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## Political Geography and Critical Geopolitics

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### Books reviewed

- Cox KR, Low M, Robinson J (Eds) (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*. SAGE Publications Ltd, London, 644 pp.
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- Dodds K (2004) *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, London, 272 pp.
- Moisio S, Koch N, Jonas A, Lizotte Ch, Luukkonen J (Eds) (2020) *Handbook of the Changing Geographies of the State: New Spaces of Geopolitics*. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham UK, 512 pp.
- Okunev I (2020) *Political Geography*. P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A., Bruxelles, Berlin, Bern, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien, 474 pp.
- Tuathail GO (1996) *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*. Routledge, London, 245 pp.
- Smith S (2020) *Political Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, North Carolina, 310 pp.
- Smith S (2020) *Intimate Geopolitics: Love, Territory, and the Future of India's Northern Threshold*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 182 pp.

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Political geography and critical geopolitics have recently seen the publication of new authored and edited collections that map out a variety of ways of thinking about political geography. A recent text -- *Political Geography* -- is by Igor Okunev, a Russian scholar trained in political science. The author is Co-Chair of the Research Committee on Geopolitics at the International Political Science Association and a Professorial Research Fellow and Director of the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations at the Institute of International Relations in Moscow (МГИМО/Московский государственный институт международных отношений МИД России). MGIMO is a prestigious independent humanities university comprising seven schools and four educational institutes. <http://mgimo.ru/> | <https://english.mgimo.ru/> | <http://en.mgimo.mba/>

*Political Geography* is first and foremost a textbook for students of political science and international relations. Chapter 1 defines political geography squarely in terms of politics: "Political Geography is a discipline concerned with the spatial dimensions of politics.... Political geography develops fundamental theoretical approaches that give insight into the peculiarities of foreign and domestic policies." This focus to the study of political science, international relations and area studies might be uncomfortable to many now working in the field of critical geopolitics, but the book serves as an invaluable resource for assisting students and instructors developing

the tools to better understand geographic variables to unravel the sources of 21st century geopolitical challenges such as regional conflicts, resource wars, great power rivalry and cooperation.

The book is synoptic and encyclopedic. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to basic concepts, terms, and approaches in political geography and the spatial organization of politics. Chapter 2 Global Geopolitical Systems. Chapter 3 Integration Groups. Chapter 4 States. Chapter 5 Properties of State's Territory. Chapter 6 Composition of State Territory. Chapter 7 International and Internationalized Entities. Chapter 8 Dependent Territories. Chapter 9 Capitals and Centers. Chapter 10 Borders and Cleavages. Chapter 11 Regions and Municipalities. And finally, Chapter 12 Spatial Identity.

The book is also linked to a separate coursera six-week online course organized and taught by the author. The course covers selected themes from the textbook; Week 1 introduces basic concepts, Week 2 addresses states and state building, Week 3 turns to state territory, Week 4 focuses on international entities and dependent territories, Week 5 deals with capital cities and state borders, and the final week deals with aspects of territorial divisions. Registration is indicated as being free (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/political-geography?action=enroll>).

In their 2020 Handbook of the Changing Geographies of the State: New Spaces of Geopolitics Sam Moisiu, Natalie Koch, Andrew Jonas, Christopher Lizotte, and Juho Luukkonen reflect from their respective institutions in the US, UK, and Finland on a similarly widening horizon of the geographies of political geography. Perhaps reflecting the growing importance of ethnonationalism and secessionist movements across Europe, their focus also gives particular attention to the state as the primary locus of political geography. As they write: "This is the era of the state. Almost all terrestrial space of the earth is claimed by a state or several states. However, contemporary states are different from each other in many respects, while the concept of the state itself has distinct connotations and meanings in different geographical contexts." (p.1).

In recent years North American and European political geography has widened its interest in state institutions, geopolitics, territorial organization, inter-state conflict, and spaces of government to include a wider range of spaces of geo-power and forms of governance and governmentality. As the role of non-state actors in international conflicts became ever more visible and as notions of the personal-as-the-political became commonplace, political geographers began to rethink their traditional role as observers of the state form and state power, with its central focus on territory, inter-state conflict, and diplomacy. For example, Gearoid O Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* was particularly important in this change and later political geographies and critical geopolitics were elaborated in texts such as those by Klaus Dodds' *Geopolitical Traditions: Critical Histories of a Century of Political Thought* (2000) and his later *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction* (2004) among others. The result was a revitalization of Western political geography and geopolitics, increasingly engaging with, and contributing to, debates about the meaning of the political and the role of space. Various notions of power were explored, and the role of non-state actors and social movements became more central. For Tuathail (1996: 1) this political geography was still very much about power and territoriality. As he wrote: "Although often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space." But to this concept of territory and power were added the importance of scale and forms of organization beyond and below state territorial forms; complex articulations of governance that increasingly expanded the notion of the political to include topics such as the tactics and

micro-politics of struggle and resistance, the role of politics in nature (political ecology), and the political geographies of the body.

In their 2008 SAGE Handbook of Political Geography Kevin Cox, Murray Low, and Jennifer Robinson began by reflecting on this widening of scope and interest in political geography: "In a contemporary world of multi-level governance, conflicts around cultural and other forms of identity and difference, and the threat of environmental catastrophe, the concerns of political geographers with spatial organization, variation across the globe and society/nature relationships have resonated more widely and intensely with concerns in other disciplinary contexts than perhaps ever before. This is proving an exciting opportunity for the field, expanding the range of empirical and theoretical concerns within its purview considerably." (Preface). The scope of the Handbook is similarly expansive with 36 chapters organized in sections on the Scope and Development of Political Geography, States, Re-Naturing Political Geography, Identities and Interests in Political Organizations, Electoral Geography and the Politics of Democracy, Global Political Geographies, and the Politics of Uneven Development.

In her 2020 *Political Geography: A Critical Introduction* Sara Smith pushed even farther as she related the spatial nature of political power to the ways in which everyday life and the world of global conflict and nation-states are intertwined. Her focus in that book is on political concepts such as citizenship, security, and territory in a geographic context, but in *Intimate Geopolitics: Love, Territory, and the Future of India's Northern Threshold* she goes further by asking "How could geopolitics be intimate? The struggle for territory is so masculine, so abstract; lines on a map, tanks in the distance, situation rooms and targeted strikes that defy state sovereignty—what do any of these have to do with marriage and its more mundane politics of family squabbles, care for children, and dinners with the in-laws? Even in its most abstracted forms, such as the cartographic delineation of territories on a map, territorial thinking is fundamentally tied to bodies on the ground in multiple and complex ways" (p. 5).

Students, teachers, and researchers will find much to engage with in each of these volumes. Perhaps first and foremost it is worth reflecting on the actual geographies in which these particular political geographies are produced; a resurgent Russian state; a European interest in supranationalism and challenges to it; a general interest in non-state actors and reconfigurations of territories and border; and an American world reworking patriarchy and racialization through emerging gender, race, and sexuality politics of space. This is the rich legacy of a contemporary political geography and critical geopolitics that asks us to pay attention to the places and sites within which our knowledge of the world is developed and the forms through which it is circulated.

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