

# Geopolitical Spatialisations Critical Geopolitics and Critical Cultural Studies

ROB SHIELDS

The geopolitics of northern Europe necessarily raises broader questions of northernness and of the global, circumpolar north, as well as theoretical questions of region-building and of regional identity. North is a significant cardinal point in European thought. There is often a perception of a homogeneity of northern climates and landscapes that lends northernness a certain stereotypical unity. Often the north is defined not only in terms of latitude but in qualitative degrees of 'northernness' or 'nordicity'.<sup>1</sup> Thus the North is also a symbol, taken as an icon which informs the national identities of northern states such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, not to mention Russia and Canada. At other times in Scandinavian nationalistic discourses, the North differentiates Scandinavia from large, influential states to the east – Russia – and the south – Germany.

## Cultural Research on Social Spatialisation

However, 'North' is semiotically ambiguous. It is a direction, a place or region, a metaphor, and for some, it is a 'state of mind'. This ambiguity instils a certain tension and contested quality to any discourse or claims on 'The North' which is a critical feature of its geopolitics.<sup>2</sup> Cultural research has reflected critically on the traditions of geographical and historical thought on the north, and literary and the visual representations of northernness. What can critical geopolitics gain from this research? What has come to be referred to as *critical cultural studies* (if only to emphasise the importance of critique as a modus operandi and to differentiate from more descriptive and less reflexive studies of folklore and popular culture), can contribute an important perspective on the role of cultural identities as fundamentally political formations of meanings, values and action. Because of their preoccupation with values and popular representations of the world, rather than formal political discourse and institutional relations defined in legal terms, cultural perspectives have been forced to develop rigorous

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Rob Shields, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. E-mail: <rshields@ccs.carleton.ca>.

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methodologies for the linguistic analysis of cultural texts and research on not only ritualised aspects of social life but the complexity of everyday behavioural variation. The relevance of this research to critical geopolitics is to demonstrate how cross-cultural antagonisms are integrated into popular regional mythologies and stereotypes, contested or instilled in subsequent generations, and thus reproduced or changed as part of the values and affective life of social groups. Often these values are contested through shifts in the symbolic and discursive meanings of key terms – such as ‘north’.

Social spatialisation is one term that has been advanced to denote this geographical formation which is as much a question of values, history and contested meanings as it is of territory and location. Because it recognises the contested and performative qualities of national and popular senses of region and identity it anticipates critical geopolitics’ interest in the constructed nature of regional images and national identity-projects. It also offers an extension of the scale of geopolitical analyses by theoretically and methodologically connecting institutional processes of governance with micro social practices of everyday life. In effect, it takes geopolitics to the street and home in the evening to profile and witness to the manner in which a nation’s existence is in a profound sense, a ‘daily plebiscite’<sup>3</sup> and affirmation at the level of the mundane, as much as at the level of statecraft.

Here I wish to pursue a more historical examination of spatialisation on which critical geopolitics itself depends. It draws strongly on modern and postmodern geographical traditions as much as on the disciplines of politics and international relations. What sort of ‘north’ is implied in this geography, and in a ‘northern geopolitics’ or a ‘geopolitics of the north’? Is the ‘north’ of geopolitics, a direction, region, metaphor or outlook to reprise some of the senses I have alluded to above? Laitinen<sup>4</sup> reminds us that the north and other European security borders are now a difficult process replete with ambiguities. In the case of Canadian cultural and historical discussions of the north, this is often remarked upon. ‘The North is not a frontier. It is the wilderness beyond the interrupted agrarian frontier and the urban islands of mid-Canada. The North is not found along a line. It is a space with depth...’<sup>5</sup>

Michael Curry has argued that modern geographical traditions unite an understanding of global space which dates from the Enlightenment, with older, descriptive traditions of ‘topology’ and travel narratives dating from the time of Aeschylus (470 BC)<sup>6</sup> and with ancient ‘chorological’ understandings of the qualitative meanings attached to not only places but planets and constellations as forces of fate and determinants of the outcomes of both personal and political action (of meetings and of battles). This tradition dates from as early as the fourth century BC.<sup>7</sup> A brief excursion into these aspects of contemporary geographical understanding might allow

us to rethink (again) the core assumptions, and the very possibility, of a 'geopolitics'.

### Topology and Chorography

The oral tradition of topology concerned the narration of places and their relation to one another, ordered as itineraries and therefore in temporal terms. 'Within the topographic tradition a description of places did not involve a clear distinction between the question "What is next to this?" and "What did we come to next?"; distance and extension were in a certain way equivalent to time and sequence.'<sup>8</sup> These narratives are filled with symbols which serve as mnemonic devices describing a world not captured in maps, or lists, or other written descriptions; neither is it a world in which one is actively searching for some simplifying world picture. Rather, it is a world in which people inhabit places where the relationships between those places and others are represented just in terms of narrative and symbol....'<sup>9</sup> [AU?]

This continued in the form of early topographies and travelogues down to the current day practices of giving directions by referring to landmarks and narrating the route as a succession of turns and distances. Places and regions are thus represented according to activities and indexical features. In these topological terms 'northern Europe' is always a destination which lies in the direction 'north' from 'anyplace' in Europe – outside and at a distance from the implied location of the enunciator. This coincides with Moisiso's argument that the Northern Dimension Initiative of the European Union reinforces moves in the direction of forming a periphery to a West European civilizational core. Thus for example, the 'North' is a land of itinerant herders, prospectors and resource extraction camps. This stereotype – and to a certain extent the continued practice – of rhythmic and seasonal tenure is a spatial and temporal disjuncture which splits the everyday life of indigenous inhabitants of the far north off from the spatialisation of national territories as continuously controlled and occupied and the temporalities of state geopolitical discourses.<sup>10</sup>

The record of the chorological tradition is found in the astrological maps and constellations of the heavens. This chorography was initially concerned with the subjective implications of places but over time evolved toward the definition of regions and their qualities or 'nature'.<sup>11</sup> While the planets and constellations are held to have particular influence over specific regions, Curry argues that 'if we strip away the references to the heavens,' in Ptolemy's narratives, 'we are left with a series of characterisations of regional cultures that may seem simplistic, but that nonetheless have an air of familiarity. They are not, in the end, that different from the characterisations that one hears today about Chinese, Finns or Californians.'<sup>12</sup>

By the beginning of the Christian era a system had been developed that divided the surface of the earth into a number (five, six or seven) of horizontal bands, or *klimata*, each with a different character. From the heavens one could tell whether one was in the torrid, temperate or frigid zone, and within each existed a different way of life ... Each zone was, that is, a separate and identifiable region.<sup>13</sup>

A similar climatic determinism was popular in the nineteenth century. Nordicity was cast as an important corollary of civilisational development. The course of civilisations was marked not only by an ascending ladder of development in time by a progressive spatial movement northward in the centres of civilisation. For example, the Norwegian Arctic explorer and emigré to Canada, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, argued in well-attended public lectures that centres of the great empires had moved progressively northward over history. This optimistic tone continued in Canadian government publications and policy even until the late 1950s.<sup>14</sup> But Stefansson's book *The Northward Course of Empire* (1923) sold much better in Scandinavian translations than in English and sold 20,000 copies in Russian translation alone. Summarising contemporary, metropolitan Canadian spatialisation of the North, the novelist Margaret Atwood provides an example of the slide from topological direction to chorographic image and back again.

It is not only a place but a direction, and as such its location is relative: to the Mexicans, the United States is North ... Wherever it is for us [Canadians], there's a lot of it. You stand in Windsor and imagine a line going north, all the way to the pole ... That's the sort of map we grew up with, at the front of the classroom in Mercator projection, which made it look even bigger than it was, all that pink stretching on forever with cities sprinkled along the bottom edge. It's not only geographical space, it's space related to body image. When we face south, as we often do, our conscious mind may be directed down there, towards crowds, bright lights, some Hollywood version of fame and fortune, but the north is at the back of our minds, always. There's something, not someone, looking over our shoulders; there's a chill at the nape of the neck. The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north, face the north, we enter our own unconscious. Always in retrospect, the journey north has the quality of a dream.<sup>15</sup>

Critical geopolitics often aims, it appears, to tease out the topological and chorographic positions included within the projects which States and transnational institutions articulate in the universalising and objectifying terms of the Cartesian space of a modern geography. Other accounts of the emergence of the nation and its nationalistic sense of itself as an 'imagined

community'<sup>16</sup> all hark back to Ernest Renan's Sorbonne lecture of 1892, 'Qu'est ce qu'une nation?'.<sup>17</sup> According to Renan, the nation begins with geography, more specifically, with territory and its attributes. Although he does not use the labels 'topological' and 'chorographic', these are the qualities he specifies: 'More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect...'.<sup>18</sup>

### The Geopolitics of Northernness

In many cultural representations, 'The North' is only vaguely located, nor is it clear how it might be reached – rather it is a contemporary form of *klimata*. For Canadians, for example, it is a zone of otherness, a white wilderness where the basic distinctions upon which 'civilisation' is based break down as day blends with night and ice blurs the distinction between land and sea. Even the map breaks up from the firmness of the 49th parallel, the land first punctured by the lakes of the Barren Lands, then fracturing into the myriad islands of the Arctic Archipelago to end in the blank whiteness of pack ice – an abstract space, neither land nor sea, defined only by the cursive net of longitude and latitude.<sup>19</sup> This has been strongly challenged by northern residents who have complained of being treated as second-class citizens, with their localities relegated to the status of internal colonies and their environments unprotected from indiscriminate resource extraction.

In nation and region-building projects of states, ties to local places must be brought into a unified cultural construct. This conceptual construction has then to be enacted in a 'spatialisation' which is both ideational, habitually enacted and embodied by individual citizens and also practised and concretised by institutions. Political conflict is an ongoing feature of this process. As a region which is perhaps more in the imagination of populations in metropolitan centres than a part of their everyday experience, the North as a topographically located region and an empirical datum of land is represented as a phantasmagoric landscape of affects and emotions. 'The North' – capitalised – is thus both a discursive formation and a set of non-discursive, sociological relations and institutions.

In the case of Finland, to give only one brief example, national identity was rooted in the experience of the landscape and later in constructions of a national mythology through the 'recovery' of the *Kalevala* epic by artists and writers including Kallela, Halonen, Simberg and Enckell. [AU?] Reflecting eighteenth-century interest in Greek humanism and Homeric epics, northern inhabitants were idealised as 'New Greeks' by virtue of their agricultural self-reliance and contact with a challenging natural

environment. The poverty of the Finnish peasant, for example, was elevated to a high ideal. In the countryside, the notion of collective poverty became an essential component of nordic identity, too often realised in famine and waves of emigration to North America over a period of about a century from 1860 onwards. This landscape pantheism was politically conservative, emphasising a personal, poetic revolution, self-mastery and discipline at the same time as faith was maintained in an established order which was naturalised and buttressed by landscape myths. At the turn of the nineteenth century, scholars such as Grundtvig (1807) asserted the authenticity of 'northern' peoples in contrast the 'artificial' culture of a more cosmopolitan Europe.<sup>20</sup> The mid-nineteenth-century creation (supposedly a 'rediscovery') of the *Kalevala* epic from shorter traditional Finno-Estonian narrative poems was accompanied by painterly representation linking the events of the epic with the Finnish people. Prince Eugen, Richard Bergh and other painters of what came to be known as *L'Ecole de Varberg* idealised the landscape of the Finnish–Russian border region (*Kalevala*). They produced a set of nationalistic visual icons including boreal forests and lakes, virgin wilderness, rock outcrops, snow and sky.

These iconic paintings provide reference points for what Kolossov (this volume) calls 'geopolitics from below', referring to the Russian case.<sup>21</sup> As Dalby suggests, however, northern geopolitics from below is far from univocal. The circumpolar region is implicit in the Northern Dimension Initiative, the citizenship of indigenous people in the far north is contested. Indigenous sense of belonging and identity is more strongly affiliated with local communities and a unique cultural heritage, not the distant southern centres of states from which they have been traditionally disenfranchised and relegated to the status of internal colonies.<sup>22</sup> For the Sami as much as for the Innu, this sense of social citizenship extends to a sense of territory which is at root proprietary, lived and topological in the sense presented above. Arctic and circumpolar regions, the states that lay claim to them and which base their identity in part on a northern chorography, are thus contested from below, as well as having to face challenges from other states, for example over the unresolved status of control over arctic waters which are ever more accessible.

The impact of environmental change is tangibly manifest in far northern ecosystems. As ice melts, not only is a fragile ecological equilibrium disrupted but ways of life and links of trade, travel and association by snowmobile across once stable ice are cut asunder. Increased shipping, including cultural tourism and 'ecological' cruises, necessarily increases the amount of waste dumped in northern waters while shifting local economies ever more strongly from traditional anchorage in a value system encoded in annual cycles of hunting and herding camps and of living off of the land to

a service sector economy of tourist accommodation and catering, guided hikes and tours in which the landscape is shared and the consumer values and assumptions of southern tourists accommodated.

It is unfortunate that the Northern Dimension Initiative focuses on neither the ambiguities of northern identities and ecological issues, nor on the disjuncture between state discourses and the spatio-temporal rhythms and cycles of northern residents. Critical cultural studies would add that, in the long run, political region-building initiatives and discourses must resonate with popular cultural notions of identity, common interest and local interests. There must be a promise of advantage at least at the symbolic level of broadened community and access to wider cultural resources. In reality, this may boil down to a 'day-out' across a border to a destination such as Tallinn, in the case of Finns, or to take a Canadian example, the cross-border shopping trips which included filling-up one's car with low-priced American petrol. However, these are decentralised and contestatory discourses producing a welter of equivocal geopolitical representations.<sup>23</sup>

These studies of the geopolitics of Northern Europe end up broaching the possibility of a 'critical geopolitics from below', of consumption cultures and of everyday practices. This is not to abandon formal geopolitical analysis but to complement and confront it with a broader cultural and economic context. With this shift in perspective, geopolitics finds new, perhaps unintended audiences across the social sciences. Critical geopolitics' cross-examination of the geographical, topological and chorological assumptions of State- and region-building leads it towards a consideration of cultural as well as political and geographical issues. But it can go further. The cultural is political, and a geopolitics 'from below' – a *geopolitics of everyday life*<sup>24</sup> – needs to be understood in its relation of opposition, ironic complicity and collusion with the dominant culture and the ideologies of landscape and nation produced by artists and media elites (as in the Finnish and Canadian cases, above). Broader traditions of research in the social sciences and humanities on culture, consumption and *klimata* such as the North or on the Orient, need to be taken up in critical geopolitical research.

#### NOTES

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2. R. Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge Chapman Hall 1991).
3. E. Renan, 'Qu'est ce qu'une nation?', in H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge 1999) p.22
4. K. Laitinen, 'Geopolitics of the Northern Dimension: A Critical view on Security Borders', *Geopolitics* 8/1 (2003) pp.00–00. [ED?].

5. B.W. Hodgins and M. Hobbs, *Nastawgan: The Canadian North by Canoe and Snowshoe* (Toronto: Betelgeuse 1985) pp.1–2.
6. F. Lukermann, 'The Concept of Location in Classical Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51/2 (1961) pp.194–210; E.V. Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 1988); M. Curry, 'Discursive Displacement and the Seminal Ambiguity of Space and Place', in L. Lievrouw and S. Livinstone (eds), *The Handbook of New Media* (London: Sage 2002) pp.502–17.
7. Curry (note 5) p.505.
8. Ibid. p.506.
9. Ibid. p.504.
10. See also S. Mäkinen, 'On the Geopolitical Discourses of the Russian Yabloko Association, 1993–2001', *Geopolitics* 8/1 (2003) pp.00–00. [ED?]
11. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* (London: Heineman 1940).
12. Curry (note 5).
13. Ibid.
14. V. Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (Toronto and London: Heineman 1923).
15. M. Atwood, 'True North', *Saturday Night*, January 1987, pp.141–8.
16. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso 1981).
17. Renan (note 3) p.22.
18. Ibid.
19. Shields (note 2) ch.8.
20. M. Klinge, *Nord, nature et pauvreté, facteurs fondamentaux de l'identité nordique*, in *Lumieres du Nord: La peinture scandinave 1885–1905* (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris: Association Francaise d'Action Artistique 1987).
21. V. Kosolov, "'High" and "Low" Geopolitics: Images of Foreign Countries in the Eyes of Russian Citizens', *Geopolitics* 8/1 (2003) pp.000–000. [ED?]
22. M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul 1975).
23. See E. Berg, 'Some Unintended Consequences of Geopolitical Reasoning in Post-Soviet Estonia: Texts and Policy Streams, Maps, and Cartoons', *Geopolitics* 8/1 (2003) pp.000–000. [ED?]
24. J. Van Loon, 'Social Spatialization and Everyday Life', *Space and Culture* 5/2 (2002) pp.90–97.