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# Introduction

In recent years human geography has seen a considerable blurring of its constituent sub-disciplines. The traditional divisions between economic, social, political and cultural geography seem increasingly irrelevant as geographers focus more and more on the connections between them. It no longer makes sense (perhaps it never did) to think of separate economic, political and cultural 'spheres', each with distinctive geographical conditions and effects. Among others, Marxist geographers have charted the connections which make the economy 'political', feminist geographers have thought in new ways about the division between public and private which has undermined any essential distinction between the social and the economic and political, while environmental geographers have shown the importance of understanding the ways our use of, and impact on, the environment depends on particular cultural constructions of 'nature' and of our relationships to it.

One of the liveliest of these refashionings of the study of human geography has taken place in social and cultural geography. Among other things this has involved a focus on a range of new concerns, including:

- (1) *The communication of meaning.* Drawing from work in cultural and media studies, geographers have become increasingly interested in the ways in which social life is rendered meaningful to people. The process of ascribing meaning ('signification') is seen as an unequal one, so that different meanings operate to advance the interests of different people or social groups. Meaning is not seen as transparent and clear, but as socially-produced and contested.
- (2) *The production and effects of discourses.* Related to (1), the concept of discourse refers to a range of meanings, or meaningful statements, which come to be linked together in a broader framework. The framework, or discourse, provides a particular 'mode of thinking' which allows us to understand things in a certain way. For example, a discourse might identify some issues as more important than others, or some forms of behaviour as better than others. They aren't (necessarily) more important or better in any absolute sense, but they are made to seem so by the discourse.
- (3) *Human subjectivity and identity.* Our 'subjectivity' is 'who we are', or rather 'who we feel ourselves to be' and 'who we are made to be' by society. Social and cultural geographers have been interested in the development of

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different subjectivities and identities in different places and among different social groups, and the ways in which the construction of identities happens through the operation of different discourses. Many writers have suggested that as individuals we all have multiple identities: we are different people in different contexts.

- (4) *Critique of geographical knowledge.* Geographical knowledge does not consist of transparent and value-free truths in the way that has often been assumed in the past. Like all knowledge, it is the product of particular social and political contexts, and as such it advances certain interests, often at the expense of others. One aspect of the 'cultural turn' in geography has involved investigating the process through which geographical knowledge has been (and is) produced and uncovering the (often unequal) power relations which it serves.
- (5) *The operation of human agency.* Human agency refers to the capacities of human beings and their role in producing social outcomes. While human beings are not able just to do anything they please, human agency does 'make a difference', even if its effects are not always intended. Human agency is always situated in and conditioned by particular geographical contexts. Unequal access to resources and knowledge means that the capacity of some groups and individuals to 'make a difference' is greater than that of others.

Although first highlighted in social and cultural geography, interest in these issues has recently spread much more widely through the discipline of human geography as a whole (not least because of the blurring of boundaries between its constituent parts). The relationship between discourses, knowledge, meaning, agency have long been seen as political, though this has often been interpreted as referring to informal politics, or 'politics with a small p'. Recent work by political geographers has begun to question this assumption and explore how these questions of human agency and thought can be applied to the formal institutions of politics, of 'Politics with a capital P'. That is, the institutions and processes of the state, government and formal political organizations which have in the past made up the subject-matter of the sub-discipline of 'Political Geography'.

The purpose of this book is both to present these new stands of political geography to a wider audience and to contribute in a small way to the further blurring of the various sub-disciplines. Our principal interest is in how we might best interpret and understand changes in the complex relationship between geography and politics. We are not concerned to present a full account of all the detailed shifts in the political geography (however defined) of the world around us. Rather, what we do want to do is to illustrate through selected examples what a Political Geography which is sensitive to Social and Cultural Geography might look like.

Wherever possible we draw on the ideas and research of those geographers who have shaped this field. Where necessary, though, we also refer to the work of those in other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, political

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science and critical international relations, if it illuminates the important issues. We hope the book will be useful and interesting not only to those taking courses in political and cultural geography, but also to all those concerned about the relationship between space, place and political processes.

The book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the characteristics of politics and presents the approach to studying politics which we will be using in the remainder of the book. The remaining eight chapters deal in turn with some of the topics that have constituted the traditional subject-matter of 'Political Geography'. As we have suggested, while the topics are conventional, their treatment is intended to be less so.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the state. Chapter 2 considers the rise of the system of nation-states and the process of state formation. Chapter 3 focuses on the transformation of many liberal-democratic countries from a welfare to a 'workfare' model of labour market and social regulation. Chapter 4 looks at the changing organization and role of the liberal-democratic state in the late twentieth century, examining how the expansion of the state has reshaped notions of political participation. We focus in particular on the changing geographies of citizenship and elections. In Chapter 5, we consider the politics of the city, focusing on the nature of contemporary urban change and the politics of urban infrastructures, gentrification and the public sphere. In Chapter 6, we examine the relationship between identity politics and the development of social movements, charting in particular the transition from organized labour movements centred on trade unions to the emergence of new forms of grass-roots political action. Chapter 7 explores the political geographies of nations, nationalism and regionalism. Like other concepts confronted in this book, we adopt a critical perspective that foregrounds the socially constructed nature of supposedly fixed identities and territorialization. Chapter 8 covers imperialism and the continuing implications of colonialism for the relations between the West, its former colonies and the people who live there. Finally, Chapter 9 explores the concepts of geopolitics and anti-geopolitics. Geopolitics is perhaps the area of political geography that has received the greatest attention since the first edition, and we assess the history of this term and the recent work by scholars in the fields of critical and feminist geopolitics to explore the hidden power/knowledge relations of geopolitical ideas.