

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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Keywords: Political geography, geopolitics, history, situation at present

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. First and Second Stages of Development
 3. Third Stage
 4. Fourth Stage
 5. The World Systems Theory
 6. Concepts of the State in Political Geography
 7. Postmodernism and the Construction of Space
 8. Territoriality, Ethnic, and Political Identity
 9. The Problem of Scale, the Concept of Place, and the Contextual Approach
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Political geography is an academic discipline studying the interaction between political activity of people and integral geographical space, which includes physical, economic, social, cultural, and political spaces.

Their superposition differentiates integral geographical space and creates socioeconomic and natural conditions for all forms of human activity, and geographical places with their unique history, structure of economy and settlements, composition of population, its identity, culture, way of life, etc. In other words, political geography deals with the relationship between political activity and geographical conditions under which it develops.

The contemporary set of subjects of political-geographical studies is being shaped as a result of (1) an analysis of “traditional” problems of human geography from a political perspective (for instance, the restructuring of urban space or the localization of nuclear power stations, protection of the environment, or the spatial distribution of ethnic minorities) and (2) a study of properly political problems by geographical methods (the role of the state, conflict resolution, or electoral systems).

Definitions, the object, and the structure of political geography are considered. Most attention is paid to the history of world political geography: to the stages of its development since the late nineteenth century and especially to theoretical achievements and approaches of this discipline nowadays—to the origin, problems, and concepts of what is termed the “new” political geography.

1. Introduction

The term “political geography” has been used at least since the eighteenth century, when it was understood as a set of information on the political organization of countries, new territories, and markets involved in the world or the national economy. However, political geography as a particular discipline emerged much later, when representations about its content, categories, and methods started to be formed because of the accumulation of geographical knowledge. The year of the publication of Friedrich Ratzel’s *Politische Geographie* (1897) can be considered the birth of contemporary political geography.

For a discipline pretending to the status of a separate branch of knowledge, it is important to define the object and the key relation it studies, its methodology and concrete methods, the system of categories, and specific problems.

The objects of political geography are political-territorial systems—interrelated territorial combinations of different elements of the political sphere (political and administrative boundaries, states and groups of state, national and supra-national political organizations, central and local governments, etc.).

The objective of political geography is to reveal the unity of political activity and of geographical factors of social development. In other words, this discipline studies the interaction of political activity with geographical space. The latter is understood as a combination of “particular” geographical spaces—of physical, economic, social, and cultural spaces. Their juxtaposition creates the differentiation of the integral geographical space and, respectively, of socioeconomic and natural conditions for political and other forms of human activity.

The political space is a form of being of political phenomena and political-geographical objects, of their mutual location, coexistence, interactions, relationships, intensity, etc. For political activity, extremely important are the structure of population, its level and way of life, political culture, and identity, which vary in space and time. Economic, social, cultural, and political spaces change at different rates: for instance, economic transformations are usually much more dynamic than changes in traditions, values, political culture, and in the political-territorial organization of society. So, the border between two countries that has not existed for very long can be perfectly seen in the cultural landscape, the people’s identity, and their political behavior. Basic features of some regional political cultures demonstrate a phenomenal stability, despite radical economic and social transformation of society.

In the system of geographical disciplines, political geography can be considered a synthetic branch interpreting and summarizing the results obtained in historical geography, cultural geography, geography of population, economic geography, etc.

Practical interest in political geography and the relationship between theoretical and applied studies has fluctuated with cycles in the development of the world economy, the state of international relations, and the evolution of human geography as a whole (Table

1). It is possible to distinguish four stages in the development of political geography since the late nineteenth century.

	Main social processes and historical features	Main social ideas and tendencies in the social sciences	Dominant scale of political geography studies	Key authors
1897–1914	Imperial rivalry between Great Britain, USA, Germany, and other countries; colonialism; rapid industrialization and urbanization; the appearance of mass socialist parties; the creation of nation-states	Social Darwinism; “primordialist” theories of nations and nationalism	The world as a whole, the state	Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, André Siegfried
1915–1949	World Wars I and II and the consequent remaking of the world political map; creation of the USSR and the bipolar geopolitical world order	The organic theory of state; the theory of “natural” borders	The world as a whole and the state; both of these scales in their integrity	Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman, Jacques Ancel, and others
1950–1973/75	Rapid industrial growth and relative social stability in most developed countries; geopolitical rivalry between West and East; decolonization; growing signs of crisis and the appearance of challenges to U.S. hegemony by the end of the period	The dominance of positivism and the diffusion of new quantitative methods; the wide popularity of neo-Marxist theories, as well as of the “ecological approach” in electoral studies	The state; the world as whole	Richard Hartshorn, Steven Jones, Jean Gottmann, and others
Since 1973/75	Coming of the postindustrial	The theories of long waves of	All the scales and their	John Agnew, Paul Claval,

	epoch; globalization of the economy and of social life as a whole; disintegration of the USSR and the socialist system	economic and political development; the structuralist theory; the concept of post-modernism	interrelations	Kevin Cox, David Harvey, Michel Foucher, Ronald Johnston, Yves Lacoste, John O’Loughlin, Peter Taylor, and others
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Table 1. The stages of the development of world political geography

2. First and Second Stages of Development

The first stage ran from the late 1890s until approximately the beginning of World War I. It was marked by the struggle between Great Britain, the U.S., and Germany for world dominance, by rapid social transformations in the advanced countries provoked by industrialization and urbanization, the creation of mass left parties, and strengthening of the nationalist ideology. In the history of political geography, this period is characterized by the first wave of theoretical generalizations. The works of Ratzel, Mackinder, and Siegfried had wide social resonance.

The second stage was mainly the interwar period, but embraced also the late 1940s. Among a great number of applied studies that appeared in this period were classical political-geographical descriptions focused on such themes as state borders, the composition and the history of state territory, territorial disputes and claims, separatism, etc. Geopolitical publications of the same years, especially numerous in Germany under the Nazi regime, in France, Great Britain, and, in the 1940s, in the USA, can also be ranked among applied studies. Some political geographers became statesmen, counselors of political leaders, members of governmental commissions created for delimitation of new state borders, and so on.

The unity of the global and national scales of analysis belong to this period. Political geography and geopolitics were considered necessary elements of the national strategy, and geopolitical concepts were being worked out practically in all leading countries. The “organic” theory compared the state with a biological organism undergoing unavoidable life stages, and served to justify “natural” objectives of foreign policy and the struggle for “natural” external borders. After the end of World War II, the Cold War and the shoring up of military-political blocs required a theoretical and ideological justification and applied studies, and therefore stimulated geopolitical works. The success of the state in the competition for access to natural resources and foreign markets was considered a condition necessary to raise the standard of living and to maintain social stability. Usually, social scientists believed that international relations

were an arena of the irreconcilable struggle between nation-states for their vital interests, while they did not see deep contradictions in domestic policy.

Nations were considered to be groups of people united by origin (“blood” kinship), historical past, language, and culture, and existing since time immemorial. According to this approach, each person belongs to an ethnic group since birth; members of this group are related by mutual engagements and have to fulfill specific functions within it determined by their rank in the social hierarchy. In other words, primordialist views dominated in both academic communities and public opinion.

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Biographical Sketch

Vladimir Kolossov (born in 1953 in Moscow) graduated from Moscow State University in 1975. At present, he is head of the Center of Geopolitical Studies of the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow and chair of the International Geographical Union Commission on Political Geography. He is also invited professor at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, France. Professor Kolossov initiated and was the principal investigator or co-investigator in a series of joint projects that his center was working on with American, Dutch, French, and Italian colleagues. Professor Kolossov organized a number of international conferences under the sponsorship of the Commission on Political Geography in Russia and other countries. He has lectured at the universities of Moscow, Paris, Amsterdam, etc.

His recent publications include articles in *Political Geography*, *GeoJournal*, *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* (now *Eurasian Geography and Economics*), *Geopolitics*, and other international and Russian academic journals and chapters in monographs devoted to the problems of electoral geography, ethnic conflicts and diasporas, international borders, geopolitics, and federalism. Professor Kolossov is the author of eight books, including *Atlas de la Russie et des pays proches* (Paris: Documentation Française, 1995, co-edited with R. Brunet and D. Eckert), *La Russie [la construction de l'identité nationale]* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999, with D. Eckert), *Political Geography and Geopolitics* (Moscow: Aspekt-Press, 2001, in Russian, with N. Mironenko), *La collocazione geopolitica della Russia: rappresentazioni e realtà* (Torino: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2001, editor), *Europe Between Political Geography and Geopolitics* (Roma: Società Geografica Italiana, 2001, co-edited with M.-P. Pagnini and M. Antonsich), and *The World in the Eyes of Russian Citizens: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Moscow: Foundation for Public Opinion, 2002, in Russian).