

56 Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal)

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

An innovative and prolific political geographer, Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal) was born in the Republic of Ireland in 1962. Growing up in County Monaghan on the border with Northern Ireland was among the influences that pushed Ó Tuathail to study political geography. He graduated with a joint BA in history and geography in 1982 from St. Patrick's College in Maynooth (now the National University of Ireland, Maynooth). Ó Tuathail completed his Master's degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign under the direction of John O'Loughlin, and moved to Syracuse University where, supervised by John Agnew and political scientist David Sylvan, he completed his PhD entitled 'Critical geopolitics: the social construction of place and space in the practice of statecraft' (Ó Tuathail, 1989). Ó Tuathail has taught at the University of Liverpool, University of Southern California, University of Minnesota, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

His first publication argued for a 'new geopolitics' that was 'much more critical' than traditional evaluations of national interest and policy recommendation (Ó Tuathail, 1986: 73). Defining geo-politics

as political discourse structured 'by either explicit reference to geographical location and concepts or by use of certain implicitly geographical policy rationalizations (e.g. *Lebensraum*, domino theory, containment, expansionism)', Ó Tuathail (1986: 73-4) examined US-EL Salvador relations from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine to the 1980s Reagan administration. 'American foreign policy', Ó Tuathail (1986: 83) concluded, 'aims to perpetuate, secure and reaffirm the American way of life. Part of insuring the survival and prosperity of large industrial states such as America involves dominating, controlling and influencing.' His subsequent article assessing US foreign policy, co-authored with John Agnew (1992), 'precipitated a research agenda which conceptualized geopolitics as a form of political discourse rather than simply a descriptive term intended to cover the study of foreign policy and grand statecraft' (Dodds, 2001: 469).

In their paper, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992: 192) argued that geo-politics must be studied as 'a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft "spatialize" international politics in such a way as to represent it as a "world" characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas'. Focusing on international relations and foreign policy-making, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992: 194) maintained that the speeches and writings of politicians, diplomats, policy advisors and the media comprise 'geopolitical reasoning'. These statements can be analysed, not to

see whether they are truthful, but rather to critically examine the effects that using certain terms and language have on the practice and impact of international relations. Painter (1995: 146) thus argues that the research agenda initiated by Ó Tuathail's work is 'concerned particularly with the "texts" of international politics', what they mean and how they are used, rather than political events in themselves.

Evaluating geo-politics stimulated a reshaping of political geography in the 1990s, and contrasted with examinations of the geographical facts of politics and state relations. Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) argued there was a need to assess how 'geopolitical reasoning' constructs representations of states, territories and political regimes through discourse and how people utilise these discursive understandings to explain events, envision international relations and justify foreign policy actions. This research agenda, therefore, was a departure from existing studies within political geography concerned with state formation, contested national borders and territories, nationalism and secession, voting patterns, geographical impacts of wars and concepts such as world-systems theory, state theory and sovereignty (Painter, 1995; Atkinson and Dodds, 2000; Dodds, 2001).

SPATIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Ó Tuathail's key contribution to debates on space and place has been his espousal of a critical theory of geo-politics. Traditionally, geo-politics is how state analysts, military or other, interpret the territorial operation of state power and visualise

spatial control. In contrast, Ó Tuathail argues for a *critical* geo-politics that recognises and exposes geo-political assertions and makes 'informed critiques of the spatializing practices of power' (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1994: 513). Influenced by the end of the Cold War and postmodern, post-structuralist, feminist and psychoanalytic theories, critical geo-politics problematises political discourses, examines their spatial assumptions, questions power relations and challenges the role of the state and how its institutional analysts envision the world. Ó Tuathail draws on **Foucault's** understanding of governmentality to argue that the articulation of 'geo-power' over both people and territory is a critical function of modern statehood. '[M]y concern', states Ó Tuathail (1996a: 11), 'is the power struggle between different societies over the right to speak sovereignly about geography, space and territory.' Utilising Derrida to assess and deconstruct political discourse, Ó Tuathail (1996a: 66–7) proposes that geo-graphy and geo-politics can be hyphenated to emphasise the process of discourse in writing or 'scripting... global space by state-society intellectuals and institutions'.

Drawing on such diverse theoretical traditions and conversant in contemporary international relations theories, Ó Tuathail productively integrated these approaches to generate analyses that interrogated contemporary international political discourse and stressed the importance to statecraft of geographical representations. Indeed, this is one of Ó Tuathail's most significant geographical contributions. Critical geo-politics made issues of space and political geography pertinent to the discipline of international relations and its practitioners, introducing geographical analyses to intellectual debates and scholars that had largely ignored these perspectives. Critical geo-politics, therefore, is interdisciplinary and Ó Tuathail has been at the

forefront of developing this field of study, editing books and special issues of major journals on the topic (e.g., Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1994; 1998a; Dalby and Ó Tuathail, 1996; Herod et al., 1998; Ó Tuathail et al., 1998).

In his book *Critical Geopolitics*, Ó Tuathail (1996a) deconstructs the canon of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geo-political texts by Rudolf Kjellen, Friedrich Ratzel, Karl Haushofer and Halford Mackinder, exposing their assumptions of political power and paying attention to their constructions of space, race and gender. Traditional geo-politics was a science for men who sought to know and control territory and Ó Tuathail (1996a: 82) contends that Mackinder envisioned British East Africa (Kenya) 'as a feminized space to be penetrated, a territory reached by others but not yet conquered'. Further, Ó Tuathail (1996a: 111–29) examines both the fact and fictionalisation of Haushofer and Nazi geo-politics in US magazines *Life* and *Reader's Digest* and the movie *Plan for Destruction* (1943). These examples are contrasted with other geo-political texts produced at the time, such as those by US foreign policy analyst Robert Strausz-Hupé, an Austrian émigré to the US. *Critical Geopolitics* also includes studies of the writings by conservative (post-) Cold War US intellectuals Samuel Huntington and Edward Luttwak (Ó Tuathail, 1996a).

Ó Tuathail has also developed a number of concepts for critically analysing geo-political reasoning, dividing geo-political discourse into 'popular geopolitics' – evident in the mass media, movies and popular culture; 'practical geopolitics' – apparent in foreign policy and state bureaucracy; and 'formal geopolitics' produced in think-tanks and academic venues (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998b). Diagrammatically outlining how this tripartite division intertwines to 'comprise the geopolitical culture of a particular region, state or inter-state alliance',

to produce a 'spatializing of boundaries and dangers' and to construct 'geopolitical representations of self and other', Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998b: 5) maintain that geo-politics are socio-cultural phenomena evident in everyday life.

Geo-political representations are produced and consumed in myriad ways, from tabloid newspaper headlines and Hollywood films, to presidential speeches advocating military action. Examining the 'geopolitical condition' of contemporary international politics, Ó Tuathail (2000b; 2002b) argues that processes like globalization, telecommunications and the 'world risk society' are challenging extant ways of thinking about state borders, territory, power, defence and security. With world leaders lauding the possibilities of the internet, biotechnology and telecommunications for capital, industry and science, many are simultaneously worried that these advances could get into the 'wrong hands' and generate new threats to state security. Ó Tuathail (e.g., 2002b) expands critical geo-politics beyond discourse analysis, to address the 'geopolitical world order' of state alliances, global relations of production, consumption and the spatial processes of trade or 'geopolitical economy' and world 'techno-territorial complexes' that, through scientific advances, the acceleration of transportation and communications and their utilizations, re-shape power relations within, between and beyond states.

The range of topics across Ó Tuathail's numerous publications suggests that many can find material to resonate with their own interests. Alongside re-evaluations of the discourse of foreign policy debates and interviews with major figures within the geo-political canon (e.g., 1992; 1994; 2000a; 2001; 2005a; 2006; 2008a), Ó Tuathail, often presciently, examines contemporary issues. These include case studies of the intersection of politics and control over territory, such as the 1991 Gulf War (e.g., 1997), the

Balkan Wars of the early 1990s and their aftermath (e.g., 1996a; 1996b; 1999; 2002a; 2006; Ó Tuathail and Dahlman, 2004; 2006; Dahlman and Ó Tuathail, 2005a; 2005b), Russia and crises in the Caucasus Mountains in the 2000s (e.g., 2008b; Kolossov and Ó Tuathail, 2007; O'Loughlin et al., 2004; 2006; 2008). One study, centred on reports by Maggie O'Kane in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, argues an 'anti-geopolitics' scripted Bosnia as a place of horrors where the West must intervene, but implicitly maintained that Bosnia remains a place that is beyond the Western political sphere (Ó Tuathail, 1996b: 182). Ó Tuathail's initial examinations of Bosnia in US policy discourse were widely applauded; Smith (2000: 365) claimed they comprise 'the most fertile and adventurous critique of a geo-political tradition'. Working with Carl Dahlman, Ó Tuathail advanced his analyses of Bosnia by comparing official political discourse, the language and practical impacts of treaties and legislation, and personal experiences recounted by interviewees. Exploring how the often brutal process of ethnic cleansing established new 'facts on the ground' that shaped subsequent land allocations and created 'new landscape[s] of land plots and housing settlements' (Ó Tuathail and Dahlman, 2006: 305), Ó Tuathail extends critical geo-politics to interrogate both the material and discursive process of state formation.

KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

In the name of heterogeneity and flexibility, Ó Tuathail frequently avoids defining 'critical geopolitics', 'geopolitics', 'territory', 'space' and 'sovereignty'.

Some critics question such definitional malleability, claiming that this, coupled with the diverse philosophical sources drawn upon by Ó Tuathail, produce 'theoretically inconstant' assessments (Stephanson, 2000: 381). Others contend that Ó Tuathail's work represents an 'extreme' critical geopolitics and is too dismissive of, and 'disinterest[ed]' in, theorisation (Kelly, 2006: 35, 40). Further, Kelly (2006: 42–3) maintains that although Ó Tuathail and colleagues have taken the understanding of geo-politics beyond current thought and practice in political science, despite their suggestion that a critical approach is a step towards 'emancipation' and 'the ending of hegemonic exploitation,' critical geo-politics offers 'neither a clear characterisation of a better society nor a specific road map for attaining such an improvement.'

Critical Geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996a) was well received. Heffernan (2000: 347) comments that the book is '[i]maginative, intellectually ambitious ... engaging [and] outstanding' and Sharp (2000: 361) claims *Critical Geopolitics* to be 'vital'. The text stimulated a symposium at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in 1997, subsequently published in *Political Geography*. In the ensuing debate, three contentions emerged. Firstly, Ó Tuathail is challenged for over-relying on textual data to the detriment of other empirical materials, such as maps, something that is curious given the importance of visual representation to both the geographical imagination and foreign policy strategy (see Heffernan, 2000; Smith, 2000; Sparke, 2000; Stephanson, 2000). Secondly, issues of embodiment and positionality of both author and subjects were raised; as were, thirdly, contentions that Ó Tuathail's text is inadvertently elitist, focusing on a few 'great men' in the field of geopolitics (Sharp, 2000), some suggesting that Ó Tuathail does not do enough to locate himself outside this canon. Dodds (1998)

adds that Ó Tuathail's focus is overwhelmingly Anglo-American.

In sum, critics suggest that Ó Tuathail is guilty of what he accuses in others – an assertion of a transcendental viewpoint from where the world and its political order can be viewed – the difference being that Ó Tuathail takes a counterhegemonic rather than hegemonic perspective. Sharp (2000) maintains that Ó Tuathail elides geo-political discourses in other fields, such as popular culture, and Smith (2000: 367) maintains that although Ó Tuathail is sensitive to '[r]eading race and gender into the texts of geopolitics', this 'is simultaneously . . . a way of reading class out'. Stephanson (2000: 382) charges that Ó Tuathail's 'attack on totalization' in geo-political discourse and foreign policy itself 'turns out ... to be a totalization', reducing the power of Ó Tuathail's interrogation

to intellectual games of deconstruction rather than empirical assessments of the material impacts of geo-politics on people's lives. Ó Tuathail (2000c) responded to these challenges, and his subsequent work demonstrates an expansion of critical geopolitics beyond the texts of policy elites to studies detailing the processes of post-war house building and settlement in Bosnia and examining geo-political discourse in popular films such as 2001's *Behind Enemy Lines* (Ó Tuathail, 2005b). Stimulated by Ó Tuathail's influential contribution to 'critical geopolitics' – he magnanimously credits **Peter Taylor** with coining this term during discussion at the University of Illinois (Ó Tuathail, 2000) – contemporary analysis of political discourses and their constructions of spatial power relations are hence advancing political geography into significant new arenas.

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