Geopolitics and the Post-colonial

Rethinking North–South Relations

David Slater
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To Farida

For her generosity of spirit and caring wisdom
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Preface

This book has grown out of a long-standing interest in North–South relations and their crucial connection with the power of geopolitical interventions. The analytical emphasis falls on ideas and issues that have been and remain of key significance to this connection. The approach taken is broadly based in post-structuralist and post-colonialist thinking, with associated links to critical development theory, and the contextualization mainly relies on illustrative examples selected from the trajectory of US–Latin American relations. The geopolitical perspective has been influenced by the creative research falling under the rubric of ‘critical geopolitics’, and my prioritization of a post-colonial analytical sensibility draws its inspiration from a wide range of authors stretching across the North–South divide.

While the post-colonial in its general analytical form is closely associated with the incisive contributions of Said, Spivak and Bhabha, in the specifically Latin American context, the work of Coronil and Mignolo, especially their critique of Occidentalism, has been particularly relevant to my own approach. As part of a post-colonial perspective, I have integrated the ideas and theoretical reflections of Third World scholars and thinkers throughout the nine chapters, and this is especially the case with respect to the chapters on dependency and difference (5 and 6). In this sense, it can be restated that the subaltern not only speak, act and write back – they also form an intrinsic part of the globality of knowledge. To be indifferent to this reality is to help sustain the imperially of knowledge which a post-colonial perspective seeks to contest and to disrupt. Although it might be argued with some justification that formally we live in a post-colonial world, we are still some way from inhabiting a post-imperial world.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part sets out to establish some of the most relevant guidelines for the conceptual and historical
framework. Chapter 1 includes a review of the debates on categories such as First World/Third World, North/South, West/non-West, and does so in a context that seeks to identify and question the limits of Euro-Americanist approaches to power and knowledge. It is argued that power and knowledge are most appropriately viewed as relational, and as not being confined to any one spatial sphere, whether global or national. The chapter concludes by suggesting how we might think about ‘the critical’ in critical thought. Chapter 2 provides one possible historical perspective on the development of US power from the nineteenth century to the Second World War and does so in the context of aspects of US–Latin American relations. The conceptual focus falls on questions of an emerging imperialism of power, the nature of geopolitical representations of the societies of the Latin South, and the significance of Latin American counter-representations of US expansionism.

The second part of the book discusses two waves of Western theory (modernization and neo-liberalism) and does so in the setting of changing geopolitical realities since the end of the Second World War. Differences and similarities between these two perspectives are identified and considered in the changing context of North–South relations and the impact of the Cold War and its demise. In both cases, emphasis falls on the mutations in theory as well as the dynamic of world politics and their complex interrelations. The third section takes up issues relating to alternative modes of thinking. Chapter 5 re-visits dependency writing as part of a project of critical memory, and in chapter 6 more recent analyses, from the post-modern to the post-colonial, are set in a context of debates on identity, difference and agency. Overall, parts II and III of the book provide a frame for examining what I call post-colonial questions for global times.

These questions are the primary subject of part IV, which includes a rethinking of the geopolitics of the global and re-examines the contemporary importance of imperial power and its resurgence (see chapter 7). Resistance to neo-liberal globalization and the place of oppositional forms of subjectivity, as embodied in the Zapatista uprising and the World Social Forum, are the focus of chapter 8, which leads into a concluding chapter that sets out the case for going beyond imperial knowledge.

In approaching geopolitics through a post-colonial vision, the book offers one possible analytical pathway to a rethinking of North–South relations. At the same time, I hope that it might contribute to a renewed focus on the need to challenge the imperiality of power and knowledge.
Acknowledgements

Ideas and viewpoints that helped to structure my own approach to geopolitical questions and North–South relations have developed out of an interactive process with colleagues and friends. In the Netherlands, I would like to thank the following people, with whom I have had many fruitful exchanges: my good friend and colleague the late Jean Carrière, Cris Kay, Norman Long, and Frans Schuurman. As a result of regular research visits to Latin America I have been able to establish contact with many writers and scholars and I have greatly benefited from intellectual engagement with a wide range of people, including Lucio Kowarick, Pedro Jacobi, the late Milton Santos, and Zander Navarro in Brazil; Fernando Calderón, Roberto Laserna, and Humberto Vargas in Bolivia; Guillermo Labarca, Martín Hopenhayn, and Carlos de Mattos in Chile; Baltazar Caravedo and Eduardo Ballón in Peru, and Pablo González-Casanova and Hugo Zemelman in Mexico. I would also like to mention Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, who kindly invited me to take part in their Latin American Studies Association research group on social movements, and chapter 8 reflects some of the ideas produced by this group.

At Loughborough, I have been fortunate to be in a Geography Department with colleagues whose research is innovative, critical and international in focus. In particular, an interest in globalization, post-coloniality and North–South relations is shared by a number of colleagues (including Morag Bell, Ed Brown, Tracey Skelton, and Peter Taylor) with whom I have had many thought-provoking discussions. Latin American research has also been carried forward by a group of postgraduate students, including Yubirí Aragort, Jon Cloke, and Alberto Cortés Ramos. I would also like to thank Loughborough University for


providing the financial support that has enabled me to sustain regular research visits to Latin America and for facilitating a period of study leave which gave me the time to complete the book.

At Blackwell, Angela Cohen, Justin Vaughan, and Simon Alexander have provided positive encouragement and a patient approach to shifting deadlines. Finally, my partner, Farida Sheriff, has given me continuing intellectual and emotional support, stimulating me to rethink many of my initial ideas, while also, after reading through the manuscript, helping me to sharpen and strengthen the entire text.
Part I

Conceptual and Historical Issues
For a Post-colonial Geopolitics

‘The central point...is that human history is made by human beings, and [s]ince the struggle for control over territory is part of that history, so too is the struggle over historical and social meaning. The task for the critical scholar is not to separate one struggle from the other, but to connect them...’

– Edward Said (2003: 331–2)

Together with the post-1989 dissolution of the Second World, the accelerating tendencies of globalization and the explosive surfacing of a variety of acute social tensions and conflicts, there has also been a resurgence of interest in the state of North–South relations. Already in the early 1990s, it was suggested that the growing gap between First and Third Worlds was raising some of the most acute moral questions of the modern world and becoming a central issue of our times (see Arrighi 1991 and Hösle 1992). This re-assertion of the significance of North–South relations captures one of the world’s geopolitical continuities. Thus, in a world frequently portrayed in terms of flows, speed, turbulence and unpredictability, there is another narrative rooted in historical continuity – the recurring stories of poverty, inequality and exclusion – a ‘shock of the old’.

For example, global inequalities in income in the twentieth century have increased by more than anything previously experienced, illustrated by the fact that the distance between the incomes of the richest and poorest country was about 3 to 1 in 1820, 35 to 1 in 1950, 44 to 1 in 1973, and 72 to 1 in 1992 (UNDP 2000: 6). Inequalities are also to be symptomatically encountered in the world of cyberspace, where access to