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## Politics, Geography and Political Geography

### What is this thing called politics?

#### Politics matters!

There is an ancient Chinese curse that runs: 'may you live in interesting times'. Cursed or not, from a political point of view life today is certainly interesting. Great political changes have swept the globe in the past 25 years. In 1984, when Joe began studying geography at university, the world was in the depths of the 'new cold war'. The hawkish Ronald Reagan had just been re-elected for a second term as President of the USA. In Moscow, it seemed to be business as usual. Konstantin Chernenko emerged as the latest in a succession of Soviet leaders determined to remain true to the traditions of Soviet state socialism. The global military order organized around NATO and the Warsaw Pact was intact, with the USA in the process of deploying nuclear-armed cruise missiles in Western Europe in the name of 'collective security'. The radical right-wing doctrines of monetarism and free-market economics that had been enthusiastically adopted by the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the USA and the UK had yet to generate much support in other industrialized capitalist countries. In China, just ten years on from the end of the Cultural Revolution, economic reform was well under way, but there was as yet no hint of the lengths to which the Communist Party would go to maintain political control. While Eastern Europe, including the then Yugoslavia, remained politically stable, in other parts of the world, civil unrest or civil war were much in evidence. In South Africa, with no sign that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison, the struggle against apartheid was intensifying. In central America the US-backed military campaign against the reformist Sandinista government in Nicaragua was in full swing.

By 1995, when the first edition of this book appeared<sup>1</sup> (and coincidentally when Alex began studying geography at university), it seemed as if the world had been turned upside down. Nelson Mandela had been elected President of South Africa following the dismantling of apartheid and the ending of white minority rule. The USSR no longer existed. In Eastern Europe, ethnic conflicts were dramatically fragmenting the political map. The Warsaw Pact has been

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dissolved. For a few brief months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 there was serious talk about the possibility of a 'New World Order'. The privatizing radicalism of the Thatcher governments caught on throughout Europe, despite the departure from office of Mrs Thatcher herself. Meanwhile, in Tiananmen Square it became dramatically clear that free-market reforms in China were emphatically not to be extended to liberalization of political life. In Nicaragua, after years of conflict with the USA, the Sandinista government was voted out of office.

The political world of 2008 is dramatically different again and in ways quite unforeseen in 1995. On 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks instigated by radical Islamists associated with Osama bin Laden's 'Al-Qaeda' network killed 3,000 people in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania. The American government responded by launching a so-called 'war on terror'. Although there is no evidence of Iraqi government involvement in the 2001 attacks, the 'war on terror' included a full-scale US-led invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein, and the American occupation of the country. Afghanistan, where bin Laden was based, was also attacked and occupied. Despite the installation of nominally democratic governments in both countries, at the time of writing the occupations are continuing. In Europe, most of the former state socialist countries have joined the European Union. Neo-liberal economics forms an international policy orthodoxy. China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics has galvanized opposition to its policies in Tibet. Human-induced climate change is widely recognized as the most urgent long-term political issue and a threat to the survival of the human species. Meanwhile, in Central America, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega is once again President of Nicaragua.

Recent political change has certainly been profound and dramatic, but also paradoxical. Politics has never been so important, yet, at the same time it has never been so unpopular. Almost every week sees another newspaper article or television feature on the distrust and contempt with which the public in many countries regard their elected representatives. There seems to be an increasing perception, in the West at least, that governments simply no longer have the power to influence events in the way that they once did (or at least claimed to). Governments frequently claim that global economic forces are shaping their national economies, and there is relatively little that they can do to intervene. While this is partly used to explain the failure of policy, it is certainly the case that economic processes do flow across international boundaries as never before, limiting the capacity of any one government to affect their direction. This has led to new kinds of relationships between governments as they try to regain control. The growth of the European Union, for example, and the setting up of a North American Free Trade Area are, in part, attempts to exert political influence over economic affairs at a wider geographical scale than that of the nation-state.

At the same time, however, such 'supra-state' institutions raise political questions too. In a free trade area, not all regions or countries benefit equally, and the European Union has had to establish special funds to support those regions where exposure to international market forces would cause major

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social upheaval. In addition, larger political institutions are perceived by some as a threat to national or regional cultural distinctiveness.

Traditional political divisions and organizations that have provided the stable framework for political debate, participation and policy-making in so many countries for half a century or more endure, but seem to many to be increasingly out of touch and inappropriate as their traditional constituencies are altered, sometimes dramatically, by successive waves of social and economic change. New political organizations arise dramatic popular support, often to fade away as quickly as they came. In many places, the difficulties of coping with economic problems and a shifting political landscape have led people to make scapegoats of some of the most powerless in society, rather than to seek reform and development through conventional political channels.

On the other hand, social idealism is far from dead, with a wide range of groups and individuals seeking to mobilize around specific issues such as environmental protection, civil rights for disadvantaged social groups, and the provision of adequate and appropriate health care, sanitation, education and means of making a living to the three-quarters of the world's population who currently live without them. Here too, though, frustration with conventional politics is common, as campaigners experience first-hand the difficulty of producing policy changes that really have an effect in these areas.

The paradox is that in a time of extraordinary political transformation there is apparently such widespread scepticism about, and even downright mistrust of, the formal political system. Perhaps though, this isn't really paradoxical at all. Perhaps it is *because* of the social and economic instability of the contemporary world that familiar political traditions, systems and ways of thinking have come to seem increasingly irrelevant. No leader, party or political movement seems able to find a language (still less a set of policies) which captures the 'spirit of the age'. As the British political thinker and writer Geoff Mulgan says,

beneath the inertial momentum of elections and offices, the political traditions that became organizing principles for so many societies, dividing them into great tribal camps identified with class, with progress or reaction, with nation or liberty, have lost their potency. They cannot inspire or convince. They do not reflect the issues which passionately divide societies. They are no longer able to act as social glues, means of recognition across distances of geography and culture. What remains is a gap, psychic as much as instrumental. Without great movements, it is much harder to understand your place in society, much harder to picture where it is going. And without coherent political ideas, to organize the fragments of many issues, fears and aspirations, it becomes far harder to act strategically and to think beyond the boundaries of individual lives and relationships. It is not that the great questions have been answered: just that the available solutions have lost their lustre.<sup>2</sup>

Yet politics is not just going to stop. The range of issues and problems facing us seems destined to grow, rather than shrink. Environmental change, health and disease, military conflicts, economic problems, ethnic identity,

cultural transformations, global poverty – the list seems endless. However we deal with (or neglect) these concerns, we will be engaging in politics. Directly or indirectly, politics permeates everything we do and influences all our lives. Politics matters.

### Politics formal and informal

The common-sense view is that politics is about governments, political parties, elections and public policy, or about war, peace and ‘foreign affairs’. These are all important, and they form the focus of much of this book, but they are also limited. They refer to what we shall call ‘formal politics’. By ‘formal politics’ we mean the operation of the constitutional system of government and its publicly-defined institutions and procedures. The implication is that politics is a separate sphere of life involving certain types of people (politicians and civil servants) or organization (state institutions). The rest of us interact with this separate sphere in limited and usually legally defined ways. The political system may accord us formal political rights (such as the right to vote, or to own property) or formal political duties (such as the duty to serve on a jury, or to pay tax). Alternatively, it may from time to time affect the society in which we live, through changes in public policy, for example in the spheres of education or environmental protection. Most of the time, though, many people don’t think much about formal politics. Because it seems to be a separate sphere, we can say things like ‘I’m not interested in politics’ or ‘he’s not a very political animal’. Formal politics is seen as something that can sometimes *affect* everyday life, but isn’t really *part* of everyday life.

One thing we hope this book will show is that the formal political system has much more impact on our lives than is often realized. Of course, the extent to which society is openly controlled or influenced by the government varies considerably. In some countries (such as those still governed by absolute monarchies, for example, or various forms of central planning), the presence of the government in daily life may be clear and explicit. However, even in liberal-democratic countries, the role of the state and the formal political system is wider and deeper than the notion of a separate and limited political realm would suggest. The difference is that in more ‘liberal’ societies it is easier to *believe* in the separateness of formal politics, because its presence, though significant, is either hidden, or taken for granted and unquestioned.

By contrast, ‘informal politics’ might be summed up by the phrase ‘politics is everywhere’. A good example is the idea of ‘office politics’. Office politics obviously doesn’t have much to do with the political system of governments and elections, but everyone understands why we refer to it as ‘politics’. It is about forming alliances, exercising power, getting other people to do things, developing influence, and protecting and advancing particular goals and interests. Understood like this, politics really does seem to be everywhere. There is an informal politics of the household (parents attempt to influence children, women do more housework than men); of industry (some groups of workers

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do better out of industrial change than others, the aims of management and workers often conflict); of education (some subjects and points of view are taught while others are not, some children benefit more from education than others); even of television (some people have more chances to have their say on TV than others, certain groups are shown in a more favourable light than others). In fact, if we are talking about *informal* politics, there is no aspect of life which is *not* political: politics really is everywhere.

It is often said that 'politics is about power'. The ways that power has been understood by social scientists have changed over time. According to the French thinker Michel Foucault, these changes are related to shifts in the ways power is exercised. Foucault argues that in traditional societies power was exercised visibly, in, for example, public spectacles. It often took the form of dramatic acts or displays. In modern societies, by contrast, the exercise of power is much more hidden. To take one of Foucault's own examples, in the punishment of criminals the power of the state in traditional (medieval) societies was displayed through theatrical executions in a public square. These practices gave way during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to what Foucault calls the 'disciplinary society'. In the modern disciplinary society, he argues, social control is produced by a complex network of rules, regulations, administrative monitoring, and the management and direction of people's daily lives. This is most strongly developed in institutions and organizations such as prisons, schools and factories. To some extent it applies to all our private lives as well. In the disciplinary society, we all to a greater or lesser extent 'internalize' codes of behaviour and rules of conduct, so that we are unconsciously disciplining ourselves. Instead of being dramatic, public and visible (as in traditional societies), power in modern societies is invisible. It operates behind the scenes, as it were, and in every part of the social order. Instead of something which exists in the centre of society (with the king, say, or the government) and which is consciously used 'against' the powerless, power now flows through all the complex connections of everyday life. Foucault's concept of power in modern societies is sometimes referred to as a 'capillary' notion of power, to imply that power filters down through all our most mundane and ordinary relationships and out into the most routine aspects of human activity.

There is a parallel here with the notions of formal and informal politics. From a 'Foucauldian' perspective, the claim that 'politics is concerned with power' takes on a particular meaning. If power in modern societies saturates the social fabric in the ways Foucault implies, then studying politics should involve at least as much emphasis on 'informal politics' as on 'formal politics'. Moreover, the 'capillary' notion of power implies that power, and hence politics, is part of all social life and all forms of social interaction, however normal, mundane and routine they seem. Thus the way we feel about ourselves and others, how we write and talk, how we work and shop, how we study and play, how we drive and go on holiday — all of these are 'political', as are our religious, recreational, sexual, artistic and academic activities. This is somewhat unnerving, to say the least, and many people may be unhappy to think that their 'private' lives have anything to do with politics.

However, if by 'private' we mean not affecting, or affected by, other people or organizations, it is remarkable how little of modern life can be counted under that heading. Almost all the areas of daily life we have mentioned are likely to involve other people to some extent, even if indirectly. When you shop for food, who grows it, under what conditions and how much are they paid? When you go on holiday, what effects do you have on the places you visit and the people who live there? When you write, what kinds of expressions do you choose to refer to other people, and what kind of representation do you build up of them? We may not feel (or may choose not to feel) *responsible* for the people with whom we have these 'indirect' relationships, but like it or not, we *are* involved with them.

Despite its name, the sub-discipline of Political Geography has not, in the past, dealt with the full range of 'politics' which we have been talking about. It has usually concentrated on *formal* politics, and even then on particular aspects of formal politics: a mixture of those that were commonly studied by the founders of the subject and those which were regarded as being somehow especially 'geographical'. Today it is becoming clearer that virtually all political processes are 'geographical' in some sense. The larger field of *informal* politics is also being widely studied by geographers. In recent years, they have introduced a whole set of new ideas into geography drawn mostly from social and cultural theory, which we believe is particularly useful in thinking about what politics is and how it works. On the whole, however, geographers looking at these broader notions of politics (the politics of everyday life, and so on) choose not to call themselves 'political geographers', and choose not to apply their ideas to the formal politics usually studied under the heading 'Political Geography'. One of our aims in this book is to show *how some of the theoretical perspectives which have helped to illuminate informal politics might assist us in understanding formal politics.*

## Understanding politics

### Material and discursive practices

Politics involves *material* and *discursive* social practices. The material aspects of social practices are those which involve the organization and use of things. The discursive aspects are those which involve ideas, language, symbols and meanings. Thus eating a meal, for example, involves material practices (the preparation of foodstuffs) and symbolic or discursive ones (an understanding of the role and meaning of meals and mealtimes in society). Writing a book involves material elements (paper, pens, word-processing, the printing process) and discursive elements (the ideas in the book, the significance of literature as a cultural form, and so on).

While material practices and discursive practices can be distinguished for the purposes of analysis, they cannot exist independently of one another. For matter to be used by human beings, they must have a discursive understanding of

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its role and importance. Equally, discourse is produced materially; whether it involves thought, speech, writing, graphics or takes some other form, the form always exists as matter and (often) has material processes or practices as its subject-matter. The material cannot be separated from the discursive, but they are not the same thing. It is common for different writers on politics and geography to emphasize material processes over discursive ones, or vice versa. We want to argue that neither can be understood in the absence of the other. Human life is both material and discursive, and the more we investigate the complex relations between the two, the more difficult it becomes to accord a general primacy to one or the other. This is perhaps particularly true of politics, which, as we outline it below, involves both material interests and discursive argument; both 'modes of production' and 'discursive formations'. Of course, precisely because social processes are both discursive and material, it is difficult to separate the ideas of 'mode of production' and 'discursive formation'. Modes of production are themselves produced in part through discourses (such as those associated with property relations, for example), while discursive formations are produced materially and have material preconditions and consequences (for example, they are dependent on the material means of information circulation). The point of distinguishing them here is to ensure that both aspects are held in mind.

The concept of mode of production refers to the ways in which individuals and social groups are provided with the means of fulfilling their needs and wants, from biological necessities such as food, to the most 'frivolous' luxuries. In complex, modern societies, the mode of production is correspondingly complex. Drawing on ideas from political economy, we may identify a number of key elements. First, the process of production requires the means of production (offices, computers, machines, tools, factories, and so on), raw materials and human labour power. Secondly, the process of production is organized in different ways in different times and places. In craft production, for example, the labourers own the means of production themselves. Under capitalism, the ownership and control of the means of production is separated from the direct producers. Thirdly, there is a division of labour, through which different parts of the production process are allocated to different social groups. Fourthly, there is a system of distribution or circulation through which products can be allocated to consumers. These various elements and the relations between them take different forms in different modes of production. The social outcomes (who gets what, where and how) are usually systematically unequal, although the character and causes of the inequality are different in different social systems.

Like the 'capillary' notion of power, the concept of 'discursive formation' comes from the work of Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, the meaning of language is not transparent and immediately obvious. Words, statements, symbols, metaphors, and so on, mean different things in different contexts. The meaning of a particular statement depends partly on who is saying it and how it is being said, but also on how it 'fits into' an existing wider pattern of statements, symbols and understandings. It is this wider pattern which Foucault calls a 'discursive formation' (which is often shortened simply to 'discourse').

This may be clearer if we consider a simple example. All human beings who live to maturity pass through the ages of 13 to 19. However, it was only in the 1950s that the term and concept of the ‘teenager’ became widespread. Before then, in some societies, one moved more or less directly from childhood to adulthood. In others, such as in Victorian England, the term ‘juvenile’ was often used, but crucially it did not mean the same, and did not have the same connotations, as ‘teenager’. In most societies, specific ages or ceremonies were important in marking the transition from childhood, often at a customary age, such as 21 (the age of majority in nineteenth-century England), or a religious rite of passage, such as the Jewish *bar mitzvah*. In America during the 1950s, however, the stage between childhood and adulthood emerged as separate and was labelled ‘teenage’. Human beings were still biologically the same, and yet Western society was transformed by the emergence of ‘the teenager’. In Foucault’s terms, this was the result of a ‘discourse of the teenager’. The ‘statements’ which made up the discourse were indeed dispersed throughout society. They appeared in many different media: in political speeches, in films, in popular music, in advertising, in newspaper columns, in parental discussions, and so on. However, they all had enough in common, in their object of analysis, in their mode of language, in the terms used and in their tone, to be considered part of a unified ‘discourse’. The ‘teenager’, therefore, was a ‘discursive construction’ which was ‘made real’ by the discourse. While it referred to the same span of years as the Victorian concept of ‘juvenile’, the effects of the two discourses were very different.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this book we will be stressing the importance for politics of the relationship between discursive and material practices. We will consider both how discourse makes things real, and how material practices enable or constrain discourse. To pursue the teenager example, material processes were important in enabling the discursive construction of the teenager. These include the growth of the American economy, which provided the wealth and resources for clothes, records and cars; the availability of leisure time and of extended education; changing demographic and family patterns; and the construction of a material geography in American cities of coffee bars, movie theatres, shops, sports facilities and high schools. This link between discursive changes and material conditions is significant in most areas of politics and something we will explore in the rest of the book.

### Our approach

Our approach views politics as a process, that is made up of geographically and historically situated social and institutional practices. As we have seen, those practices are both material and discursive in character. They are also, at least in part, purposeful and strategic, and they depend on the availability of unequally distributed resources. Let’s unpack this in a little more detail, by outlining six key elements of the interpretative framework that will inform the rest of the book.

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### *(1) People and their competing needs*

It is people and the relationships between them which make politics: political processes are produced by human activities and *human agency*. As human beings, we all, individually and in social groups, have *needs, desires, wants* and *interests*, which, with the possible exception of basic biological necessities, are constructed (made meaningful) through discourse. *Politics* arises from the impossibility of reconciling the wants, needs, desires and interests of all individuals and groups instantly and automatically.

### *(2) The role of strategic action*

We develop and pursue *strategies* (purposeful practices) in support of (our understanding of) our interests. Strategies need not be grand or comprehensive: they may be mundane or small scale. Our strategies are never wholly rational, since our knowledge of the circumstances in which we act is always partial and imperfect, and many of the factors which influence outcomes are beyond our control. This means in turn that while our strategies have effects, their effects are often *unintended*. Strategic action potentially brings actors into *conflict* or *alliance* with others pursuing similar or opposed strategies, and can consequently generate both *struggle* and *co-operation*.

### *(3) Resources and power*

The ability of different groups and individuals to pursue strategic action varies, as does its effectiveness, depending on the differential availability of *resources* within society. Resources may be of many kinds. These include: our bodies; other material resources of all sorts; 'discursive' resources (such as knowledge, information, language, symbols, and ways of understanding); the compliance of other people; means of violence; and organizational resources (the ability to co-ordinate, deploy and monitor other resources). Unequal access to such resources accounts for differences in *political power*. Where conflicting strategies are being pursued, the exercise of political power generates *resistance* (counter-power).

### *(4) Institutions*

Strategic action often leads to the development of *institutions* of various sorts. Once established, though, institutions 'escape' from the intentions of the initial strategy and develop independently. Institutions are then political actors themselves, pursuing strategies which may be unrelated to those which established them. Institutions also have their own internal politics, which also consist of individuals and groups pursuing strategic action. The strategies of institutions are the (often unintended) products of internal politics. As such they may be (and often are) contradictory. Institutions exist on a different temporal (and often spatial) scale from individual action. The fact that they endure over time and are stretched over space is one source of their political power, and helps to explain why and how they can become harnessed to very different strategies from those intended by their creators.

#### (5) *Authority and sovereignty*

Individuals, groups and institutions typically advance *claims to authority*, through which they aim to secure the compliance of other individuals, groups and institutions with their own strategic action. However, there are no absolute grounds on which authority can be justified. All claims to authority are assertions, rather than statements of fact. Claimants to authority usually pursue (often again through strategic action) attempts to legitimate their assertion: that is to secure consent to their claim from both other claimants and those whose compliance to authority is sought. The process of *legitimation* is a discursive one involving attempts to construct frameworks of meaning through which authority is made to seem legitimate. Legitimation is rarely completed or absolute, but is a continual struggle against those who contest it. In the absence of (or additional to) consent, compliance with claims to authority may be pursued through *coercion*, where the necessary resources (means of violence) are available. A claim to *sovereignty* on the part of an institution is a special type of claim to authority: a claim to being the *highest* authority for some defined group or area. Like all claims to authority, it is rarely established and uncontested.

#### (6) *Political identities*

Our pursuit of different strategies and our positions in relation to the strategies and claims to authority of others, constitute us in a variety of ways as *political subjects* with particular *political identities*. These are thus partly the products of our conscious intentions, but partly the outcome of the discursive and material practices of others. To say that we are political subjects means that we each, as human beings, have relationships to politics. Part of 'who we are' is produced through our political positions. For instance, we all relate to the state in different ways, perhaps as voters, as users of public services, as asylum seekers, as pupils in state schools or universities, or as the focus of various forms of legal regulation. In different times and places, we take on different political identities, sometimes deliberately, as part of a 'strategy' and sometimes unwillingly or even unconsciously.

This may seem a little abstract, but in the chapters that follow we will show how this kind of perspective can help us to understand political change in different contexts, which should help to flesh out the framework in more detail. It is important to note, however, that this perspective is not a rigid theory which can be applied like a template to all political situations. Rather, we want to use it as a *way of thinking* about politics. This means that there will be times when we use other, more detailed theories to talk about particular aspects of political change. There are, for example, substantive theories of international relations, imperialism, state formation and social movements. In the chapters dealing with those topics, we will want to discuss some of those more specific theories and their strengths and weaknesses, using the above framework as a kind of guide for assessment.

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### Politics and geography

So much for politics: what about geography? Of course, the term 'geography' can refer to quite a wide range of ideas. Traditionally, 'geography' has been defined broadly as the study of the earth's surface. As far as human activity is concerned, this is often thought to involve four (overlapping) aspects:

- (1) *Space*. Geographers study the spatial distribution of human activities and institutions of all kinds and their causes and effects. They are also interested in the influence of spatial organization on social, political, economic and cultural processes.
- (2) *Place*. Geography involves the study of place: the character of places, the relationship between people and their places, and the role of places and the difference between them in human activities.
- (3) *Landscape*. Geography focuses on the development of landscapes and the meaning and significance of landscapes for people.
- (4) *Environment*. Geographers are interested in the relationship between people and their environments, including their understandings of environments and their use of environmental resources of all kinds.

All of these traditional concerns remain central to human geography today. All of them, however, have been subject to considerable rethinking and reformulation over the years. To take one example, the relationship between society and space has been the focus of much debate within human geography. In the past it was often assumed that space and society were separate things which may have *influenced* each other in various ways, but which could, in principle, be examined and analyzed independently. More recently, geographers have insisted that spatial relations are inseparable from society. All social relations are constituted spatially, and there can be no possibility of a 'non-spatial' social science.<sup>4</sup>

To understand what this entails for Political Geography consider some of the components of politics outlined above. Human agency and strategic action are always *situated* in particular geographical contexts, which condition strategies and make some options available and others impossible. The resources on which agents draw in developing strategies are made available to them partly by virtue of their spatial organization. Our access to money, materials and organization is partly a function of where we (and they) are, while knowledge, information and symbolic understandings are the product of geographical contexts and on many occasions have places and geography as their subject-matter. Moreover, space and spatial organization is itself a resource. Studying the control of key sites and territories has a long history in Political Geography, but the principle may be extended much further. For example, the spatial organization of institutions such as schools, factories and prisons is a central element in their control and monitoring. Finally, social and cultural geographers have studied how the production of political subjectivities and identities is bound into space and place. All of this suggests that in studying

politics, geography is not an optional extra, or a particular perspective. Instead, politics is intrinsically geographical, and can be studied in that light.

### Political geography

Human geography has traditionally been divided into a number of 'sub-disciplines': urban geography, social geography, historical geography, and so on. Each sub-discipline represents a more limited and specialized field of study supposedly corresponding to a coherent part of 'geographical reality'. However, universities, where, for the most part, academic human geography is practised and developed, are not the rational, ordered places they sometimes like to claim to outsiders. While some writers have tried to argue for the development of a more rational sub-disciplinary structure,<sup>5</sup> the activities of human geographers seem unlikely to fall neatly into ordered categories. This is because the discipline of human geography has evolved over time and has been created in particular social and political conditions. As a result, some sub-disciplines are stronger than others, with more research, more academics working in the field, more conferences, books and papers, and so on. In addition, academic research and writing is continually developing and changing. Understandings of the world and the subject form and reform; schools of thought and theoretical traditions arise and then fade; and the substantive issues studied change over time. In some cases, a sub-discipline can be dominated for some time by a single person; others may be more diffuse.

All this means that while human geography and its sub-disciplines are *about* social phenomena, they also *are* social phenomena in their own right. They are the products of historical accidents, debates, disputes, personal and institutional success and failure, and their social, political, cultural and economic surroundings. In fact, they are what we have referred to as discourses or discursive formations.

Foucault's concept of 'discourse' has implications for how we think about academic subjects like human geography. If disciplines and sub-disciplines are discourses, then they do not provide immediate and transparent windows on to the world. The world is not divided neatly and rationally into economic aspects, cultural aspects, geographical aspects, and so on, with each part the subject of a corresponding academic discipline, and each discipline looking down on 'its' object of analysis from a detached viewpoint. Instead, as discourses, academic subjects are *part* of the world. Not only that, they are influential in making the world the way it is. As we shall see, just as the discourse of the teenager helped to bring the phenomenon of the teenager into existence, so the discourse of geography helped to shape the modern world (sometimes in violent and destructive ways).

One of the standard sub-disciplines of human geography is 'Political Geography'. It has all the trappings of a formal sub-discipline. It has a journal, also called *Political Geography*. It has representation in learned societies: for example, the Association of American Geographers has a 'Political Geography

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Specialty Group' while the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers has a 'Political Geography Research Group'. It has its 'Great Thinkers of the Past': Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, Ellen Semple, Isaiah Bowman and Richard Hartshorne. It also has university courses and textbooks devoted to it. As well as an institutionalized sub-discipline, 'Political Geography' is also a discourse, in the sense we have outlined above.

This has a number of implications. First, the sub-discipline does not refer transparently, straightforwardly and comprehensively to some easily definable 'politico-geographic' aspect of the world. Despite its journals, textbooks and courses, there is no universally accepted definition of the field of inquiry called 'Political Geography'. Moreover, any attempt at definition will almost certainly throw up anomalies, when compared with what actually appears in the courses and textbooks. Many 'textbook' definitions cite, in some form, the relationship between space and place (geography) and politics (or power, or government) as the core focus of political geography. In one sense, this seems to be stating the obvious, but it really only begs the further questions of how one defines 'politics' (and 'geography!').

However, even if we could answer these additional questions, the problem with attempts to define the 'essence' of 'Political Geography' is that they give an inaccurate picture of the actual *discourse* of Political Geography. That discourse overlaps only rather haphazardly with these 'essentialist' definitions. A discourse operates by setting the agenda, establishing the boundaries of legitimate debate and marking some statements and arguments as meaningful and as making sense (i.e. within the discourse) and others as not meaningful, (i.e. outside the discourse). To some extent these consequences of a discourse may be part of a deliberate strategy. Often, they are unintentional, though that does not make them any less significant. An important point about discourses is that they are not (or only very rarely) controlled by a single person or organization. Indeed, part of their power comes from their being widely accepted. When a discourse is produced and reproduced through the speech and actions of a large number of people and institutions, it can come to seem like common sense – like part of the taken-for-granted background to everyday life. In fact, a discourse is always the product of a specific set of historical circumstances, and always operates in favour of certain interests and social groups. Many people who participate in the propagation of discourses may not have given much thought to the social and political circumstances which produced them, and might not even approve of the interests which they sustain.

The discourse of the sub-discipline of Political Geography has in the past been marked by the inclusion of certain characteristic topics and points of view and the general exclusion of others. Think of some of the main political shifts over the last quarter-century. In many countries, the women's movement has, by any reckoning, been one of the most influential and important political forces of recent years. It has involved political campaigns and struggles, new legislation, reams of comment in the political media, the founding of political and academic journals, the development of feminism as a political philosophy and practice, not to mention counter-attacks and a so-called male backlash since the late 1980s. In all respects it has been one of the biggest

political controversies of its day. Moreover, it is hugely geographical. Women's lives vary from country to country and place to place, as does the form and content of their political campaigning. Control of space and of places goes to the heart of the issue, as may be seen in, for example, attempts to reduce the threat of male violence both in the home and on city streets.

Yet, until quite recently, both feminism as a perspective, and the women's movement as a political phenomenon were marginal to the discourse of Political Geography. Geographers have been working on these topics for many years. Indeed, they represent some of the liveliest and most innovative areas for contemporary geographical research. For the most part, however, the resulting papers and reports have not 'counted' as Political Geography according to the (unwritten) rules established by its discourse. This highly political work has tended to appear in journals and books devoted to cultural or social geography, or those dedicated to studies of gender. This is now changing and a strong field of feminist Political Geography is emerging. And of course, in one sense it may not matter. If the work is done, and it is published, then perhaps it isn't important whether we call it 'Political Geography' or 'Cultural Geography'.

Fair enough. There are, though, two reasons why such 'turf disputes' may be significant. First, the example illustrates how conventional academic divisions do not reflect a rational ordering of reality (or even their own definitions of their fields), but a particular path of intellectual, social and institutional development. Secondly, as we mentioned above, discourses are the products of, and in turn sustain and promote, particular social and political interests. Discourses involve mobilizing meanings in association with relations of power. If the discourse of Political Geography constitutes the sub-discipline around (among other things) the geopolitical world order, while simultaneously marginalizing issues of gender and the politics of the women's movement, then the inference that students, policy-makers and other academics are likely to draw is that geopolitical transformations are not connected to (or even that they are more politically significant than) gender politics. Arguably, such a discourse implies that geopolitical change is not even of concern to women: that it is men's work.

Like other discourses, Political Geography is marked by its origins. Early Political Geography was concerned mainly with the relationship between physical territory, state power and global military and political rivalries. Throughout the twentieth century Political Geography took those concerns as its starting point, and they are, of course, important issues. Nevertheless, the result was a rather 'top-down' view of the subject. *People* appeared rather infrequently in the textbooks of Political Geography. Political geographers now take social and political struggles and social movements much more seriously than in the past. Movements of labour, women, lesbians and gay men, minority ethnic groups, disabled people and environmental campaigners, are now taking centre-stage in research on political geography. Political geographers draw more on ideas from social and cultural theory as well as political economy. A new wave in the development of Political Geography is underway. This book tries to map some of its directions.

## 18 POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY: AN INTRODUCTION TO SPACE AND POWER

### Notes

1. Painter, Joe (1995) *Politics, Geography and 'Political Geography': A Critical Perspective*. London: Arnold.
2. Mulgan, Geoff (1994) *Politics in an Antipolitical Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 7–8.
3. Thanks to Miles Ogborn for this point.
4. See, for example, Soja, Edward W. (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso; Doreen Massey (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.
5. Dear, Michael J. (1988) 'The postmodern challenge: reconstructing human geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 13: 262–74.

### Further reading

Political geography is a lively and rapidly developing field. Two comprehensive collections of essays convey this breadth and dynamism particularly well. They are:

**Agnew, John, Mitchell, Katharyne and Toal, Gerard (eds) (2003) *A Companion to Political Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell.**

**Cox, Kevin, Low, Murray and Robinson, Jennifer (eds) (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*. London: Sage.**

The journals *Political Geography* (Elsevier), *Space and Polity* (Taylor and Francis) and *Geopolitics* (Taylor and Francis) are all essential for keeping up with current developments in the field, while *Progress in Human Geography* (Sage) publishes reviews of recent research in regular progress reports on political geography.

Those interested in the history of the political geography can explore it with:

**Agnew, John (2002) *Making Political Geography*. London: Arnold.**