in *Political Geography* reflect this diffuse situation.”

This openness to diversity as stated in the initial editorial essay has since been reaffirmed ([O'Loughlin & Slater, 2001](#)). As a result, over the years compelling and fascinating research themes have been added to political geography. Many of the directions suggested for research in the 1982 editorial essay have been well researched. Others have fallen by the wayside in the context of changing times in academia and global politics. New themes and twists have emerged, pushing disciplinary boundaries and building contacts between geography and other disciplines. Outcomes include diversity, multivocality, interdisciplinarity, and an increasingly international scope. Feminism; political ecology; queer studies; academic, ethno-linguistic,

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and social peripheries; and quotidian, ‘small’ topics have accompanied ‘big’ politics and the masculinist mainstream on the pages of *Political Geography*. The journal has become widely read and cited in other disciplines, especially in political science, which gives it quite a unique niche amongst geographical journals. No wonder then that *Political Geography* moved from a quarterly publication rhythm to eight issues per year (see Taylor, 1992). The journal has consistently been, and remains, the leading publication in its field, even if other specialist journals now successfully share this interest in the spatial dimensions of politics.

One can justifiably say that political geography is “in fine institutional health” (Flint, 2003: 617), if measured through the visibility of the field in major conferences, institutionalization (journals, specialty groups, and professorships), academic curricula, and textbook markets. These developments are not limited to one particular country – nor might they even be so crucial in disciplinary progress (Painter, 2003). Arguably, political geography seems more vibrant and visible than ever. In some countries, this vibrancy has seldom been questioned. In other cases the return of political geography from obscurity to limelight has been dramatic. Anssi Paasi, for example, wrote in 1990 in the series about “Political Geography around the World” that “[r]ecent international trends in political geography have not yet reached Finland” (Paasi, 1990: 63). Now the status and future of political geography in that country look quite different. But what steers the course of an academic discipline in a particular place and what can one learn from it?

Most political geographers in their discipline’s North American and European core still know fairly little about the evolution of political geographies in relative peripheries. Recent commentaries suggest that an increasing number of scholars want to challenge the hegemony of the English language in political geography and, more generally, learn from other and, perhaps, alternative academic practices. According to this view the long-standing prominence of “a US–UK configuration” (Mamadouh, 2003: 667) also narrows the base of political–geographical thought and obscures “the situated basis of its claims and vantage-point” (Sidaway, 2008: 51). Unless diverse realms are brought together “parochial knowledge” continues to be “created in universal form” (Robinson, 2003: 648).

So how to encourage and facilitate fresh contacts and kick political geography further toward “a global perspective” (Perry, 1987: 6)? What can be done to let more information seep through the barriers around, and within, the dominant “Knowledge-Publishing complex” (Robinson, 2003: 648)? After all, it is political geographers – supposedly a globally mobile lot with access to latest communication technologies and training in cross-culturally ethical fieldwork – who make political geography, its politics, and its policies.

The additions to the editorial team, board, and mission of *Political Geography* are a sincere attempt to steer the emphasis from talking toward doing. A new Associate Editor brings in more know-how about the production and publishing of knowledge from beyond the current mainstream and predominant linguistic realm. She also expands the linguistic competence and networks of the editorial team. The recently appointed Editorial Board members likewise add to the cultural and disciplinary networks and knowledge supporting the journal. These (and future) opportunities are acknowledged in the journal’s modified mission statement (on this and future issue mastheads and the website), the update of which was based on a consultation with the Editorial Board. It is the mission of *Political Geography* to simultaneously build on tradition and explicitly recognize the field’s diversification and strengthen new research directions. When the journal was founded 26 years ago, the time was ripe, and “*Political Geography* was planted into already fertile ground” (Minghi, 2002: 742).

So: What ways forward now? In part, more of the same – but more than that. Open-minded curiosity, development of cross-cultural and linguistic skills, and the sharing of responsibilities

in diverse networks offer possible routes to ease the exchange of ideas between cores, peripheries, and “concentric circles” (Häkli, 2003: 660). This steers attention to the current practices and future training of political geographers. By way of example, a critical assessment of one’s own networks every now and then can be a refreshing experience: Do I always collaborate, and hang out with, the same people in the same places? What are my linguistic and cultural competencies and how do these affect what I do? A critical evaluation and positioning of one’s self as a scholar and one’s networking practices is likely to have a positive impact on the teaching of political geographies (Raento, 2002). Cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary networks are difficult to maintain without regional knowledge, commitment to fieldwork, and linguistic skills (Toal, 2003), which need conscious support. But these skills may not always help to counter other “politics of political geography” (Mamadouh, 2003), which demands a closer look. The observation that “where you write from makes a big difference” (Häkli, 2003: 660), applies beyond writing.

A (self-) critical review of practices and policies needs the company of tough ethical questions. Some of these questions imply disciplinary maturation and closely resemble questions often asked in politics. What are the responsibilities of individuals and institutions in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural exchanges? Do, or should, they differ from one place to another – and why so? Is ‘equality’ automatically a top value and what supports or contradicts each possible answer? Does, can, or should the pursuit of new contacts affect contemporary academic standards, how, and why? How do representatives of the centre avoid patronizing, tokenism, and double standards (Mamadouh, 2003: 667)? How do the representatives of relative peripheries negotiate new or existing power structures, exclusion, and matters of self-confidence (Minca, 2003; Raento, 2004, 2005)? Where shall these intercultural – and intertraditional – discussions about academic practices, policies, and politics meet? As Juliet Fall’s (2007) recent survey of French-language political geography indicates, such questions are also being asked in that linguistic sphere.

We aim to learn by doing more – for example, by addressing these tough questions beyond the increasingly commonplace statements about the need to cross-conventional boundaries. There is no reason to abandon the optimism of the journal’s first Editorial essay (1982) despite challenges. *Political Geography* offers a space for innovation, whilst also continuing to be a forum for a variety of ‘traditional’ themes in political geography.

With its wide range of authors and readers and with the vital assistance of the Editorial Board and reviewers, *Political Geography* continues to be “the meeting place” (Taylor, 1992: 6) for the best work from established traditions and novel interdisciplinary, innovative, and international approaches. The experience will continue to be instructive, exciting, and, at times, annoying, inconvenient, and contested – like learning and politics tend to be.

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