The World is Not a Blank Canvas: Or Why Should We Teach Political Geography?

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This article was not written *by* geographers *for* geographers. On the contrary, this article was written by authors interested in international and security studies and is meant for those studying international problems. This is an important note to highlight because no matter how porous the boundaries between social science disciplines are, researchers tend to stay within the confounds of the familiar. IR researchers read IR works, are familiar with IR works, and rely on IR works – for the most part. But as John Agnew (1994, 56) points out, IR tends to fall into what he calls the “territorial trap”, seeing “geography as a body of fixed facts setting the environment for the action of territorial states that are essentially the same today as 200 years ago”. Even when geographical notions are present, they are mostly either reduced to what Agnew discusses – the state as a spatially fixed unit, domestic/foreign polarity, and the state as a container of society (Agnew, 1994) – or they have some relatively marginal importance in the theoretical causal mechanism (e.g. Walt 1987; Mearsheimer 2001). Simply put, notions such as a billiard table or even tectonic plates (for example, see: Krasner 1982) fail to encapsulate the full spatial complexity of our world. The world is not a blank canvas, and to better understand the complex and multifaceted political processes and structures, it is necessary to consider the relations between the political subjects and different units in physical space.

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This is where political geography comes in! Political geography as a scientific discipline studies the spatial dimension of politics. As Richard Hartshorne (1960, 56) puts it quite elegantly, it is "the study of the variations of political phenomena from place to place". As a sub-discipline of geography, political geography studies area differentiation (Cohen 1975, 3) by combining knowledge of political science and geography. Therefore, the world is not a blank canvas for political geography because not only do political phenomena vary from one part of the world to the other, but their differentiation matters in our understanding of political processes *both in concrete cases as well as in general*. The last line is not highlighted for no reason. While IR does take into account specific spatial factors when it comes to case study research, we cannot say the same for general IR theorising – the balance of power works the same at any time and in any place. To sum it up, improving our study of international *problematique* requires not seeing the world as a blank canvas, but instead refining our understanding of the complex and multifaceted political processes and structures and their impact. The first step to that is to teach and learn political geography.

Among many great political geography textbooks (e.g., Glassner and de Blij 1986; Gallaher et al. 2009), one of the latest additions to this corps – *Political Geography* by Igor Okunev, Professorial Research Fellow & Director at the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations, Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, aspires to be the benchmark for such an endeavour. Gerard Toal (2021) hails it as "the ultimate political geography textbook". John Pickles (2021) counts it among the most important political geography and geopolitics textbooks in recent decades. A similar view is given by Mikhail Grachyov (2021), who puts Okunev's new look at "old science" as "an authoritative source to be cited by researchers". The authors of this paper share such a view. The textbook offers a systematic breakdown of crucial terms, concepts, and subjects of this scientific discipline, making it useful both for newcomers to the topic as well as experts alike, due to its clear structure, easy-to-understand explanations, and comprehensiveness.

The textbook itself is divided into twelve chapters. But, it ought to be highlighted from the beginning that not all chapters are of the same importance to those studying international *problematique*. While the authors of this paper argue that geography matters, this does not automatically mean that all fields of research in geography matter to the same extent. Okunev's textbook strives to be an all-encompassing tool for teaching political geography in its totality. Therefore, it is understandable why, for non-geographers, some segments can be of secondary relevance. The first chapter, *Introduction to Political Geography,* lays out the key concepts that are then delved deeper into in the following

chapters. Okunev (2021, 19) defines political geography as a "discipline concerned with the spatial dimension of politics". Such a definition diverges slightly from those given by Hartshorne or Cohen because it implies a greater level of explication given to the discipline. Reading Hartshorne's definition, given above, one might think that political geography is more descriptive than explanatory in the sense that it identifies political variations in different areas of the world. Okunev's view of the discipline provides a more encompassing foothold because it implies that political geography observes politics through spatial variables, therefore having greater explanatory potential.

However, we must point out that this definition of political geography brings it very close to our understanding of geopolitics – i.e., *the spatial analysis of (international) politics*. This is especially true when it comes to the second chapter of the textbook, as we will discuss later in the paper. Some might see this as a "double-edged sword" of sorts. On one hand, geopolitics did evolve from political geographic considerations, making such connections logical (e.g., Mackinder 1904; de la Blache 1926). But already during the 1940s, authors pointed out that geopolitics was closer to political science than to geography, meaning that geopolitics and political geography did evolve in separate directions (Cahnman 1943, 55). On the other hand, from 1945 onwards, political geographers strived to remove any association between their discipline and geopolitics because of the usage of the term by Nazi Germany. However, such a view of geopolitics suffers from the *reductio ad Hitlerum* – an association fallacy meaning that if you share something with Hitler (Nazi Germany), your position is automatically wrong/invalid. Geopolitics, seen as the spatial analysis of international politics, need not necessarily have anything in common with its use by the likes of Haushofer's Munich Club and can be a useful way of understanding international problems. Okunev's definition of political geography, which brings it closer to geopolitics, can serve both disciplines – bringing political geography closer to IR but also stripping geopolitics of the possibility of future misuse, as it had been done in Nazi Germany.

Perhaps more importantly, Okunev distinguishes between several levels of spatial organization. Now, it is important to note that this is a story of scale and not a story of levels of analysis. After Kenneth Waltz differentiated the levels of analysis in *Man, the State and War*, IR researchers mostly used them as mutually exclusive analytical categories (Waltz 1959). If we exclude works like Putnam's on two-level games or Buzan's on the concept of security, researchers have begun theorising on several levels of analysis, primarily through the development of neoclassical realism in the second half of the 1990s (Putnam 1988; Buzan 1983; Ripsman et al. 2016).

On the other hand, scale in political geography most prevalently represents "a `vertical` series of nested levels, local, national, regional and global, that provides a convenient way of thinking about relationships…across different spatial extent" (Dahlman 2009, 190). As Okunev (2021, 21) puts it, "being physically in one place, we find ourselves in several layers of political space at the same time". The importance of scale means that we can observe the effects and impacts of the same international problem on different scales, i.e., spatial levels, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Within the textbook, Okunev takes the state as the primary unit and starting point and divides other levels into two large groups: the supranational and the subnational. The first consists of global, megaregional, transregional, macroregional, and mesoregional levels, and the second encompasses supraregional, regional, intraregional, subregional, and local levels. Additionally, he defines the two fundamental principles of spatial organization. Relying on the distinction between unitary and federalist states, Okunev applies the same concept to all levels of spatial organization. The unitary principle exists when a higher level of spatial organization determines and shapes a lower one, while the federalist principle means that the lower levels will form the higher one.

As mentioned previously, the second chapter, *Global Geopolitical Systems,* concerns the supranational levels of spatial organization. This chapter is not only the closest one to geopolitics but IR as well. Okunev examines them primarily from a geopolitical lens, employing the concept of geopolitical power systems. They could be antagonistic systems with competing subsystems (East vs. West) or civilization-centred systems, such as in the Clash of Civilizations model by Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1996). The concentric systems stem from the writings of classical authors of the Anglo-American school of geopolitics: Alfred Tayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, and Nicholas Spykman, whose work focused on the development of concepts of Heartland, Lenaland, and Rimland (Mahan 1890; Mackinder 1904; Spykman 1944). Another type is the polar systems (unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar), based on the number of great powers. Regarding great powers, Okunev distinguishes between a consistent power, a rising power (an underachiever) that has the capabilities but whose status as a great power is not universally recognized, and a revisionist power (an overachiever), whose status as a great power is accepted but is founded on its now declining capabilities.

Okunev gives significant attention to the regional systems based on geographically defined macro- and mesoregions. Macroregions correspond to the continents of the world, while mesoregions "constitute stable historical and geographical groups of countries within a continent" (Okunev 2021, 63). If we

begin with the notion that the world is not a blank canvas, the focus is given to different regions and their specific characteristics that represent such a statement. Now, one might object that this chapter should be more extensive. But we should bear in mind that this is a textbook intended to introduce readers to key concepts and approaches to thinking about problems of focus in political geography. Without a firm understanding of the foundations, facts about how the world politically differs from place to place, as well as their impact on understanding international problems, become somewhat meaningless. Therefore, this decision by Okunev is understandable. The following chapter, *Integration Groups,* continues the focus on the supranational level. It tackles the various forms of integration in which states take part. Okunev explains the various stages of economic integration, from the preferential trade areas to the economic unions, as well as the other types of integration based on different policy areas, such as the visa-free zones, currency unions, and military alliances.

The fourth chapter, *States*, explores in detail the titular unit of political and geographical organisation and analysis. After tracing the evolution of the state from the Neolithic revolution, across city-states and both ancient and colonial empires, to the modern nation-state, the author describes the differences between some important and mutually similar concepts. He points out the contrast between the source and the holder of power. The source of power is essentially the sovereign, the actor vested with the right to govern, while the holder of power is “an institution that *de facto* administers state affairs” (Okunev 2021, 127). The different sources of power, namely the monarch or the people, lead to different forms of government: monarchies and republics, respectively. Criticizing the Montevideo criteria for statehood, consisting of a permanent population, defined territorial boundaries, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states, Okunev argues that some states, such as the Vatican City and the Order of Malta, do not fulfil the first criterion, and points out that not a defined territory but a link to an ancestral territory is required. Thus, he comes to two necessary ingredients for statehood: territorial rootedness and sovereignty (internal and external). Combing territorial rootedness with two aspects of sovereignty, he proceeds to map various types of states, ranging from sovereign states, possessing all three characteristics, to quasi-states, which pose neither one.

As Okunev places the national scale at the centre of his work, one might argue that this chapter could come prior to the discussion of supranational regions. Not only are macro and mesoregions formed primarily by nation-states, but their integrations are the focus of the third chapter as well. But whether the same can be said for the two subsequent chapters (fifth and sixth) that focus on

the properties and composition of state territory is even more questionable. These chapters deal with the state's territorial position on the world map and the internal features of its territory, respectively. Okunev elaborates on how size, shape, neighbourhood, continentality, isolation, enclavity, and exclavity influence the position of a state. Now, the issue is this: can we talk about these features without first understanding the macro and mesoregions that states are positioned in? This question highlights the notion of scale, as discussed previously. A state is not just what defines it internally, but externally as well. Without an understanding of both internal and external elements, you cannot understand the property of a certain state. Therefore, the order can be left to the preference of the author as long as the logic is consistent. In the case of this textbook, it means that the chapters are organised on a descending scale – from global to local.

The seventh chapter focuses on those spatial wholes that are not part of any state. As Okunev (2021, 207) notes, "some areas that are not part of the sovereign territory also come under the state's jurisdiction". For example, the exclusive economic zone, the continental shelf, or occupied territories. They are called territories with a mixed regime and, together with international territories and internationalised territories, which are both subjects of the eponymous chapter nine, are part of the mixed level of spatial organization. Internationalized territories are the opposite of those with a mixed regime because they are part of the state's territory but are governed by an international authority. Examples are international straits, canals, lakes and rivers. On the other hand, the international territory belongs to all of humanity, and states cannot exercise specific authority in these areas. These include the high seas, the international seabed area, the international airspace, the outer space and celestial bodies, the Arctic and the Antarctic.

Chapter eight, *Dependent Territories,* analyses another specific level – the suzerain one. It encompasses territories between the state and the regional level. Their existence stems from colonialism and the subsequent opposing phenomenon – the decolonization process. While continental empires embarked on internal colonization of their vast land territories, the sea empires ventured to new undiscovered lands, which led to the creation of colonies outside of the metropolitan state and culminated in imperialism as the final stage of colonialism. The six waves of decolonization enabled the formation of modern non-self-governing territories that Okunev classifies into four categories based on a combination of two criteria: incorporation into the structure of the state and organization, defined as a degree of self-government. Chapter *Capitals and Centers* deals with these two important concepts. The author contrasts the

classical idea of a geographical centre, understood whether as a geometric median centre, a demographic centre of the population, or a political centre of the state's administrative hierarchy, with the notion of a pole of inaccessibility, which is "a location whose remoteness makes it the most challenging to reach" (Okunev 2021, 350). The chapter also discusses the functions of the capital: as a representation of a nation (the symbolic function), as the seat of government (the institutional function), and as one side of the centre-periphery dichotomy (the regional function).

Borders and Cleavages are the subjects of the next chapter. Okunev explains the three stages of boundary-making: delimitation, demarcation, and remarking, and examines the divided cities through which the state border runs. Writing on the social cleavages, he draws from the influential works of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). The second-to-last chapter, *Regions and Municipalities,* explores various forms of subnational spatial organization. The administrative divisions do not have any kind of political power and are only a representation of the central government at a lower level. On the other hand, autonomies exercise various degrees of authority and self-government. However, unitary and federal states can both have administrative divisions and/or autonomies, since the type of state depends on whether the power is granted top-down or bottom-up. The final chapter, *Spatial Identity,* is influenced by the discipline of critical geography and incorporates constructivist analysis of spatiality. In addition to objective, physical, absolute space, there is relative space, which is subjective and socially constructed through the functions and characteristics we assign to it. The first is connected to territorial identity, which rests upon the features of the terrain that define a group, such as the specific worldview of mountain dwellers based on the objective characteristics of their surroundings. The second influences the spatial identity, which is based on the relationship of a place with other locations. For example, Saint Petersburg is seen by its citizens as a window on Europe.

The world is not a blank canvas, and to understand it right, we must have a strong foothold in the discipline of political geography. Complex and multifaceted political processes and structures, as well as international problems that stem from them, must be tackled by recognizing the world's spatial differentiations. If we not only learn how to see and recognise the multiplicity of colours that the world canvas is made of, our understanding of international problems can only get better. Textbook *Political Geography* by Igor Okunev does precisely that. It is a thoroughly researched textbook that covers a vast number of concepts, terms, and phenomena, well-organised and logically divided into specific chapters, and enhanced by numerous illustrative examples that are particularly interesting for students of Russian politics and geography. It also provides numerous and

carefully curated recommendations for further reading, making this book a great teaching tool and a starting point for research into any aspect of the diverse ways spatiality influences politics. For IR scholars, the chapters on macro and mesoregions and those dealing with the state are particularly relevant. Our university curriculums should reflect on these reflections. Whether it is Political Geography, Regional Studies, or the Geopolitics of World Regions, future generations of researchers of international problems would benefit from being taught about and trained in the ways our world differs.

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