

Geopower and geopolitics in, of, and for the Middle East

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In 1976, Michel Foucault gave a unique interview with the editors of the French geography journal, *Hérodote*. The interviewers pushed him to explicitly reflect on the many spatial concepts that pervade his writing, such as *region*, *province*, *field*, *archipelago*, and *territory*. In one reply, Foucault explained:

People have often reproached me for these spatial obsessions, which have indeed been obsessions for me. But I think through them I did come to what I had basically been looking for: the relations that are possible between power and knowledge. Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power. There is an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory.¹

The geographers were subtly critiquing Foucault for deploying these spatial concepts unreflexively—taking space more as a given rather than something that is politically constructed through such metaphors and ways of knowing the world. Initially on the defensive in this interview, Foucault struggled to grasp the geographers’ line of criticism. But by the interview’s close, he came to see what they were getting at:

I have enjoyed this discussion with you because I’ve changed my mind since we started.... I didn’t see the point of your objection. Now I can see that the problems you put to me about geography are crucial ones for me.... The longer I continue, the more it seems to me that the formation of discourses and the genealogy of knowledge need to be analyzed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power. Tactics and strategies deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organizations of domains which could well make up a sort of geopolitics where my preoccupations would link up with your methods.... Geography must indeed necessarily lie at the heart of my concerns.²

As Foucault came to understand through this interview and later developed in his *Security, Territory, Population* lectures at the Collège de France in 1978,³ geography is fundamentally about the political construction of space. Because geographical ways of knowing are always constituted and mediated through relations of power, geography itself can never be a “neutral” backdrop for human affairs. Geography is, in short, a power–knowledge relationship.⁴

¹ Michel Foucault, “Questions on Geography,” in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007), 177.

² *Ibid.*, 182.

³ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Picador, 2007).

⁴ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 10.

Foucault clearly gleaned some important insights from the French geographers at *Hérodote*, and that scholarly exchange continues in reverse today, as many critical geographers continue to be deeply influenced by Foucault's work. In one form or another, many of us are concerned with what Gearóid Ó Tuathail has termed "geopower"—"the functioning of geographical knowledge not as an innocent body of knowledge and learning but as an ensemble of technologies of power."⁵ Ó Tuathail's seminal work on "critical geopolitics" in the late 1980s, which builds from this concept of geopower, is now one of the most influential threads of research beyond the discipline. Yet beyond geography in Middle Eastern studies, there has been curiously little engagement with critical geopolitics. Indeed, while it is clear from the pages of *IJMES* that regional studies scholars are taking space and geography seriously, this has not been accompanied by intensive engagement with academic geography. In the remainder of this essay, I will thus address the question of what a critical approach to geography and geopolitics can do for scholarship in, of, and for the Middle East.

Most social scientists readily acknowledge that world regions, such as the "Middle East," are political constructions—contested and constantly shifting in popular imaginaries around the world and throughout history. As Anssi Paasi, the leading geographer of regions, argues, they are:

complicated constellations of agency, social relations and power. Regions are institutional structures and processes that are perpetually "becoming" instead of just "being." They have a material basis grounded in economic and political relations. Various time scales come together in such processes. Similarly social institutions such as culture, media and administration are crucial in these processes and in the production and reproduction of certain "structures of expectations" for these units. Such structures are the basis for the narratives of identity, mobilisation of collective memory, and they also constitute the visible and invisible social "gel" based on values, norms and ideologies.⁶

The consensus on the constructed nature of regions notwithstanding, there is little agreement on how or whether scholars should engage with "mesoscale" world regions.⁷ Political geographers Alexander Murphy and John O'Loughlin, for example, have argued that geographers simply cannot ignore them, "however difficult it is to define those regions and however much they are contested."⁸ Other critical scholars, continuing to have an uneasy relationship with the implications of producing geographical knowledge and how to address "the fact that our work always escapes us," are thoroughly agnostic on this issue.⁹ As so many Middle Eastern studies scholars are keenly aware, world region definitions "and the importance of particular topics as research priorities have mostly been thinly disguised (if that) projections of the state's strategic and geopolitical priorities."¹⁰ Regionally focused scholars have reconciled this challenge in diverse ways and I do not want to suggest that one way is more appropriate than another. Rather, what is of particular interest to critical geographers is how scholars themselves

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ Anssi Paasi, "The Resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observations on Regional Dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 133.

⁷ Natalie Koch, "Is a 'Critical' Area Studies Possible?," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (2016): 807–14. See also James D Sidaway, Elaine LE Ho, Jonathan D Rigg, and Chih Yuan Woon, "Area Studies and Geography: Trajectories and Manifesto," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (2016): 777–90.

⁸ Alexander B. Murphy and John O'Loughlin, "New Horizons for Regional Geography," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50 (2009): 245. See also Alexander B Murphy, "Advancing Geographical Understanding: Why Engaging Grand Regional Narratives Matters," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3 (2013): 131–49.

⁹ Koch, "Is a 'Critical' Area Studies Possible?," 809.

¹⁰ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of Field Science*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 9.

become implicated in the very processes of region making through the kinds of questions they ask, the methods they employ, and the narratives they produce.

Area studies research is, in short, an exercise in geopolitics. Take, for example, the fact that the “Middle East” has classically been defined in Western scholarship by the prevailing thematic foci of resource geopolitics, conflict, and borders. Counterexamples notwithstanding, this “norm” has shaped scholars’ capacity to imagine what a “proper” research project in the region would look like. In my own research on soft authoritarian governments in the Arab Gulf states, I have examined a wide range of “feel-good” projects, such as higher education, urban sustainability, sporting mega-events, and nationalist celebrations.¹¹ Such themes clearly do not fit the “structure of expectations”¹² that many American and European observers hold about the Middle East. The fact that they are so rarely discussed is troubling because attending to these topics challenges essentialist thinking about people and places across the region. It is only by pushing beyond these unspoken topical boundaries that geographers and other social scientists will be able to challenge their own practices of region making that define the Middle East as an exceptional space of conflict, petrowealth, and oppression.

Yet the very ability to locate important and insightful research questions that go beyond the sensational press headlines and policy papers demands a critical area studies approach that embraces grounded ethnography and the local as much as it does geopolitical narratives and mesoscale world regions. In considering the future challenges and opportunities that Middle East studies scholars face in knowing and narrating the world through an area studies framework, Ó Tuathail’s formulation of “geopolitics” is an especially useful way to keep knowledge production at the heart of geopolitical analysis. Not only is geographical knowledge always political, it is also always multiscalar and produced by an innumerable set of actors that seek to know and narrate the world in a particular fashion. Geographers have been pioneers in developing multiscalar theoretical and empirical research frames and, on this basis, are well positioned to advance critical work on, in, and for the Middle East by helping scholars not only to better answer the questions we already have about the region, but also to pose the ones we don’t even know we should be asking.

Ultimately, advancing a critical approach to Middle Eastern studies demands recognizing that by producing geographical knowledge about the world, scholars of geopolitics are inherently actors *intervening in* geopolitics. This point is not new, but it can be easily forgotten. As critical geographers have vividly illustrated in recent years, treating geography and spatial concepts as a “neutral” backdrop can often become the basis for a sanitizing project, whereby scholars (and others) remove from view our complicity as actors in structuring expectations about world regions and how “proper” projects in the region should look. And this is the point that the French geographers at *Hérodote* wanted to push Foucault to consider: that geopolitics and the practice of geographing goes well beyond the simple analysis of spatial metaphors and concepts, and necessarily includes critical reflection on the very political work that we ask these metaphors and concepts to do, and for whom.

¹¹ See, for example, Natalie Koch, “‘Building Glass Refrigerators in the Desert’: Discourses of Urban Sustainability and Nation Building in Qatar,” *Urban Geography* 35 (2014): 1118–39; Natalie Koch, “The shifting geopolitics of Higher Education: Internationalizing Elite Universities in Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, and Beyond,” *Geoforum* 56 (2014): 46–54; Natalie Koch, “Gulf Nationalism and the Geopolitics of Constructing Falconry as a ‘Heritage Sport,’” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15 (2015): 522–39; Natalie Koch, “Is Nationalism Just for Nationals? Civic Nationalism for Noncitizens and Celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE,” *Political Geography* 54 (2016): 43–53; and Neha Vora and Natalie Koch, “Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, *Kafala*, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15 (2015): 540–52.

¹² Paasi, “The Resurgence of the ‘Region’ and ‘Regional Identity,’” 133.