



Subject, Silence, Narrative, Humor, Family, No Borders: Six Openings to Critical Political Geography

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio^{1 and 2}

Space and Political Agency Research Group (SPARG)
University of Tampere/Academy of Finland
kirsipauliina.kallio@uta.fi

Abstract

Critical political geography is not best described as a subfield but, rather, a multi-dimensional discussion where human geographers and scholars from neighboring disciplines debate politically and geographically relevant topical issues, approaches and theories with a critical attitude. Hence, in principle, a singular ‘proper’ critical political geography does not exist. However, like in every research area, certain conventions and threads of discussion have become established in time, leaving others more marginal. This means that if not explicitly discussed, the meanings of ‘critical’, ‘political’ and ‘geographical’ run the risk of becoming stagnant and new openings will be even harder to make. This series of



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interventions sets out to enliven the debate on the scope of critical political geography by introducing six themes that the authors find missing or on the sidelines in the current research. These include the political subject as an analytical starting point; socio-cultural silence and its situated nature in transcultural belonging; narrative methodologies in the study of everyday politics; humor as social practice and coping strategy; family as a theoretical and empirical allocation of biopolitical government; and the legitimacy of border control in the politics of mobility and migration. We hope that the series will inspire scholarship on these and other emerging themes that are significant to the present and future study of critical political geography.

Introduction

In his reflection on the politics of political geography, Guntram Herb (2008) dates critical political geography back to two anarchist geographers of the late nineteenth century, namely Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin, who took a critical stance toward the prevailing imperialist and nationalist attitudes. Yet the radical aspects of their work started to influence political geographical research long after their own time, in the early 1970s, when the critical tradition began to highlight issues below the scale of the state. At that time the political economy approach, emphasizing the local scale and the social relevance of research, formed the dominant discourse in the Anglophone discussion. Herb identifies three strands of research that after the late 1970s were expanding what had seemed to become the critical orthodoxy. First, humanist geographers started to speak for the significance of human agency, individual creativity and action. Second, the cultural turn brought questions related to identity politics and social movements to the fore. Third, the universality and ‘viewpointlessness’ of scholarly inquiry was criticized most enthusiastically by poststructuralist, postmodernist and feminist geographers who accentuated the positionality, particularity and situatedness of knowledge and practice. These critiques have been followed and accompanied by work on critical geopolitics, scale and ‘anti-geopolitics’ that have all, likewise, set out to further develop critical geographical thought.

Building on and continuing these discussions, this intervention series wishes to highlight six aspects that the authors consider forgotten, understudied, disregarded, hidden or otherwise lacking in the current scholarship. The intention is not to argue that the discussed issues would not have been visited by others as such, as they all surely have, in geography and elsewhere. Rather, we wish to underline their potential in creating novel critical approaches for the politicization of geographical events and relations that may first seem politically self-evident and explicit. Following relational political thought, we share the idea that recognized political structures, conventions, perspectives and theories may disguise other political dynamics and meanings which can be made visible by challenging

established conceptions of ‘the political’ (cf. Barnett, 2012; Dikeç, 2013). Our compilation is therefore methodologically oriented.

The series begins with Kirsi Pauliina Kallio’s account on the subject of action as the locus of political subjectivity and a prime constituent of political geographical events and dynamics. She argues that the significance of particularity in political subjectivity is lost in much of the present scholarship because it is erroneously paralleled with ideas related to the individual neoliberal subject. Kallio’s intervention is followed by Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen’s reflection on socio-cultural silence and its situated nature with relation to memory politics, mundane geopolitical tactics of belonging and discursive practices with material effects. Her consideration of children’s developing and practiced political agencies in forced displacements of war reveals that voice and articulation may act as a disguise to mundane forms of politics that are manifested in silent embodiments.

Third, Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola takes up narrativity as a specific methodological tool for making sense of the complex and contradictory interactions between people in particular geographical settings, as a complementary approach to the much employed discourse analysis. She suggests internal contradictions as key to politicizing the already politicized geographies, like state borders and borderland identities. Providing yet another conceptual proposal, Juha Ridanpää suggests different forms of humor as alternative lenses to perceiving and discussing the political world. Among other things, he notices the role of irony as a means of critique, humor-laden speech as a tool for dealing with traumatic pasts, and humorous practices as major players in ‘serious’ transnational controversies.

The fifth intervention is by Lauren Martin who discusses the family as a central element to theories of governmentality, engaging with its discursive, practiced and governed aspects. She argues for the re-politicization of the family, to bring together the seemingly disparate projects evolving around this sphere of life, and acknowledging the various agencies at play in family politics. In the last section, Andrew Burrige questions the legitimacy of border and immigration controls, introducing the idea of a no borders politics of mobility and migration in particular, as an alternative to the hegemonic discourses and practices endorsing inequality and precarity. Like Martin, Burrige focuses on the interface between individual human beings and institutional control, raising questions over the norms by which human mobility may mobilize.

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