Critical Geopolitics

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Introduction

Until very recently, the term “geopolitics” was striking in its complete and utter absence from the lexicon of European institutions, as well as within scholarship in European Studies. As an edited collection from the early 2000s noted in its opening pages, the EU as a geopolitical player “remains largely an ‘unidentified international object’”, with the even more vexed question of “European power” falling into “the gaps within the literature of international political analysis” (Elgström and Smith 2006, 1). Critical geopolitical scholar James Sidaway put it even more succinctly in a 2006 editorial, noting the seemingly insurmountable challenge of deciphering the geopolitical “nature of the (EU) beast” (2006, 4). Even with the appointment in 2009 of a new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), scholars remained doubtful whether the EU could develop a distinct “geopolitical persona”. As political geographer Merje Kuus (2010, 381) noted at that moment, while the creation of the EEAS signalled the emergence of “a European diplomatic culture and the operation of the Union as a (geo)political subject”, it was entirely unclear how effective the Service could be in crafting a single “European” geopolitical vision and praxis. The EEAS reflected, in many ways, the strange nature of the EU geopolitical beast. The Service was to be

independent, but accountable to the Council, the Commission, and the Parliament, with its own headquarters, budget, and staff, but its diplomats are to be either seconded or transferred from the Commission, the Council Secretariat, and the member states’ diplomatic services. The EEAS’s geographic and thematic desks are to manage the Union’s external relations, except in enlargement, trade, and development. The agency’s relationship with national foreign ministries is to be complementary because EU foreign policy is supposedly agreed upon by the member states, but nobody really believes this. (Kuus 2010, 381)

Although many of the ambiguities and institutional complexities identified by Kuus in that instance have persisted, much has changed over the past 10 years. The appointment of HR
Federica Mogherini and the subsequent drafting of the EU’s Global Strategy in the summer of 2016 marked important shifts in this respect, with the language of “classical” geopolitics entering the EU’s lexicon much more explicitly (see, for e.g. Mogherini 2017; on the Global Strategy: Tocci 2016). Although scholars have questioned the true extent of the “geopoliticisation” of EU foreign policy discourse, and especially of EU foreign policy practice (see Nitiou and Sus 2019), a significant (at least semantic) shift does appear to be taking place, with the European Council’s 2019–2024 Strategic Agenda explicitly calling for a concerted European geopolitical strategy (European Council 2019). This long-standing reticence of the EU to admit to being a “geopolitical actor” accounts, in many ways, for the fact that the relationship between European Studies and Critical Geopolitics appears, at first glance, to be under-developed; at least in its attention to what have been the traditional concerns of “geopolitical” scholarship.

However, and as we hope to outline in this brief overview, a wide range of critical geopolitical work has contributed in important ways to understanding the changing nature of the European project, in its external but also internal dimensions (and, indeed, complicating this apparent spatial distinction). Drawing on critical geopolitical approaches, scholars have examined the longer and more recent histories of European integration and their implicit “geographical imaginations” (looking, for instance, at the (geo)political “work” done by inherently spatial concepts such as subsidiarity and cohesion); others have turned their attention, instead, to the different scales of EU action, from cities and regions (with work on urban geopolitics as well as regional development agendas), to EU external action, including both foreign and security policy and development aid. Critical geopolitical approaches have thus investigated how the integrating European polity has been socio-spatially constructed, through different processes and on multiple scales. At the same time, critical geopolitics has contributed important scholarship inquiring what the EU means to various audiences, how such meanings are forged (discursively, as well as materially) – and how those meanings in turn influence what the EU is and what it does. Such scholarship has thus examined how the spaces of EU power and “actorness” are discursively narrated and legitimized, in both formal policy documents and political “performances” as well as in popular geographies (such as the mass media) – but also how such discursive practices are indelibly bound up and sustained by material practices of the “Europeanization” of spaces, both within and beyond the Union’s borders (see also Carta’s chapter on “Discursive Approaches” and Lawrence’s chapter on “Governmentality Approaches” in this volume). In the section below, we summarize the emergence of Critical Geopolitics as an approach, then proceeding to discuss its contribution to a critical European Studies research agenda.

The troubled histories of geopolitics and the “critical” turn

The term “geopolitics” has a long and troubled history. Its racist and environmental-determinist origins are commonly seen as drawing upon ideas rooted in colonial and imperial geographical traditions of the end of the 1800s, most visibly in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. A key figure in the development of modern geopolitical thought was German zoologist and geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Ratzel admired Darwinian theories but regarded them as lacking attention to space and spatial configurations. For Ratzel, Darwin’s struggle for existence was a struggle for space and his theories should thus also be applicable to human societies and political structures (Reuber 2016, 2012; Heffernan 2000). Influenced by Ratzel’s social/political Darwinism, the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén is frequently cited as the first to actually have used the term “geopolitics” in 1899 to “denote the territorial aspects of the state”. Kjellén and Ratzel were instrumental in developing “geopolitics as an organic...
theory of the state” whereby the state is “not only bound to earth but also determined by it” (Moisio 2015, 221; see also Ó Tuathail 1996). Such classical geopolitical understandings spurred the development of a number of national geopolitical “schools” from the early 1900s onwards, most prominently in Germany, Italy, France and the UK, but also in Japan. Throughout the long 20th century, “geopolitics” served as pseudo-scientific legitimation for the militarist, racist, fascist and imperial expansion of the world’s great powers, most prominently in the Geopolitik of Nazi Germany (Bassin 2005; Natter 2003) and the Italian school of Geopolitica (Antonsich 2009; Atkinson and Dodds 2000).

The emergence of a “critical geopolitics” towards the end of the 20th century was precisely motivated by the rejection of this violent past. The forerunners of what became known as Critical Geopolitics even rejected the term geopolitics completely.Gearóid Ó Tuathail (a.k.a. Gerard Toal), in many ways considered the “founder” of the approach, describes his first encounter with the term “critical geopolitics” as follows: “I didn’t like the term at all. I protested: ‘I’m not a geopolitician! I don’t want anything to do with geopolitics’. I only adopted the term under protest’ (Bachmann and Toal 2019, 151). Ó Tuathail’s reaction was illustrative of the resistance amongst critical scholars to what was commonly understood as “geopolitical thought” until the 1990s. Critical Geopolitics emerged, in fact, as a direct rebuttal of such classical geopolitical thought, rejecting its geo-determinist nature, its focus on territory as the sole spatial category of analysis, and its state-centricity. Also, importantly, it rejected geopolitics’ direct ties to politics and geography’s infamous function as “an aid to the practice of statecraft” (Ó Tuathail 1987, 197); or, as surmised in the title of French radical geographer Yves Lacoste’s 1976 book (re-published in 2012) ‘la géographie, ça sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre’ (Lacoste 1976/2012).

Over the past three decades, scholarship in Critical Geopolitics has, not focussed on great power politics, but rather on the deconstruction and problematization of hegemonic discourses and power relations (Ó Tuathail 1996; Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998). Influenced by post-structuralism, and emerging alongside similar developments in “critical” international relations theory (most importantly, the early work of Ashley 1987; Campbell 1992; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Walker 1993), Critical Geopolitics analysed the taken-for-granted constructions on which conventional international politics is based (and, accordingly, conventional political geographic readings of politics). By refusing to accept “reality” as presented by dominant discourses, these analyses explicitly called into question the very foundations of geopolitics and international politics. Their explicit aim was to:

subvert the discursive practices of conventional politics, calling into question all the silences and taken-for-granted constructions on which they are based. [If we] refuse to accept reality as presented […], numerous new ways of looking at politics are opened up. These challenge the conventional notions of both scholarship and political practice. Theory is not just a tool of analysis here, rather it too is the object of analysis, following the Foucauldian theme of asking questions about the production of questions. (Dalby 1991, 269, emphasis added)

From its inception in the 1990s, Critical Geopolitics has indeed had at its centre a questioning engagement with key assumptions regarding the constitution and workings of (political) power relations, and a focus on the analysis of how dominant discourses shape geopolitical agency and processes (see also Carta’s chapter on “Discursive Approaches” and Lawrence’s chapter on “Governmentality Approaches” in this volume). Early writings in this tradition called, in fact, for geopolitics to be “critically re-conceptualized as a discursive practice” (Ó’Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 192), drawing attention to “the politics of the production of global political space
by dominant intellectuals, institutions, and practitioners of statecraft in practices that constitute “global politics”’ (Ó Tuathail 1996, 185).

Since the 1990s, Critical Geopolitics has evolved and broadened as both a methodological and conceptual lens for geopolitical inquiry which encompasses “various ways of unpacking the tropes and epistemologies of dominant geographies and scriptings of political space” (Power and Campbell 2010, 244; see also Dodds et al. 2013; Moisio 2015; Bachmann 2019). John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge’s focus on political spatialities beyond the nation-state (including firms, social movements, international organizations, etc.) in their influential Mastering Space (1995) provided a crucial contribution in this respect, interrogating geopolitical agency and constellations that transcended the power hierarchies of a nation-state dominated international system.

Equally important was their attention to the material regulation and intellectual representation of the “international political economy”, a preoccupation that would remain central to certain strands of critical geopolitical scholarship. At the core of early Critical Geopolitics, therefore, lay the emphasis on the socially constructed, rather than naturally given, practices and ideas through which the international political economy was “realized geographically” (Agnew and Corbridge 1995, 4–5). The aim of this early scholarship was thus to “bear witness to the irredeemable plurality of space and the multiplicity of possible political constructions of space” (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 2–3).

As such, at its origins, Critical Geopolitics was not concerned so much with the (re)formulation of geopolitical concepts, but rather sought primarily to unmask geopolitical discourses and imaginations as social and political constructions, querying how such constructions and discourses create “realities”. In the words of Simon Dalby (1991, 274), along with Ó Tuathail a key scholar in the development of this approach, the role of Critical Geopolitics was to be “nothing less than a recognition of the importance of studying the political operation of forms of geographical understanding, recognizing that [all] geo-graphs are specifications of political reality that have political effect” (emphasis added). The aim of critical geopolitical analysis was, then, to expose “the politics of the geographical specification of politics” (Dalby 1991, 274). In so doing, Critical Geopolitics drew strongly on feminist, postmodern and postcolonial readings, asking ‘who talks about what and whom, for whom, and from which position?’ (Reuber and Wolkersdorfer 2001, 7, author translation; see also Hyndman 2007) (see also Kinnvall’s chapter on “Postcolonialism” and Abels’ and MacRae’s chapter on “Gender Approaches” in this volume).

Not just powerful states and powerful men: The fields of Critical Geopolitics

Over the past two decades, Critical Geopolitics has greatly extended both its methodological and conceptual repertoire, as well as its range of focus. Scholars inspired by this approach understand the “making of geopolitics” as not only dependent on government texts and actions, or the speeches and deeds of “powerful statesmen”, but also as expressed on other scales and in other sites, from classrooms and city streets to the president’s office, and as including all those mundane strategies that constantly and often unquestioningly (re)produce purportedly natural orderings (Lossau 2002, 78). Critical Geopolitics today can be said to be about the analysis of power relations not only on the scale of global politics, but on all scales of geographical inquiry, starting from the human body to the family, the neighbourhood, the city, the sub-national region, the nation, the macro-region and the world. Geopolitics is thus seen as being constituted in and through a variety of cultural, social and economic texts, gestures and practices, articulated by a variety of agents, formal and informal, in a variety of sites, both material as well as virtual.
Critical Geopolitics scholars have structured these heuristically in three intertwined dimensions: Formal, practical and popular geopolitics (see O’Loughlin et al. 2005). *Formal* geopolitics comprises the “formalized theories and grand strategic visions of geopolitical intellectuals” (Ó Tuathail 1999, 113) as they are primarily advanced by geopolitical “strategy makers”, such as public intellectuals and thinkers or think tanks, research institution or academia. *Practical* geopolitics refers to what Gérald Ó Tuathail calls the “everyday practice of statecraft” (ibid, 111). This implies concrete geopolitical action by practical geopolitical actors, such as politicians, civil servants and public office holders, etc., as well as geopolitical reasoning articulated by public institutions and channels (at a variety of scales). *Popular* geopolitics, on the other hand, has at its core the interest in popular culture and the mundane, “commonsensical”, production of geopolitical knowledge, including in film, television, the visual arts, literature, newspapers and, of recent, social and other online media (including gaming). Such popular forms and sites of geopolitics both shape and are shaped by formal and practical geopolitical imaginations and agendas (Dittmer and Dodds 2008). In this sense, the trinity of formal, practical and popular geopolitics is not to be considered exclusive. Ideally, these “fields” are to be understood as interlinked and employed in shifting combinations (Ciuta and Klinke 2010).

Indeed, over the past two decades especially, critical geopolitical scholarship has attempted to go beyond some of its early focus on “dominant intellectuals, institutions, and practitioners of statecraft” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 185), while also extending its gaze beyond its original deconstructionist focus on texts. The work of Müller (2008), for instance, employs Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of discourse and calls for the inclusion of social practices into discourse analysis (see also Carta’s chapter on “Discursive Approaches” and Saurugger’s chapter on “Practice Approaches” in this volume). Sharp’s (2011) work on subaltern geopolitics and McConnell’s work on non-state diplomacy (McConnell 2016; see also Dittmer and McConnell 2015), on the other hand, has helped extend the focus on other actors and sites of geopolitical production.

At the same time, Critical Geopolitics has been methodologically enriched by new approaches and methodologies. This comprises ethnography (Megoran 2006; Bachmann 2016) including institutional ethnographies (most prominently, Kuus 2014; Jones and Clark 2015) and also, more broadly, engagement with the practice turn (in European Studies, see Adler-Nissen, 2016). Much recent work has focused specifically on the role of performance and affect in geopolitical practice (especially Dittmer 2017; Dittmer and McConnell 2015; McConnell 2016). Such work builds on a much longer body of research by feminist geopolitics scholars on affective and embodied geopolitics, including the geopolitics of the everyday: Highlighted by Dowler and Sharp (2001) already in the early years of critical geopolitical scholarship, and extended by scholars such as Pain, Smith and Staeheli with their work on the “geopolitics of fear” and “intimacy geopolitics” (Pain 2009, 2010; Pain and Smith 2008; Pain and Staeheli 2014). Most recently, scholars have also added a focus on materialities to Critical Geopolitics. As Squire suggested in her 2015 piece “Re-shaping critical geopolitics?: the materialist challenge”, while concerns with the affective and embodied dimensions have by now become an important part of critical geopolitical work, the field as a whole has continued to privilege “representation, culture and interpretation” (Squire 2015, 140). Squire argued, rather, for critical geopolitical approaches able to capture what she termed the varied “*material/discursive intra-actions* that cut across such ontological, analytical, and disciplinary divides”, and focused “not so much on political performance as it is on the mutual enactment or co-constitution of subjects, objects, and environments” (Squire 2015, 141).
The call to go “beyond the representational” has also been taken up by one of the founders of the field, Geraóid Ó Tuathail, who in his latest book, *Near Abroad*, calls for a similarly “thick” geopolitical analysis of the complexities of the contemporary world, an analysis able to capture the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and peoples.

Grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world, it [thick geopolitics] strives to describe the geopolitical forces, networks, and interactions that configure places and states. It recognizes that local conditions matter, that agency is rarely singular, that power is exercised geographically, and that location, distance, and place influence its operation. (Ó Tuathail 2017, 279)

Such thick analysis differs from and gives more depth to our understanding of the world than approaches “viewing geopolitics as a grand game” (Murphy et al. 2018, 293) between the world’s major powers. And it is precisely this sort of “thick” account of the different spatialities of the European project, within, at, and beyond Europe’s borders, that scholarship informed by critical geopolitical approaches is able to offer, and we outline some of its contributions to date below.

**Critical geopolitical contributions to European Studies**

We can summarize the contribution of work in the critical geopolitics tradition to European Studies around three broad topics (for a more detailed overview, see the review article by Moisio et al 2013, to which we also contributed):

1. *The EU’s self-representation as a geopolitical and “global” actor and, related, the perceptions of EU actorness abroad;*

2. Critical perspectives on *local and regional development* and, more generally, *space- and scale-making in EU policy;* and

3. A wide range of scholarship on *the bounding of Europe* – both symbolic (for e.g. the framing of the borders between East and West) as well as material, with critical work on *border and migration management* at and beyond the borders of the EU.

Work on the “geographical imaginations” underpinning the European project, both internally and in its external projections, has been an important part of critical geopolitics scholars’ analyses. “Myths of origin” have served as a particularly important support to all national geopolitical visions (see Dijink 1996), and Europe – both as a project and as a geopolitical subject – has its own set of founding myths, and associated set of mythologized geopolitical imaginations. Scholars such as Foster (2015) or Pollard and Sidaway (2002) have interrogated the role of symbols and visual cultures, in particular cartographic representations, in the making of the EU, and their longer-standing imperial and colonial legacies. More recently, others have turned a critical gaze to the ‘carto-political’ constitution of the European Union as a bounded space (Bueno-Lacy and van Houtum 2015 and the work of the ‘antiAtlas’ collective, Parizot et al. 2014).

More specifically, and directly engaging with the large body of work in European Studies on Europe as a civilian or normative power, work in the critical geopolitics tradition has extended these analyses with attention to their *spatial* dimensions, also drawing attention to their longer-standing genealogies in classical geopolitics. Geographers including Bachmann (2011), Bachmann and Sidaway (2009) or Hooper and Kramsch (2007) have interrogated in depth the imperial legacies of Europe’s imagined world roles, while related scholarship has examined the EU’s self- and other-positioning in transatlantic relations (Bialasiewicz and Minca 2005;
Elden and Bialasiewicz 2006). At the same time, other work has contributed to understandings of how the world “returns the gaze” on Europe, and thus how context-specific articulations and interpretations of the EU’s global role, are inescapably interwoven with other spatial relations, including colonial histories as well as those of im- and emigration (among others, Bachmann and Müller 2015; Ferrer-Gallardo and Kramsch 2016; Ferrer-Gallardo and van Houtum 2013) (see also Kinnvall’s chapter on “Postcolonialism” in this volume).

An important focus of critical geopolitics scholars’ attention in this regard has been the Mediterranean, for decades the privileged space of EU external action and imagined, since colonial times, as Europe’s “natural” space of responsibility. The work of geographers such as Alun Jones (2006, 2009) has been key in better understanding both the making of such imaginaries – and their very material effects, both on EU policy “for” the Mediterranean, and within the partner states on the southern and eastern shores. A number of other scholars have extended this work, providing critical analyses of the spatialities, real and imagined, of the European Neighbourhood Policy (including Boedeltje and van Houtum 2011, Dimitrova and Kramsch 2017; Scott et al. 2018). The EU’s “East” has also been the object of extensive critical geopolitical research, including on the geopolitics of the accession of Eastern and Central European states “into Europe” (Kuus 2004, 2005, 2007; Jones and Clark 2008; Scott and Liikanen 2010), but also interrogating wider relations between the EU, Russia and the Eastern Neighbourhood (Nitiou and Sus 2019).

Such critical geopolitical perspectives on the making of the EU’s Neighbourhoods provide an important counterpart to the existing literature in European Studies, with much of it still marked by “diffusionist” understandings of the externalization of EU governance and the “stretching” of EU actoriness in space. As this scholarship has contributed to highlighting, what is at play is rather a much more complex and fluid process of reworking the confines of what and where Europe is; a series of constantly shifting re-articulations of European economic but also political-juridical and regulatory spaces. Indeed, as such work has highlighted (much of it relying on in-depth empirical research), Neighbourhood “region-making”, whether in the Mediterranean or at the EU’s Eastern borders involves a multiplicity of political and economic projects at a variety of geographical scales, sometimes complementary but often contradictory. It highlights how the making of “European spaces” is built on a shifting and tenuous balance between integration and exclusion, and an ongoing re-definition of what is to be shared, how, and with whom, choosing to make selectively mobile certain categories of capital, goods, labour and investment. The work of Casas-Cortes et al. (2013) and Pickles and Smith (2016), for instance, has shown how the “bordering” of a Euro-Mediterranean region relies on just such differential inclusion and exclusion, made possible by a wide range of policies and practices ranging from selective visa liberalization, to selective market access for different products such as fisheries or agricultural goods, but also through the extension of the EU regulatory space via the dissemination of technical and sanitary standards in industrial and agricultural production systems, allowing these to “dialogue” with (and thus access) the Single Market (see also Smith 2015).

The above described scholarship on the re-making of the EU’s Neighbourhoods is closely related to critical geopolitical work on the internal “spatial constitution” of Europe and its associated geographical imaginations. A long-standing body of work has focused, indeed, on the Europeanization of territorial structures and spatial policies, highlighting the discursive nature of the making of a rationally-organized single market and “space of flows”. Critical geopolitical approaches have highlighted how European space-making (including the European Spatial Development Perspective [ESDP] and EU-orchestrated regionalization) is explicitly about the political production of space, rather than a non-political implementation of supranational
policies in an already-existing political space (Bialasiewicz et al. 2013; Clark and Jones 2008; Jones and Clark 2008; Kramsch and Hooper 2004; Luukkonen and Moisio 2016; Moisio and Luukkonen 2015; Painter 2002). Other studies have highlighted how the construction of the supranational EU political space has been a highly contested process, marked by struggles over the location of power and authority, and how Europe means different things in different places, and that the politics of integration evokes different responses, tactics and strategies in different geographical contexts (Antonsich 2008, 2010; Smith 2002, 2013, 2015). The active production of political space in the EU has also been approached from the perspective of a critical political economy of scale. These include the promotion of "city-regionalism", which arguably has become one of the central spatial constituents of the EU’s geo-economic persona, and has been an integral part of attempts to build “open” political spaces for the operation of the “EU”ropean economy. As Jonas and Moisio (2018, 351; see also Moisio 2011, 2018) have highlighted in their work, city regionalism has become "a key focus of geopolitical experimentation and economic problem-solving on the part of [EU] states as they strive to construct a more functional trans-national statehood for the 21st century; indeed it might well be becoming central to how states orchestrate international competitiveness". What their work adds in particular, however, is an appreciation of how the different scales of the “local” (here: city-regions), the “European”, and the “international” are constructed in practice in order to enable a specific political economy; as they note, the current vogue for “city regionalism” among European policy makers “needs to be understood not solely as the medium and outcome of territorial reorganizations internal to the state”, but also as “a decisive moment in the internationalization of the state itself” (Jones and Moisio 2018, 351).

The last body of work that we wish to highlight here is the extensive critical geopolitical scholarship on the making of borders in and beyond the territorial boundaries of the Union. This has included research examining the bordering discourses and practices of EU institutional actors, as well as the making of the border regimes of individual member states (for an overview, see Scott et al. 2018). Extensive attention has been given, in particular, to the ways in which the EU extends its border-regimes through recourse to a range of externalized and off-shored border solutions – and how such a spatially-extensive border-regime shapes the EU’s geopolitical relations, in its immediate Neighbourhoods but also with third states across the globe, increasingly bound to the EU by a variety of “mobility partnerships” (see, among others, Bialasiewicz 2012; Casas-Cortes et al. 2016; Collyer 2016; Scott and van Houtum 2009). Work has also looked at the re-scaling of borders within the EU that now enter into, for instance, the spaces of cities (Collyer and King 2015; Darling 2016), as well as the governance of migration through exceptional sites such as the camps, detention centres and “hotspots” that have emerged not just at the EU’s land and sea borders but also within the national territory of Member States (Ferrer-Gallardo and Albet-Mas 2016; Tazzioli 2018, 2019; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018; Vaughan-Williams 2015; Vradis et al. 2019). It should be noted that much of this scholarship has developed in dialogue with – and inspired by – a broader body of work in critical border studies, not just by geographers. Political sociologist Chris Rumford’s conceptualization of “border-work” (2008, 2009) was an inspiration to many of the critical geopolitical analyses that followed (for an overview of this cross-disciplinary conversation, see the collective piece “Lines in the Sand: Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies”, Parker et al. (2009).

Most recently, important work has drawn attention to the representational and material geopolitical re-shaping of the Mediterranean as a humanitarian space for Europe’s intervention (most importantly, Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017, 2018; also Garelli and Tazzioli 2018). As Jean-desboz and Pallister-Wilkins (2016) noted in their introduction to a special issue of Mediterranean
Politics on this topic, the making (representational and material) of a “Mediterranean migration crisis space” is key to understanding how EU policies of migration management are currently developing and theirs and other scholars’ research inspired by critical geopolitics approaches has been crucial in this regard. This has also included pioneering work on the role of geo-optical tools such as mapping and other remote sensing and real-time visualization technologies in governing migration at Europe’s sea borders (Tazzioli 2016; Cuttitta 2018a, 2018b).

Future research directions?

As the EU struggles for a new “vision” in order to bolster both domestic legitimacy and support, as well as to re-define its worldly engagements, a critical geopolitical perspective can furnish useful conceptual – and perhaps also practical – tools. One such perspective could be that which Bachmann and Moisio (2019) describe as a ‘Constructive Critical Geopolitics’ (see also Manners’ chapter on “Critical Social Theory Approaches to European Integration” in this volume). This approach goes beyond the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses or geopolitical constellations and opens the door for a more applied, constructive formulation of geopolitical alternatives. It remains centrally concerned with power relations – asymmetrical power relations in particular – and sensitive to historical, spatial, political, economic, social or cultural inequalities. It also remains firmly anchored in Critical Geopolitics’ antiauthoritarian tradition and thus sensitive to the traps of imposing (political) visions as side-effect. Bachmann and Moisio (2019, 14) argue

It is precisely because of its established strength in excavating and deconstructing hegemonic narratives that critical geopolitics has the analytical and explanatory potential to be applied to the construction of possible geopolitical visions. Through its emphasis on accounting for historical, geopolitical and local sensitivities in different time-spaces, critical geopolitics is particularly well suited as an approach for constructive geopolitical visionizing that is sensitive to unequal power relations and the pitfalls of earlier/other “subjective, ethnocentric, essentialist and implicitly authoritarian” (Olson and Sayer 2009, 180) geopolitical accounts.

For European Studies specifically, it could furnish accounts of the European project that are not merely anti-authoritarian, but that are also able to consider the multiple constellations and effects of the European integration process. As we have in part summarized above, critical geopolitical scholarship has drawn attention to the EU’s past and present (and future) neoliberal pushes, its austerity policies, the prioritization of corporate over social interests, and its increasingly violent border and migration regimes. Critical Geopolitics’ focus on the socio-spatial construction of geopolitical power relations at such diverse sites and scales thus offers a rich conceptual and methodological toolbox for studying the “nature of the [EU] beast” (Sidaway 2006). At the same time, a constructive critical geopolitical approach can also offer avenues for re-thinking the European project (and the EU’s role in the world) as a multilateral peace and integration process, stressing the significance of an example that illustrates consensual and non-violent conflict resolution and a mode of political cooperation that is often laborious and cumbersome, but that embodies the rule of law and the rejection of anarchy amongst its members. In particular, at a time of rising nationalism within the EU and beyond, the EU remains a decidedly non-nationalist example that, by its very nature, always has to be sensitive to multiple interests and viewpoints and find ways to mediate those. Critical Geopolitics is well suited to account for such sensitivity and multiple perspectives, not just as a basis for understanding how the Union works, but also for the formulation of future, alternative (geo)political visions.
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