

REGIONAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: TOPICAL ISSUES

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CONTEMPORARY TRENDS OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

This paper investigates the basic lines of contemporary political geography. The insight reveals the historiography of key steps of political-geographic making, formation of subject matter of the discipline, present day problems and themes of explorations. The focus points out the trends of situation in political-geographic regional and international studies, electoral geography, conception of geographic places and problem of “power”.

Key words: political geography, geopolitics, political-geographic regional and international studies, electoral geography, concept of geographic places, power.

Geography deals with political concerns for a long time. We know from ancient Europeans Aristotle, Thucydides and Livy about political organization of ancient states, interrelation between the geographic peculiarities of a territory and a policy, the features of an area and the opportunities of military strategies. Famous treatise of Sun-Tzu tells about the art of war. The middle age political think tanks Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Rousseau and others also touched upon the political geographic issues.

French philosopher Turgot introduced the term “political geography” in 1750 to show relations between geographic factors and political organization of society [1]. F.Ratzel animated political geography as an academic branch by his first work in the domain “Politische Geographie” (1885) and first monograph “Politische geographie” (1897) [13]. The ideas of political geography as a science germinated in 1890s. Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen introduced the term “geopolitics” in 1899.

Domain of research of political geography changed in time. Subjects as territory, its geographic (political-geographic) positioning, frontiers and borders, peculiarities of government setup and administrative division, concept of power and potential to use it shaped the focuses of political geographic explorations.

During the 20th century the reputation of this branch fluctuated among academicians and public due to political situation changes (especially in the socialist countries). Its subject matters, nevertheless, remained topical and needful.

The political geography discourse also shifted during the 20th century. Initially political geography aimed to determine impact of geographic factors on the political reality and architecture of political actors (states, for instance) as well as competition for economic resources and spheres of influence. The objectivist descriptions of certain territories dominated. They lacked peculiarities of social identities and competition of political forces concerns. In some cases interpretation of political processes gave preference to geographic

(environmental) factors.

Later, the content and direction of political-geographic research changed. Nowadays the very insight on geographical processes and systems has to take into account political factors. First of all it became clear that geospatial differentiation in terms of social and economic geography may lack correlation with physical-geographic distinctions. Secondly, extended understanding of “politics” embraced such realities as political identity, political movements, power of various types, etc. Being transformed in the second half of the 20th century political geography at the edge of millennia questions the influences of factors of politics (political sphere) on state of geographic, more explicitly geospatial, entities.

Accordingly, understanding of subject matter of the political geography changed in the course of the last century. In the first quarter of the 20th century the core reflected the absolute authority of American geographer J.Bowman – president of Association of American geographers and advisor of the Treaty of Versailles [4]. On his opinion political geography aims on studies of governmentally or legally established political entities and their spatial similarities around the Earth. European geographers supported that idea. For example, the famous Ukrainian geographer Stepan Rudnytskyi in his paper “Ukrainian concern on making of political geography” (1923) [14] explains that this branch investigates and represents relations between public life and the Earth. In 1950s the idea of studying the political life of states in geographic space got perfection by French scientist Jean Gottmann (1952, 1973) [6, 7], whom Western geographers consider to be the most serious specialist in political geography of 20th century.

Intensification of political geographic explorations during the last quarter of the 20th century run further changes in subject matter. Combination of geospatial analysis with political geographic vision of various phenomena of social life expanded the field of research in political geography. The conventional research focuses of political geographic regional and international studies extended to examination of global and regional interrelations and spatial regularities political organization of the society. Such developments promoted elaboration of the concept of “geographic places” (territorial-political systems) introduced by John Agnew (1987, 2002) [2, 3]. At the junction of political geography and geopolitics, beside the classic geopolitical concerns, the interrelations geospace - different kinds of power got focus (C.Flint, 1985; J.Nye, 2011) [5,12].

In the USSR and later across the post-soviet terrains the political geography initially meant study of territorial alignment of political forces (I.M.Maergoyz, 1971) [11]. The prevailed definition of political geography considered it as geographic science in the framework of social and economic geography, which learns the spatial organization of political existence of the society, territorial combination of political forces being caused by co-impact of various social and economic factors (V.Kolosov, 1988) [10]. Such a

cumbersome and imperfect depiction had to be modified. First, M.Kaledin (1996) [8] introduced the concept of efficient political geography detecting the unity of political and geographic factors of social development. The ideas of political geographic space as an integral part of geo-space and territorial-political system (“geographic places” of J.Agnew) appeared and spread.

Based on the above Russian academicians V.Kolosov and M.Mironenko (2001) [9] proposed rather constructive definition: “political geography studies the interrelations between the integral geo-space and political sphere as one of four human activity spheres: economic, social, political and spiritual”.

These authors assume that the integral geo-space combines economic, social, political and physical spaces. Their superposition differentiates the integral geo-space: social, economic and natural conditions of activity. Thus, the objects of political geography study are the territorial-political systems interrelated with each other and the geo-space. Territorial-political system means combination of elements of the political sphere (system of political institutions with various functions of political power) and different social institutions, social groups, etc.) existing on the territory. Understandably, these systems differ on complexity and scale. The above insight on the object of political geography got followers among Ukrainian geographers (B.Yatsenko, V. Stafiychuk, Yu.Bratchevskiy) [15].

At the edge of 20th-21st centuries the political geographic research conjoins both conventional themes and issues and new trends of scientific explorations. Research of classic fashion embrace:

- Numerous works on political-geographic country studies representing conventional political-geographic survey of countries focused on history and morphological features of the territory, state borders, problems of historic core and capital of the state, problematic areas (“hot spots”) or areas of separatism;
- Works conjoining global and national levels of analysis, where, on one side, the attention is paid to various typologies of the states, on the other – to their political-geographic positioning at macro-, meso- and micro-levels;
- Political-geographic research with focus on geospatial disclosures of political process in the state: relations nation-state, national state as a community; sources and determinants of political power of a state, national interests of a state;
- Simultaneously intensified political-geographic and geopolitical studies of political forces balance at global and regional level;
- Rather independent research of electoral geography acquiring applied character.

Formation of new reality of the world system under globalization, information and technological revolution, establishment and development of industrial society renews topics and issues in political geography.

- The political-geographic discourse embraces explorations of

regularities of increasing complexity of world economy, where interrelated national economies appear to operate together with new actors: multi-national corporations and banks, regional systems of integration, powerful international institutions, world cities and metropolitan regions.

- Formation of information society creates new conditions and needs of political-geographic research. The territorial-organizational basis of geospatial information networks does not change radically the world order, however, embeds new system of world links and orders. Contrary to the existing organizational structures network operations enable flexible adaptations to the dynamic environment. The geospatial structure appeared at the start of 1990s to serve the needs of financial and banking monopolies rapidly gained power thanks to progress in information and communication technologies and functioned promptly adjusting to the needs of the entire society. System of information networks also transformed the practice of geopolitical processes.
- Under network society formation and integration processes the classic triad of political-geographic country studies – “territory (borders) – state (national interests, power) – national and territorial identity” – experiences rethinking of the contemporary functions of the state in terms of economy, social affairs and national security. A part of competence shifts to higher (integrative entities, international alliances, etc.) or lower (regions, metropolitan regions) levels of governance system.
- The concept of geographic places enables new complex and simultaneous approach to political-territorial systems of the society at various levels of hierarchy: from community to state and supranational formations.
- At the junction of political-geographic and geopolitical issues the explorations of balance and interaction of political forces have permanent topicality. Contemporaneously, understanding of “power” broadens together with geo-conflict situations concerns.

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During last decades the key conventional branches of political geography gained strength and deepen structure (political-geographic country studies, electoral geography, etc.). At the same time new directions reflect conditions of post-industrial stage and information society formation: studies of political-territorial systems (concept of geographic places), types of power used in geopolitical opposition and conflicts, research of national and territorial identity, etc.

The fledged and structured branches initiate our further insight.

Political-geographic country studies constitute the core as from the conception of political geography as a science. Territory, nation (or groups of

nations), political system of the country, its economy, infrastructure, etc. are explored mutually and in the historic context. The issues of independence and state sovereignty on the terrain of the country, formation of its national interests, security and human rights abundance have strategic importance. The permanent problems related to territorial delimitation nurtured the solid applied branch on frontiers and borders – limology. Far-long known role of political and geographic positioning of the state reflects the given world system political and geographic features, which can significantly impact the economy. Geographers pay a good few attention to studies and development of territorial government setup and administrative division, territorial governance of various types, explorations of capital cities and metropolitan regions.

Electoral geography came up in 1920-30s as an applied branch of political geography. The western democratic countries with political and ideological pluralism propagated this domain the most. Wherein it is worth mentioning that electoral geography development has limitations in the former USSR (as well as in other authoritarian and totalitarian states) with one-party system and de-facto no choice elections development.

Electoral geography is one of the best elaborated and dynamic disciplines within political geography due to its positioning at a junction of several branches: geography, political science, sociology, psychology, history, etc. The strong ties link it with political regional studies and regional political sciences. The electoral geography roots, however, in geography but not political science. The objective of electoral geography adds explanation and causes detection of territorial differentiation of political sympathies of population to their description. Infiltration of basic notions of “geographic places” concept into the electoral-geographic analysis can enhance the applied potential of the branch.

Among the domains of political geography germinated at the edge of 20th and 21st centuries the territorial-political systems and issues of “power” (being at a junction of political geography and geopolitics) attract the foreground attention. Contemporary vision of political geography objects territorial-political systems (TPS) interacting with each other and geo-space (ibid V.Kolosov, M.Mironenko, 2005). The regularities of territorial and political organization of such systems reveal the concept of “geographic places” (ibid J.Agnew, 1987; J.Agnew, 2002). Its two basic provisions stipulate as follows:

1. Geographic place as a nucleus of political sphere is a field of interaction of social processes operating on various hierarchical levels: from local to global. Given the above the social and political entities of certain levels (communities, civil organizations, church, political parties, media, etc.) influence people’s conception of situation in the country or area.

2. Geo-spatial differences in the course of social and political processes – from developments and outcomes of elections to formation of powerful national and trans-national social movements or government behavior – have geo-spatial context. Ultimately, the balance of political forces in the state results from multiplicity of local communities’ choices and, at supranational

level, the political choices of governing elites of the region's countries.

Another basis of the geographic places concept is as follows:

- Hierarchy of territorial-political systems compose two levels of various qualities. The national systems get shape in homogenous legal and administrative framework of the certain state. The transnational TPS origin dependent on conditions of powers' play in geopolitical processes.

- All kinds of geographic places have substantial typological differences. The civilizational features mostly determine national TPS typology: systems formed in spheres of Christian, Muslim, Far East civilizations). The peculiarities of positioning in the world system and balance of geopolitical powers set the typology of transnational TPS.

Studies of geopolitical regions and problems of "power" follow the conventional interest of scholars to the situation in the big political-geographic (geopolitical) spaces of the world having their own typology:

- The "regions of power": USA, EU countries, Russia, China, Japan;
- The "junction regions" embracing the sustainable areas of Central European countries (including Ukraine) and opposition terrains of the Far East: North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, etc.;
- The "black hole regions" represented by apparent examples of Central and Eastern Africa, Middle East, southern part of Central Asia.

Geopolitical position of countries and regions of the world system strongly depends on the balance of geopolitical powers. Nowadays political geography and geopolitics scholars distinguish four kinds of power: military, economic, soft and smart.

The last decade developments modified the classical concept of power: along with military and economic powers the importance of soft power and smart power increase. The diffusion of the resource potential of power prompts the emergence of new actors (TNC, international organizations, international metropolitan regions, and even social movement and natural hazards), which conjoin their operations with efforts of individual states in the world political geographical processes.

The process of globalization and development of information society stimulate intensification of different regions of power activities depolarizing the basis of unipolar world. Although the United States dominate in all kinds of power and the EU and Japan keep their positions as centers of economic powers, the potential of China rapidly increase while Russia remains the military power. The political-geographic geospatial patterns, thus, differs from the one professed by the concept of center-periphery.

All the above listed subjects of international relations - Western Europe, the USA, Russia and China (the so called "geopolitical quadrangle") – will navigate the direction of development of the geopolitical structure of the world in the next decade. They, however, must pay attention on the extant potential of Japan and new regional leaders: Turkey, Iran, India, South Korea, Brazil and others. The latter pursue their own set of interests, actively represent and defend

them in the formation of international orders of game.

The regional network of geopolitical relations, thus, forms in many regions of the world. For example, in Europe relations between Western Europe and Russia play a significant role in representation of Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian systems respectively. They have long-lasting and dynamic history of competition and cooperation especially in shaping and defining the orders of the game across spaces that have always been at the cross-roads of interests of powerful forces of great empires and blocks: Baltic-Black seas, Baltic-Caspian seas and Balkans.

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