

The origins and evolution of popular geopolitics: an interview with Jo Sharp and Klaus Dodds

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When I was a PhD student (1999-2003) studying newspaper representations of Central and Eastern Europe during NATO and EU expansion, Klaus Dodds's and Jo Sharp's work was central to the way in which I came to position my work within wider literatures. More importantly however, when I subsequently decided to shift from 'legitimate' news media to the decidedly more vulgar study of superheroes and their imbrication in geopolitical discourse, it was their critical opening into the worlds of popular culture that gave me the courage to push the boundaries of what was acceptable to study within the field of critical geopolitics. Both had paved the way for my work, Klaus with his analyses of political cartoons and James Bond films, and Jo with her work looking at the treatment of Russia (as a mirror for American identity) in Reader's Digest magazine. I think it is safe to say that, without these two scholars, there would either be no field of popular geopolitics or it would have taken a much different form at a much later date.

Indeed, one of the themes of the interview we had in summer 2015 is the highly contingent nature of events. I was particularly interested to discover the particular collision of intellectual currents, social networks, and personal circumstances that brought about their unique formulations of popular geopolitics. A paradox can be identified in their responses to this question. First, they both acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of the influences, from Edward Said to Michael Shapiro to Antonio Gramsci. Further, it is their wide-ranging interests in specific geographic regions – most obviously the Soviet Union (Jo) and the South Atlantic and Antarctica (Klaus) – that fuelled their focus on popular culture and its relation to geopolitics. Nevertheless, it is the 'small world' nature of the discipline of geography – specifically the poststructuralist branch of political geography from which critical geopolitics emerged in the 1990s – that enabled popular geopolitics to take hold and become a project in its own right. The key authors of critical geopolitics were young contemporaries of one another, inviting one another to participate in panels, special issues, and the like. This fertile environment enabled popular geopolitics to territorialize as a field and yet, that field has sometimes been better at reiterating Jo's and Klaus's claims than at advancing their concepts or theories. In fact, my own early work on nationalist superheroes is susceptible to this critique, largely replicating elements of both Klaus's and Jo's work. From Klaus I took the emphasis on the visual shorthand of comics and cartoons, and from Jo I took an interest in serialized narratives that underpin ultimately conservative geopolitical visions of the world. In the intervening years, I moved from the United States to London, and subsequently became good friends with both Klaus and Jo, which is probably apparent in the tone of the interview. In fact, when I first moved to London and was waiting for my furniture to arrive on a slow boat from New York City, I slept on my bedroom floor with only a pillow and duvet borrowed from Klaus to cushion me. Geography can be a 'small world' indeed.

Until recently, I think it is safe to say that popular geopolitics remained insulated from some of the broader research currents in related fields, such as cultural studies. Nevertheless, the field is now in a period of rapid change, with a new generation of young scholars taking an interest and importing their own interdisciplinary concepts and intellectual inspirations. It is for this reason that I wanted to ensure that the early history of the field was documented, as it has an historical and geographical context that is crucial to understanding the conceptual development of the field. As Jo Sharp notes below however, the future is not beholden to the past, and that is a good thing.

The following has been edited and abridged, with references inserted where possible.

Jason: Thank you very much for agreeing to do this. As the two people perhaps most foundational to popular geopolitics in geography, I was wondering if you both might describe the landscape of critical geopolitics¹ when you came to it. Klaus, why don't you go first?

Klaus: Thank you for inviting me. My first exposure to something that might be called critical geopolitics came entirely by accident. That was when I alighted upon an article published by Simon Dalby, I think in 1989 or 1990, that talked about geopolitics in ways that struck me as rather interesting but at the same time reminded me of something by Gearóid Ó Tuathail three or four years earlier which I had perhaps not taken as much notice of as I should have, on the language and nature of US-Salvadoran foreign relations² — I can't remember the title [presumably Ó Tuathail 1986]. In both cases I came away with a sense in which geopolitics could be something rather different than what I had been taught as an undergraduate, which had been a fairly conventional diet of the Great Men associated with geopolitics, and a straightforward periodisation of how ideas came and went, but one which was not informed by social theory. So, I was excited by the work of Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, both of whom were interested in discourse and language and were also reasonably new to academia. You could associate with them — these were people who represented an entirely different generation of political geographers distinct from Peter Taylor, or John Agnew, or whomever.

Jason: How about you, Jo?

Jo: Well, critical geopolitics was quite new, because I came to it in 1990, I suppose, so the words had not long been used. Obviously there was Gearóid Ó

¹ Critical geopolitics is a constellation of approaches to the study of geopolitics that typically share a poststructuralist concern with representation and an anti-imperialist ethos. For reviews see Dodds 2001; Jones and Sage 2010.

² The papers referenced here are the first efforts to frame geopolitics through the lens of discourse, and they presage the formation of what became known as critical geopolitics. For a review of this early work, see Dodds and Sidaway 1994.

Tuathail and John Agnew's first piece [Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992]. But the piece that first captured my imagination was Simon Dalby's work and his book *Creating the Second Cold War* [Dalby 1990],³ which I found fabulous and really brought a lot of things into focus. I didn't really come to geopolitics as such. Well, I came to it in a sort of roundabout way because I didn't have any intention of studying critical geopolitics. I think the specific institutions that I moved through have been quite instrumental in the ways that I came across and engaged with particular academic approaches. So I had come to Syracuse because I wanted to work with John Agnew, not because of the critical geopolitics article, but because of his book *Place and Politics* [Agnew 1987], which I had used for my undergraduate dissertation to look at identity in the Shetland Islands. I had then done a course with the late Graham Smith on — well it started off at the beginning of the year as the Geography of the Soviet Union and by the end of the year it was the Geography of Russia. It was a fabulous time to be doing that course. It was a course that looked at the changing geographies of the Soviet Union and how that drove the end of the Cold War; it wasn't America winning, or any of these simplistic arguments, but that it had a very different society, particularly in the ethnic fringes. Nationalism drove the end of the Cold War. I found that argument very persuasive and very interesting; I wondered what it would be like to combine some of his ideas and some of John Agnew's ideas, but look at *Russian* nationalism as dominant rather than marginal. So that was the plan; very old school. Two things happened which then brought me to critical geopolitics. I hope you weren't expecting any brief answers [laughter].

Jason: Never.

Jo: So the first was that I had to take courses since I was doing my Master's and PhD in the United States, so I did everything I could on Russia and the Soviet Union. So that took me out of geography and into political science. And I couldn't understand why the person teaching the course didn't use Graham's explanation of what happened. So he was in there saying — it was basically Sovietology, the idea that you could understand change in the Soviet Union by looking at where people were standing in funerals, and who was carrying the coffin, and these sorts of things. And I said, "No, no!" It was in no way an arrogant interjection because I was just saying "I've come across this other guy's ideas which are so much better!" [laughter] And I just couldn't convince the professor that this was a better explanation. This was the first time that I think I had really been hit by the idea that there were very different explanations for something. I perceived that what he had was a very old-fashioned, simplistic view; I had been exposed to a much more nuanced political-cultural-geographical explanation of what was going on. We were just...like ships in the night. At the same time that that was happening, I was exposed to postmodernism for the first time. So I took a course

³ The paper and book referenced here are both analyses of discourses through which the Cold War was framed; Ó Tuathail and Agnew's classic paper is an analysis of George Kennan's framing of Russian collective psychology at the start of the Cold War while Dalby's book (based on his doctoral dissertation) is of post-détente discourse.

with Jim Duncan that was very interdisciplinary — he ran it with someone from landscape architecture — and I had never come across anything like this before. It was brilliantly taught, and also it introduced me to the idea of discourse, the politics of language, the politics of knowledge, all these sorts of things. So at the same time that I was seeing this happen in the course about Russia, I was getting the conceptual grounding in the postmodernism course. So those two things really came together in my head and led me to a Master's dissertation that was the beginnings of *Reader's Digest* as an example of this, drawing together those two experiences. Then I came across the early incarnations of critical geopolitics and thought, "Oh yes, that is what I am trying to do." So it wasn't so much that I read critical geopolitics and thought "this is what I want to do", but that I — and I suppose others came to it the same way — was experiencing competing narratives of a major historical world event at the same time as I was exposed to poststructuralism. And I wonder, also, whether there is any significance to the fact that some of the earliest proponents of critical geopolitics were from the fringes of Britain, but were at the time of working in North America. So you have Simon and Gearóid from Ireland, John Agnew from Cumbria (which is almost its own country in Britain), myself from Scotland — Klaus is the outlier coming from the heart of Empire — but I wonder if we were much more conscious of that politics of language — of the use of 'British' versus 'Scottish', 'Irish', a sense of 'Northern Englishness'⁴ — and that poststructuralist approach gave us an intellectual language for something we've been thinking about anyway. I've never spoken to the others about this; I suspect it isn't coincidence.

Jason: It would be interesting, sometime when we are all sitting down for a beer, to float that idea. I think I've heard Simon say something similar about himself and Gearóid.

Jo: I suppose there is the introduction to *Critical Geopolitics* [Ó Tuathail 1996]; Gearóid grounds himself in the introduction when he starts off with a bit of Irish history, saying, "this is where I am coming from."

Jason: In your story, you say you started *Condensing the Cold War* [Sharp 2000] by combining these two courses, but actually what made you decide to do what we would now call Popular Geopolitics? That was a form of discourse that hadn't been studied and which was in fact excluded from a lot of the early critical geopolitics.

Jo: I think it was because I didn't come to it as critical geopolitics. I came into it wanting to study Russia; I had been doing this course that made me realise there was more than one narrative going on. I had some of the language from the

⁴ The political and cultural geography of the United Kingdom is very complex, shaped by the historical and contemporary political dominance of London and the Home Counties ('Southern England') over a range of nations (the Irish, the Welsh, the Scottish) as well as the (formerly) industrial heartland of northern England. Sharp is here referring to a sense of distancing by these often-marginalized groups from the official discourse of geopolitics coming from London.

postmodern/poststructural course to explain that. Edward Said's *Orientalism* also influenced me [Said 1979].⁵ I thought, "Oh, I could do something like that for my Master's!" It seemed then like a neat kind of project, and I really wasn't thinking about it anymore than that. I wanted to take Orientalism from the nineteenth/early twentieth century and see how it works out if you look at America and communism. It was a chance encounter with John Western; he always reminds me that it was his idea. He said, "Why not look at the *Reader's Digest*?" It was meant to be a short project to look at...I think it was a term paper initially...just to look at the concept of Othering and using the Other to reflect on the Self. It was looking at that that I then came across some of the critical geopolitics literature and I realised it wasn't simply about representation and difference, but that it was doing something else in terms of American political culture, American identity, the sense of manifest destiny. At some point — I can't be sure at what point — I must have been influenced by Gramsci and the idea that the hegemonic cultural values were important. So because I didn't come through the tradition that said "this isn't something to be included" it came as a surprise to me when I discovered that not everyone thought that looking at popular culture made sense in terms of International Relations or geopolitics. Because you're right, there is a huge tradition that says there is absolutely no role for popular understandings, and the first time I gave a seminar in the department, one member of staff said, "well, this is all very interesting but it is irrelevant, it has no influence at all on the political process."

Jason: We'll come back to the reception of your ideas in a moment. How about for you, Klaus? What led you specifically to popular geopolitics?

Klaus: One of the other areas I was always very interested in was public geographies, specifically some of the work that people like Susan Smith did at the start of her career, Jacquie Burgess and Jo Gold, around media geographies, geography in the popular media, that kind of thing. How geography was put to work in a variety of contexts. I think through their work — as well as Simon, Gearóid, and John Agnew's work — it wasn't too much of a stretch for me at least to think about how this kind of formal, academic sort of geopolitics might actually have something else attached to it, which was a kind of popular dimension. Or at least I could think about how ideas migrate forwards and backwards in different kinds of contexts. I remember my supervisor, Les Hepple, saying to me, "well, actually, that is a relationship that you could productively think about in your own PhD work," which was about Britain and Argentina and the way the two countries had managed their difficult relationship over the disputed South Atlantic territories.⁶ It was obvious to me doing that research in Britain, Argentina, and the United States that the popular domain was hugely

⁵ Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a landmark volume in literary studies, highlighting a mode of literary engagement with 'the East' that was common in British and French accounts of empire in the eastern and southern fringes of the Mediterranean. Said argues that this discourse enables colonialism rather than simply reflecting it.

⁶ Here Klaus is referring to the events leading up to, and including, the 1982 Falkland Islands conflict. He published this work in *Pink Ice* (2002).

important. So for instance if Argentina believed that the Malvinas were an integral part of the Republic — they talked about them as the Little Lost Sisters — that the gendering of territory, the representation of territory, and the role of public education was hugely important in ensuring that Argentinian citizens — by the time they were even 5 or 6 — were inculcated with the sense that the Malvinas were theirs. Likewise you had the paradox of Britain perhaps — a context where British citizens didn't have a strong sense of what the Falklands were, let alone located, until of course April 1982 when things changed. So then you had the interesting case, which you could think through more theoretically: how did this apparently obscure place suddenly loom large in the popular geographical imagination? So it was those kinds of happenstances that led me to popular geopolitics. But at the same time, I should stress how supportive Simon and Gearóid were at the start of my career. I think a lot of this stuff partly comes out of personal relationships. In both cases here a willingness to look at my work, and to encourage me.

Jason: I know from reading the papers you published from your PhD that your PhD work would be categorised as formal and practical geopolitics, so to the best of my knowledge your first work in popular geopolitics was the Steve Bell cartoons. Is that right?

Klaus: Sort of. What happened was that I had Steve Bell's cartoons that he had produced in 1982 and I thought they were — of all the cartoons I had seen in Britain and in Argentina — the most interesting.

Jason: So you had intentionally done a popular geopolitics of political cartoons in your PhD, you didn't just publish it? I didn't realise that.

Klaus: I think with probably everyone's publication history, you can only tell so much about what they were doing and thinking at the time. People will say to me, 1996 was the first time you published something on popular geopolitics [Dodds 1996]. And my reaction is, actually, I thought about popular geopolitics a lot earlier on in the midst of my PhD, some of which was in the PhD but not published more widely. Some of it I collected when in Argentina, including cartoons of Margaret Thatcher as a pirate, was rather X-rated and focused on what Argentina wanted to do to Thatcher as a pirate. I wouldn't necessarily want to publish this or reproduce those images. Not for young audiences. So I had this material, and it was probably thanks to someone like Peter Taylor who said, "Oh, I love Steve Bell — if you have this stuff why not do something with it?" So I had the opportunity to pull that stuff out of my box file and write it up. I think it appeared in the same special issue that Jo was in [Sharp 1996]. For me that was the perfect opportunity. The other thing that hardened my decision to develop this stuff was meeting Jo for the first time at the AAG in 1993 in Atlanta, when she and I were on the same panel, chaired by John Agnew with Simon and Gearóid in the audience. There was only about an audience of six, with this enormous bowl room as I remember. I think I then in a sense was given an impetus — and probably the confidence — to do something more with this material rather than just sit on it.

Jason: That's quite a panel, in retrospect. Those people are all big names today. Were there any particular models that you specifically were trying to avoid as you undertook popular geopolitics?

Klaus: I think what drove my thinking was to avoid trivialising the popular. In a sense, I'm not sure I had a model, but I was very concerned about — and I think Jo's work on *Reader's Digest* was a great help because she demonstrated in that 1993 piece that you could write really very well on something that some people might have thought was banal and mundane [Sharp 1993]. She showed that precisely because it was banal and mundane, and extremely popular and circulating around the world, that it was worthy of consideration. So like everyone who is starting their career, what you crave are people to reassure you that you are doing substantial work. I think if I had a concern it was really about not being seen to trivialise anything I was doing, but at the same time to be mindful of the fact that I was concerned about public reception, however big or small that public was. I think most people will attest to the fact that there is a sense of insecurity that is particularly acute when starting off.

Jason: It is so different when you have the job security that enables you to say what you want, but usually when you are starting off you lack that.

Klaus: In 1995 I was still in a temporary lectureship at Royal Holloway, and it became permanent in 1996. In retrospect I wonder if I held back on publishing some of that stuff on cartoons because perhaps I was concerned that it might be seen as a little frivolous.

Jason: It's one thing to go to Jo and Simon Dalby and tell them your ideas about popular geopolitics. If there is anyone who will go along with it, it is them. But how did your non-fellow travellers respond?

Klaus: In Bristol, where I did my PhD, the direction of traffic was very much towards cultural and economic geography⁷, so I think political geography was seen to be — well we know Brian Berry's quote about the moribund backwater [Berry 1969]— there was a sense in which political geography was not the cutting edge. Indeed, the biggest names in the British context were probably Peter Taylor who was doing world-systems analysis and the ever-prolific Ron Johnston who was best known for his work in electoral geography. Certainly geopolitics as we would understand it now was not seen something terribly avant-garde, even if when I started the Cold War ended and we had the Gulf War crisis. It would appear to have been a golden opportunity for geopolitics to reassert itself but it didn't feel that way in the hothouse that was the Bristol geography department at that time.

⁷ The University of Bristol in the 1990s served as a hotbed of what came to be known as the 'new cultural geography', which highlighted identity and practice. These same insights were used to revitalize economic geography (see Thrift 2000).

Jason: So you think that in your particular context, the shift to popular geopolitics was aided by the way in which it brought the new cultural geography to political geography and gave it that aura of the avant-garde?

Klaus: That's exactly how I would see it. I think as popular geopolitics began to establish itself, I am quite certain it was aided by the cultural turn — people like Peter Jackson, Denis Cosgrove, and others who were interested in language, discourse, and representation. That gave it a boost and an intellectual legitimacy.

Jason: Jo, how did your initial work in popular geopolitics go down? As your PhD research was explicitly about popular culture in a way that Klaus's wasn't, you must have been extra worried about the way it would be perceived.

Jo: Within geography it was no problem at all, and I was very lucky that I had a fabulous advisor in John Agnew. I even had a moment two years into the PhD where I thought it was ridiculous and I was going to give up. I had come up with another topic and spent a week working on it, and John just dragged me into his office and told me not to be stupid and just get on with it. Which was of course very good advice. I also got to know Gearóid and Simon quite early on. They invited me to present at a session they were doing at the AAG — the same one Klaus is talking about — so to be a part of that group early on was fantastic. Simon in particular has always been incredibly supportive of me, even driving through blizzards to come to my viva, which was great. So within political geography I didn't feel I had to prove myself. And they were involved with the journal *Political Geography* so quite early on I got something published from my PhD, in 1993 [Sharp 1993]. It was a special issue they were editing, so I got very supportive comments from them. Publishing outside the discipline with the *Reader's Digest* project was much more difficult; I never really managed that. I tried a number of different journals over the years, and didn't get anywhere. I tried an American political history journal and it was a nightmare, partly because it was a terrible review process. They sent it to one reviewer and about a year later I got comments that it was too theoretical. I emphasised the empirical in the re-write and they sent it to a different reviewer who a year later said it wasn't sufficiently theoretical. The review process for *Condensing the Cold War* was very interesting because they sent it to two reviewers initially, one in geography and one in — I guess — IR or political science. The geographer loved it and the other person had real problems with it. I made considerable revisions and it got sent out to different geographer and a different IR person and the same pattern emerged.

Jason: I realise that it's a lot to ask of you to remember specific reviews, but what was it that the presumably IR person didn't like?

Jo: I don't recall precisely. I suspect it was to do with where this fitted into the political process, because I wasn't proving influence. There have always been comments in the book reviews — it was reviewed quite broadly — the thing that most often came up is that I haven't said enough about the individual writers of the articles, and that came particularly from people with historical backgrounds who were interested in the individuals. Because I was looking at such a long time

period, I was arguing that there was a particular voice of the *Reader's Digest* that gave the seal of approval.

Jason: It's the editor, right? The articles are all condensed.

Jo: Yes. But also my argument was that the type of person was more important; they weren't academics. That's the knowledge that the *Reader's Digest* didn't like because it was silly, complicated, too ambivalent. They were people with empirical, hands-on experience: retired generals, those kinds of people. It was that fact plus that the editors had chosen them as a voice worth repeating that I said gave them their authority. Some of the reviewers didn't like that. Also, that I had no evidence from audiences. I didn't do any research on audience reception, which I don't see how you can do over seventy years and across the whole US. I was arguing that the rate of re-subscription was a suggestion that people were accepting particular arguments. They weren't violently rejecting them. Why would you continue to get something that you didn't find useful or agree with? It's a surrogate for audience work. I appreciate that it's not unproblematic.

Jason: I won't push you on that [chuckles]. Since to my mind you both have helped to create the field, how have you witnessed the field unfold over the roughly 25 years in which there has been a popular geopolitics? Klaus?

Klaus: I would say that a lot of things have changed. First, the sheer number of people engaged with popular geopolitics; in 1996-1997 if you'd asked me how many people are working in this field, I wouldn't have gotten much past five fingers. That's what it felt like to me. I think — to personalise it for a bit — when I came across your work for the first time, it's an odd thing to say, but I suddenly thought, "Okay, so there are more people out there." Also I thought more strongly about North American contributors whereas most of the people I knew — maybe reflecting my own insularity — had been British-based. Clearly in retrospect there were others interested, broadly speaking. So I think the increase in numbers is one change. Second, I think clearly over 25 years interest in language and representation has been hugely complicated by non-representational theory, by materiality, by interests in objects, by affect — things that I don't think 25 years ago anyone was talking about. I don't remember anything about affect and politics in geography. So I think the mainstream was very much the politics of representation and it's not surprising that if you look back 25 years ago the work has that particular feel to it. I think third, consumption and audiences are being thought about far more — in your own work with me and in others' work — and that is a very different iteration of popular geopolitics than existed 25 years earlier. I think the fourth thing — I'll finish on this one — is that geographically it's a lot more diverse. We have wonderful work being done in the former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia, Latin America — it has a far more global scope to it. I think it feels like a far more cosmopolitan project whereas previously it had been very niche or US-this or US-that. I think it's a lot more exciting now.

Jason: My sense from talking to you outside of this interview, Jo, is that you are a bit more sceptical?

Jo: I think the first things were very exciting because there was a sense of doing something that hadn't been done before. A lot of the ideas that have become completely mainstream and a bit old-hat and no longer at all fashionable were only just emerging: our engagements with Foucault (it's difficult to think of that now as new and exciting but it was), really thinking of alternative ways of representing the world and how that might be linked into the construction of individuals' political subjectivity, national identity, all those sorts of things. Conceptually it was a really exciting time and my feeling is that in those early years — this is maybe a kind of grumpy person's looking back, whatever the opposite of nostalgia is — the exemplars, whether they be your comic books, my *Reader's Digest*, the range of other things that were being looked at — that was being used to drive forward particular conceptual positions. To talk about not just these particular representations, but what they allowed us to understand about the politics of scale, the ways the scales were linked together. The reason I moved towards feminist geopolitics⁸ is that I think what I was drawn to popular geopolitics for was the way it linked the global and the individual. That is something that is so often overlooked in what I tried to do with the *Reader's Digest*; I tried to understand how people identified themselves as political subjects. The reason I drifted away was because I got bored. There was a tendency of people to go off and find their favourite film, book, whatever, and just do another study of it. I didn't feel that there was the same amount of conceptual drive. We had a lot of good examples but it wasn't doing anything very different with it. That, plus another institutional move, which opened up other opportunities for me, meant that I drifted away from popular geopolitics. It has only been more recently that I think the field has become more exciting again because...I'd like to think it has been responding to the feminist geopolitics challenge but also the things Klaus just mentioned about how scales are linked together and how popular culture drives political process rather than being simply another representation. I'm probably being overly critical, but that's the way it seems to have happened.

Jason: Can you give an example from your own recent return to popular geopolitics of how the field now is doing innovative things on the topics that matter to you?

Jo: Well, I really like your *Popular Geopolitics 2.0* [Dittmer and Gray 2010].

Jason: This part is definitely getting into the final edit. [laughter]

Jo: Because I think it's responding to that conceptual problematic of scale. However, there is a danger as always in academic circles, and I think this has been the case with first the cultural turn which went so far away from the material in its efforts to ignore it, and now there is the danger on the cutting edge of geography that we go so far away from the representational, everything has to

⁸ Feminist geopolitics refers to a critique that both highlights the role of women in geopolitics but also contests the top-down scalar imagination of both classical and critical geopolitics. For a review, see Dowler and Sharp 2001 and Hyndman 2004.

be in the pre-cognitive and visceral and that sort of thing. I don't think in politics that works because the representational remains important. But to understand, as Martin Müller's work has [Müller 2008], how discourse is performed and not simply the words on the page... feminist geopolitics has been trying to get at that too. And I think your work on Popular Geopolitics 2.0 was also trying to find a way through — it was quite conceptual, I think — how we balance those different approaches. In Hayden Lorimer's words it is the "more-than-representational" [Lorimer 2005]. I would be very uncomfortable with a critical geopolitics or popular geopolitics that abandoned the representational. So I think we have kind of swung that way and are coming back to different ways of incorporating the material. I'm not sure I can separate critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics, and feminist geopolitics in any clear way that I perhaps could have in the early 2000s. So I'm not sure that your work is purely popular geopolitics — or only popular geopolitics — particularly as you looking towards the diplomatic side of things that obviously is linking back towards the core concerns of critical geopolitics [e.g., Dittmer 2015, 2016] even as the feminist geopolitical impetus has been responded to — I think popular geopolitics is thinking of these things more and more. I think Chih-Yuan Woon's work is clearly a response to both.⁹

Jason: How about you, Klaus? You and Jo have both kind of come and gone from critical geopolitics. For neither of you is it the only thing you've ever done, far from it. What made you decide to pick up the baton of popular geopolitics at various times or put it down?

Klaus: I really think that you are on to something here. So, I think like a number of people who have had quite varied careers, I struggled to stay focused on one thing for terribly long. That presents both opportunities and dangers. If I had spent the last 20 years consistently working on popular geopolitics, I am quite certain I would have had a big monograph out that was *Everything You Need To Know About Popular Geopolitics*. I just didn't have that consistency in me. If I'm being honest, I think the Arctic and Antarctic — in terms of regional work — was always my greater passion. What's interesting I think is the way in which strands occasionally cross over and hybridise somewhat. I have found it perfectly possible to do things that might appear quite disconnected from other core areas of business. Now, I follow the careers of other people who I admire and respect, and occasionally I look at their websites and publication history. Jo is a good example. When Jo teamed up with [Africanist] John Briggs for example, and this whole vista opened up of East African research — and I wondered how that was going to relate to popular geopolitics. Then eventually you see the papers she was doing on Tanzanian newspapers and the War on Terror [e.g., Sharp 2011a]. In my own work on the Arctic and Antarctic I began to see opportunities to take the insights of popular geopolitics and look again at some of the material that perhaps I'd ignored because of my interest in governance. I realized, "You know what, there's a lot going on here."

⁹ Woon's work is marked by an interest in both state action and a feminist approach. See, for instance, Woon 2013, 2015.

Jason: This is a side question unrelated to the previous, but how did you decide to do a study of James Bond?

Klaus: A lot of it comes down to opportunities or suggestions or encouragement. When you look back on a career — how incredibly haphazard it appears! In 2002 David Newman said to me, “I am amazed someone of your interests in popular culture hasn’t written about James Bond,” and I replied that I was a big James Bond fan, but I had never thought about writing something. He was the editor of *Geopolitics* and he asked me to write something. So that’s when I decided to write about my favourite James Bond film, *From Russia With Love*, and to think about how the James Bond films have been extremely significant given their popularity and longstanding appeal [Dodds 2003]. *From Russia With Love* was a wonderful text to get your teeth into because of its very strong iconography revolving around Istanbul and Turkey. It appealed to me and the referees liked it, and people were very positive about it after it was published. There might be people who didn’t like it but the people who spoke to me spoke warmly about it and that reinforced my determination to do more.

Jason: You have one paper [Dodds 2005] based on archival research of the adaptation of a Bond book into a Bond film. I love that paper because it is unique within popular geopolitics, based on archival research about production, something that most popular geopolitics ignores because it is so focused on the image or text itself. Where did that idea come from?

Klaus: That paper was a happenstance. I wrote the paper on *From Russia With Love*, and I knew the film extremely well as a result. As a teenager I had read the James Bond novels, and it happens that the transition from the novel to the film is a more faithful transition than some of the others, for instance *You Only Live Twice*. What I began to think about was the question of who undertook this creative process, of re-working Fleming’s really well known novels into the screenplays and subsequent films? I discovered by chance that one of the most important Bond screenwriters was someone named Richard Maibaum. He had been involved in thirteen Bond films, and so if there one person to start with it was surely him. An extraordinary discovery was that he was a graduate of the University of Iowa and he had given his old university all his screenplay materials. I got into contact with their archive and they had it all, and nobody had ever used it before. I got everything photocopied and what you saw was this amazing record of how Maibaum started with the novel, did the screenplay, and went back and forth arguing with the studio. So you can see how the screenplay takes shape, especially the role of place in the story. You’re absolutely right that popular geopolitics hasn’t talked an awful lot about production. Jo’s work hints at a bit of that with regard to the *Reader’s Digest*, but it is hard to get a hold of a lot of that stuff methodologically.

Jason: I love that paper because it hints at a completely different world of popular geopolitics that might-have-been and still-could-be. What do you think is missing from popular geopolitics? What are the strengths and weaknesses of that kind of research?

Klaus: I think one of the stronger elements of popular geopolitics now is the way in which there is more explicit talk about the everyday, the way in which things — objects, images, texts — play a part in everyday lives. I think the work on things like affect try to get at the transitory nature of these things. They have a capacity to take over everyday life at times but also at times to be part of the background, hardly commented on, subsumed into lives. I like that sense in which the popular is seen as less box-like, more diffuse, more scattered through everyday life. So you aren't looking at a single film as it is disconnected from everything else. I am guilty of that, so I say this knowingly. I think one of the areas that I still feel needs a lot of work is the production side — the consumption side is a work in progress of which I am more optimistic. But the way in which things get made, get produced, circulate (or not), and how they fall apart or fail is...

Jason: You can't study a movie that was never made.

Klaus: Exactly. And yet *why* that movie wasn't made — or why *Dr. No* wasn't something otherwise — is actually interesting. What is perceived to work commercially, visually, geopolitically? For instance *Dr. No* was at one point going to be much more about the Panama Canal and Cuba, but it was a difficult time for US-Cuban relations and it was decided that it was best to avoid that topic to avoid generating controversy. So I think the production side of popular geopolitics needs further encouragement. I think the consumption stuff is a work in progress in terms of audiences, how they do or don't coalesce, and how we can write intelligently about things that are very difficult to grasp. I think methodologically those are also — whether dealing with affect or not — incredibly tricky things to investigate.

Jason: How indebted is popular geopolitics to the disciplinary project of geography? To what extent is it worthwhile to think of it as a sub-field of geography, or is it something else?

Jo: I think the difference with political science and IR is about the connections between scales which geographers are more attuned to. I don't think it can be seen as a purely disciplinary endeavour because if you go back to the origins of critical geopolitics, the inspiration was not from geographers. It was [Michel] Foucault, it was [Edward] Said, it was [James] Der Derian, [Michael] Shapiro, and those kind of guys: the cool, critical IR types, whom we basically used to take apart our Founding Fathers in geography. I think we do things differently in the sense that human geography has a very good, 'anything goes' approach — a tolerant attitude to theoretical and methodological diversity. We are much less angsty about the proper way of doing things than some of our cognate disciplines. I think part of that is because we don't have founding fathers that we have to kowtow to. Having said that, because we've had a long history of thinking about scale, I think we are much more attentive to that in geopolitics, although some feminist IR people are thinking a little bit in terms of the way that the domestic and the international are dependent on one another, someone like Cynthia Enloe obviously. Really the majority of these divisions are more entrenched, whereas in geography what sets us apart is a greater sense of the

tension between the existence of scales established through institutions and regulations and such. At the same time, we realise that these are porous and creative and interdependent in all sorts of interesting ways. If there is a distinction that's where I'd like to think it is.

Jason: I think you're saying that there is something in popular geopolitics that has emerged out of this geographic sensibility, and that's not to say that other people don't do it or think about it, but that there is a legacy of its origins in geography.

Jo: I think part of this openness to approaches in geography is reflected in how critical geopolitics has developed within the discipline. In fact it has got to the stage where critical geopolitics – which was a term – has become an approach. The words have been so rammed together that they have lost their critical purchase. Originally it was supposed to be an oxymoron, two terms sat together that should make us very uncomfortable. Now of course it is not a provocation, but has become mainstream. This is great, because we have a discipline that can allow within twenty years something that was such a provocation initially to become a very accepted way of doing things. Only five years ago Simon Dalby was able to say that the term had lost its critical meaning [Dalby 2010]. When I introduced *subaltern geopolitics* I was very clear in the introduction of that special issue of *Geoforum* [Sharp 2011b] that this wasn't simply about coming up with another label, but it was an attempt to get back to the jarring provocation. It is really interesting to compare that with the way that feminist and postcolonial IR seem to sit within their discipline. Critical and feminist geopolitics sessions get big audiences at the AAG; they are seen as kind of cool and interesting. I've been to a couple of ISA meetings and there have been huge turnouts for people doing old-school geopolitics and then at the ISA meeting in San Francisco a few years ago I went to hear some of my idols and there were more people on the panel than in the audience. In geography, that wouldn't happen. Those rooms would be the ones packed out. The intellectual trajectories of these things that are very close in many respects have been very different. That says a lot in a very positive way about geography.

Jason: What about you, Klaus? How important is the geo- in popular geopolitics for you?

Klaus: The geo- is very important for me. Recently there has been a trend amongst environmental geographers to come back to geo-politics emphasising the agency and vitality of the earth itself in contrast to the discursive focus of critical geopolitics. The role of ice, wind, air, and so on in shaping the politics of earth. Until recently I saw the geo- as being about the representations of the earth whereas now I realise there are a range of ways to conceptualise the geo-, from the discursive to the material. This is the influence of some of the assemblage work, thinking about how things come together or not.

Jason: How should we think about popular geopolitics through this materialist lens of the geo-?

Klaus: I think one of the things we might think about is the genre of disaster films and ask, "How can we turn this around?" The focus of these films is human-centric: who survives? Which city gets destroyed? But we might really need to think about the way in which the geo-physical has been visualized as a vital force in political life. That would be a very different conversation about what a popular geo-politics might entail.

Jason: What do you think is the future of popular geopolitics as an endeavour? Do you have a preferred course you would like to see it go down?

Klaus: I think the future of popular geopolitics might well be about reconciling lots of different interests. I would like us to try to think about the production, circulation, and consumption of the popular more holistically. Often we view media as if it is only in one of those boxes. In everyday life, however, all three apply. The things we study often defy the very ways in which we study them. Perhaps we also need to re-think the forms in which we analyse popular culture. I have started to think about the novel and why we ought to turn to the novel as a way to think through popular geopolitics. There is a lovely novel by Dave Eggers called *Zeitoun*, which is about the aftermath of the flooding of New Orleans in 2005. I think it deals brilliantly with the geo- (in this case the agency of water in the overwhelming of the city) and brings up the production of race, inequality, violence, the urban, and the War on Terror, in ways that are incredibly affecting as a reader in ways that academic papers rarely achieve. Eggers shows how the everyday is utterly shaped by these broader structural forces. I still think popular geopolitics needs to be better at accounting for the scalar complexities of what we study.

Jason: What do you think about the future of popular geopolitics, Jo? How do you see that future, and how would you like to see that future?

Jo: If I could shape it I'd like to not be able to anticipate what comes up. I'd like it to be challenging me, and to be challenging some of the things that the three of us have taken for granted and written in our work. I'd like for people to tell us that we're wrong. I think that although theoretically we're very good at talking about how those scales connect together, I don't think empirically it has been done perfectly or consistently. I think there is still work to unpick institutions; maybe your diplomacy work will do it.

Jason: I doubt it. [laughter]

Jo: I would like for us to be thinking about how these geopolitical knowledges are being circulated, consumed in different ways, and again not just about interesting representations; for people to be using all these case studies of representation to *explain* political identity, how people engage with political process, and so on. It is more and more important as we see all sorts of non-formal, non-traditional political routes gaining in significance. I saw that in last year's [2014] Scottish Independence referendum. It wasn't about parties; the ideas were coming from a loose organisation of civil society groups that became the Yes campaign. This was all being communicated through social media and

other forms that we as political geographers are not very good at understanding. We see this across Europe and the Middle East and getting our heads around some of that would be a good idea. I think we romanticise some of these groups, so it needs to be about understanding the process rather than just capturing the representation and saying, “yea, that’s lovely”. I think the last point — probably obvious and a bit stodgy — but America is being challenged as the hegemon and we have ignored China to some extent. Is it the case that American cultural imperialism has been worn down?

Jason: What ties together the things you are saying — to me — is our need for a better understanding of power in popular geopolitics, both in the relations between scales and also in a topological sense of the nodes where these relations tend to cluster, places like Al Jazeera. Maybe Hollywood is still important, but what is going on in China? Where are the loci of representational power today? That seems to me like a general theme in what you are saying.

Jo: And that comes then to the notion of discourse being performative as well, understanding where it happens and what different representations allow us to do, and allow to happen. These were the provocations right at the beginning, and I think the early stages of critical and popular geopolitics have been horribly misrepresented in some of the critiques that have suggested they were all about language, which I don’t think was ever the case. It was about discourse in that Foucauldian sense, I think. So I think it would be nice if perhaps popular geopolitics disappeared as a term, that we don’t separate it from critical geopolitics more generally. When you think about how the [2015 UK] General Election was won or lost through the media¹⁰; so much wasn’t about policy but about personality. The extent to which it makes sense to separate the formal political sphere and the sphere of the popular — not just the media but everything — these lines are becoming ever more blurred, if they ever were distinct.

Jason: It’s interesting too, because popular geopolitics is the only one of those three terms that has become a project of sorts. You don’t hear people saying, “I’m doing formal geopolitics”, or “I’m doing practical geopolitics.” They say, “I’m doing critical geopolitics.” It is popular geopolitics that gets hived off and imagined as something distinct. Which gets at your original schism between Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew setting it out, and then you and Klaus adding in something different. In a way, that binary still exists — just not rigidly.

Jo: You’re right. There is a bit of a hierarchy in some people’s minds between proper geopolitics (even critical) and the popular side of things. But as I say, I’m not convinced that distinction makes sense. It’s the same thing with feminist

¹⁰ In this election the Conservative Party won a majority, allowing David Cameron to remain Prime Minister. Despite being a parliamentary democracy (people only vote for their local MP), the media discourse was widely critiqued as being fixated on the personality of the party leaders, especially Labour Party leader Ed Miliband. Of particular interest was the ability of party leaders to eat bacon sandwiches in view of the public.

geopolitics, which persists as having a label although a lot of the things that feminist geopolitics was arguing for has become mainstream (although not often cited). I wonder if things have become less distinct in that there is a general range of approaches to geopolitics that includes popular geopolitics. There was a paper in 2010 — I can't recall who wrote it — that argued we need to move away from media in popular geopolitics [this is a joking reference to Dittmer and Gray 2010]. Does that mean that if we are looking at other forms of political activity and how that ties in to other scales, would that include someone like Kye Askins, who I don't think would ever call herself popular geopolitics, but who is studying non-formal geopolitics? I think initially the label was to say that geopolitics doesn't just happen in the hallowed halls of Westminster and the White House. Again, this is probably a provocation that is no longer needed, as there is more of an acceptance that all of these other spaces count. Maybe geography has embraced the idea that politics happens everywhere.

Jason: Thank you very much for your time. I have enjoyed this immensely.

Klaus: Thank you.

Jo: Thank you.

The interview thus ends on an uncertain note. If the historical details of popular geopolitics and its origins were complicated but relatively clear in hindsight, the contemporary boundaries of popular geopolitics – disciplinary or otherwise – remain unstable, in flux, and contested. If popular geopolitics can refer to the classic analysis of geopolitical representations, to the affective and discursive politics of social media, to the geopolitics of everyday life sans media, to novelistic accounts of non-human agency, to audience practices of consumption, then what is it? And how is it that the term itself is more used than ever, even as its meaning becomes more contested and multiple?

I am of course not interested in offering a definition, or in eliminating the term. But what I would like to see is the development of rigorous, sustained debate, drawing from various conceptual and theoretical traditions. For too long popular geopolitics has been a realm of part-time scholarship, and therefore it has not developed with any sense of direction or purpose. The challenges are real: how should we make sense of the eclipse of mass media by social media and the internet? How can we decolonize our popular geopolitical knowledges? How can we imagine a popular geopolitics inclusive of, but not limited to, media? These are big questions, but they deserve answers. Inspiration abounds in neighbouring disciplines, but answering them will require sustained empirical inquiry and conceptual debate. It is my belief that by engaging in that inquiry and debate, a new generation of scholars will make the definition and utility of popular geopolitics clear for the next 25 years.

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