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Classics in human geography revisited

Agnew, J.A. 1987: *Place and politics: the geographical mediation of state and society*. Boston and London: Allen and Unwin.

Commentary 1: a different place, a different politics

Fifteen years have now passed since the publication of John Agnew's landmark book, *Place and politics*, in 1987. The world and its political geography are far different places today than was the case when the book was written (Ó Tuathail and Shelley, 2003). What does *Place and politics* have to say to those of us who live on the other side of what Peter Taylor has called the 'long 1989'? To address this question, recall Agnew's purpose in writing *Place and politics*. Pointing out that previous efforts to explain aggregate political behaviour 'are sought in categories and concepts that relate all social cleavages to the level of the state', Agnew stated that 'The central premise is that territorial states are made out of places' (p. 1). He went on to point out that 'the social bases of response and resistance to [state] institutions are best viewed in terms of the histories of places' (p. 1).

Agnew's premise that 'territorial states are made out of places' is no less true today than it was when the book was written 15 years ago, but the events of the late 1980s, the 1990s and the early twenty-first century have resulted in a fundamental reconceptualization of what 'place' is. How have the definition and meaning of place, and the relationship of place to the territorial state, changed over the past 15 years? The end of the cold war resulted in fundamental changes in the world political map. New states arose and others disappeared. Conflicts in many parts of the world in the 1990s revolved around tension between territorially defined states and place-based national and ethnic groups.

The end of the cold war also contributed to dramatic increases in international trade and globalization. The volume of multilocal production, distribution and corporate activity rose substantially. Movement of people, goods, services and ideas across boundaries became easier, and volumes of cross-border spatial interaction increased dramatically. The 1990s also witnessed the explosive growth of the internet, which greatly facilitated global communication and affected relationships between people, places and territorial states. Accordingly, boundaries between states have come to be conceptualized less literally and with more fluidity; the presence of a border affects local and regional conditions on both sides in varying ways (Bean and Shelley, 2004).

These developments force us to reconsider what a place is. For Agnew, place is a setting for interaction, but this setting must be located: in his words, 'place is not just locale, as setting for activity or social interaction, but also location. The reproduction and transformation of social relations must take *place* somewhere' (p. 27, italics in original). For Agnew, there are three elements of place: locale, or place as setting for

social interaction; location, or place located in geographical space; and sense of place, or attachment between people and place. The meanings of all of these elements have changed dramatically in the past 15 years.

Prior to the past two centuries, locales were locations. Most social interaction took place on a face-to-face basis within specific locations. Since the early 1800s, however, the invention and diffusion of the telegraph, telephones, radio, television, railroads, automobiles and aviation allowed the uncoupling of locale and location. No longer was social interaction limited to spaces within the immediate proximity of individuals. Modern communication and transportation allowed social interaction to take place between locations. The locus of persons with whom social interaction takes place is constrained less and less by location. Rather, people increasingly identify persons to interact with on the basis of common occupations, personal or professional interests, religious beliefs, political views, languages and ethnic heritages rather than merely on the basis of geographic proximity. An internet chat room, consisting of people from throughout the world with some shared interest, is a much more meaningful venue for social interaction for many persons than is a set of people who happen to reside in the same neighbourhood, parish or territorially defined political unit. These changes also have affected sense of place: the sense of belonging, community and communality associated with sense of place is also less directly dependent on location than has been the case traditionally.

What does this mean for the interaction of place and politics? As Agnew and others (i.e., Archer and Taylor, 1981) have pointed out, sequences of elections in various countries are characterized by long-term persistence in patterns of party support over time. Of course, such persistence is reinforced by the fact that electoral data are reported and aggregated on a territorial basis. Moreover, institutions of democratic governance have long been, and continue to be, organized on a territorial basis. In the USA, Britain and most other countries, legislators are elected from territorially defined districts. It is presumed that these districts contain communities of interest whose members, by virtue of their geographic proximity to one another, share common economic and political interests and goals.

As place becomes less dependent on location, however, this assumption has come to be questioned. For example, the creation of 'majority-minority' legislative districts in the southern USA is based on the assumption that the political interests of African-American or Hispanic voters are served better by common ethnic heritage within the districts, rather than proximity. Indeed, Guinier (1994) has referred to the territorial imperative in districting as 'the tyranny of the majority'. As place becomes more and more independent of location, will we see an increased level of representation that is not tied to territory?

How will the relationship between place and the territorial state be redefined in the years ahead? Will the definition of the state as something that is 'made out of places' come to be less explicitly linked to territory than has been the case historically? Or will state interests attempt to reinforce an increasingly ossified and meaningless system of territorial organization of space, at the expense of the less location-bound definition of contemporary places? The answers to such questions remain to be resolved, but Agnew's landmark work continues to point the way toward resolving such issues.

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Commentary 2

John Agnew's *Place and politics* was published in 1987. The main argument in the book was that political behaviour is intrinsically geographical and that a full understanding of political behaviour therefore requires a place-based perspective. This argument was conducted at two levels. At a general level, Agnew set out to demonstrate that place is still important, in contrast to what he termed the 'nationalization thesis' – i.e., the dominant belief that distinctive local or regional forms of political expression had been rendered insignificant by state building and the growth of national citizenship. At a more detailed level, he outlined a framework for a specific theory of place and political behaviour.

The book was divided into 13 chapters. The first six reviewed the current state of political sociology, identifying the dominant modes of theorizing and their ontological limitations. Attempts to overcome these deficiencies were reviewed, paying particular attention to structuralist theory as an attempt to develop an internally consistent framework which could provide a synthesis between structure and agency. This provided the setting for Agnew's specific theory of place and political behaviour. Place was identified as an essential (but often overlooked) element in structuralist theory: 'Place is defined as the geographical context or locality in which agency interpellates social structure. Consequently, political behaviour is viewed as the product of agency as structured by the historically constituted social contexts in which people live their lives – in a word, places' (p. 43).

The second half of the book contained an analysis of voting behaviour in Scotland and the USA. In each instance, an overview of place-specific patterns of electoral behaviour is followed by vignettes of specific places (four in each area) and an analysis of the links between place and political mobilization.

One might assume that geographers would require little convincing about the general thesis that place is important. However, Agnew pointed out that many geographers adopted an ecological mode of analysis which assumed the existence of universal laws waiting to be uncovered and which assumed that the differences between places could be attributed to the differences in composition of their populations, with at most a local correction factor to explain the 'residuals'. For example, if the support for a particular political party is associated with younger voters and voters from a working-class background, then this party would be expected to get higher levels of support in places where the population contains a high percentage of young people and/or working-class voters. These universal laws, assumed to be invariant in time and space, were essentially non-geographical – i.e., the places in

question could, in effect, be anywhere. Other geographers focused on spatial form (e.g., the effect of constituency boundary changes on election outcomes) in isolation from social theory. Thus, although the book was primarily an appeal for the inclusion of place within political sociology, it could also be read as an appeal for the inclusion of a more explicit social theory within political geography.

There are several possible reasons for revisiting a classic. One is to evaluate the impact of the work on the development of geographical thought (or, in this case, on social scientific thought in general). The present commentator is not qualified to evaluate the impact of *Place and politics* upon political sociology, but many of the general, if maybe not the specific, themes developed by Agnew have been adopted by political geographers, even though the subdiscipline is possibly even more eclectic today than it was in the 1980s. For example, there is now a greater emphasis upon intensive rather than extensive studies, a conscious attempt to integrate social theory, and an awareness of places as historically constituted entities. *Place and politics* undoubtedly contributed to these developments.

A second reason for revisiting a classic is to evaluate whether the work still has something to offer to the modern reader. *Place and politics*, in my opinion, still has a lot to offer. I will focus on two aspects.

First, Agnew's specific theory of the relationship between place and political behaviour is potentially significant but does not appear to have received the attention it deserves. Agnew's concept of place is multidimensional and contains three interrelated elements: *locale* – the settings (either informal or institutional) in which social relations are constituted; *location* – the relationship between a place and other places; and *sense of place* – the subjective orientation engendered by living in a place. However, despite later elaborations (e.g., Agnew, 1996; 1997), the theory is still not fully fleshed out. The links to structuration theory could be made more explicit, while scale remains problematic. The size of places is not explicitly defined, although the examples in the book suggest that places are envisaged at the level of a town or city. However, towns and cities contain smaller places which differ from one another (due to residential segregation). At a higher level, nation states could also in many respects be regarded as 'places' (although 'locale' takes on a different meaning). We clearly need to think in terms of a hierarchy of places, but the relationships between the different levels require further elaboration. *Place and politics* is rich in ideas and still offers a useful springboard for exploring these issues.

The second aspect I would draw attention to is Agnew's critique of the 'nationalization thesis'. The notion that social change was *not* undermining the distinctiveness of places would have appeared counterintuitive to many readers in 1987. Since then we have seen the end of the cold war, the further expansion of capitalism into former socialist countries, the popularization of the internet, cheaper air travel, easier telecommunications, etc. The common sense is that we now live in a more tightly integrated and increasingly homogenized world. The emigration of a close friend or relative in the past was cause for a wake; now it is an excuse for a holiday. In the face of globalizing tendencies, Agnew's critique might appear more counterintuitive than ever. However, his arguments about the significance of places are still valid and are well worth a revisit. Other commentators have of course criticized the assumption of increased homogeneity by emphasizing the uneven nature of capitalist development (i.e., the 'locational' aspects), but Agnew's concept of place provides a richer interpretation. A

sense of place, for example, may actually be intensified, rather than diminished, by the continuing trend towards 'McDonaldization'.

There is a down side. At the risk of overgeneralizing from a sample of one (myself), we are all basically lazy and therefore we yearn for the 'one big theory' (whether it is positivist, Marxist or whatever) that will explain everything. However, one implication of Agnew's analysis is that to fully understand the world in which we live we need to understand each of its parts (i.e., places). This is a very daunting prospect. Not only are there a very large number of places to be explored, but each of them is continuously evolving into something different. Further, as Agnew notes: 'the structuration of social relations in everyday life contains many similar elements from place to place . . . but produces many different outcomes in different places' (p. 42). The prognosis for a general theory (as opposed to an efficacious framework for analysis), adopting a place-based perspective, is therefore not very encouraging.

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Agnew, J. 1996: Mapping politics: how context matters in electoral geography. *Political Geography* 15(2), 129–46.
 — 1997: The dramaturgy of horizons: geo-

graphical scale in the 'Reconstruction of Italy' by the new Italian political parties, 1992–95. *Political Geography* 16(2), 99–121.

Author's response

A classic is presumably a book or article that is not simply timely but speaks to and of issues that are of persisting importance to a significant number of people. Whether *Place and politics (P&P)* is worthy of the label is probably best considered in relation to the persistence of citation and whether or not it has inspired others to follow in its footsteps. On the first count I think that it has done fairly well, at least among geographers. I am surprised by how often citations to it still appear, if sometimes in strings of references rather than as a free-standing item. It is one of those books that journal editors seem to encourage authors to cite early in their articles, if only to show that they have covered all of the bases. More often than not, it is the chapter on the devaluation of place in modern social science that is the subject of citation. Other parts of the book, particularly the chapters on American and Scottish electoral politics, appear to have elicited little or no attention. Unfortunately, my hope that the book might have some impact upon research practice in political sociology, at least as measured by favourable citations, seems to have been largely without foundation. That field remains as aphasic about space and place as it was before the publication of *P&P*.

On the second count of inspiring other research it has been less successful. Undoubtedly, it helped to spur several different research projects. Paul Routledge's *Terrains of resistance: nonviolent social movements and the contestation of place in India* (1993), for example, uses the threefold division of place (locale, location and sense of place) from *P&P* to good effect in examining the geography of two major non-violent social movements in India. Byron Miller uses *P&P* (and a number of other sources) to develop his own geographic model of social-movement mobilization in *Geography and social movements: comparing antinuclear activism in the Boston area* (2000). I have remained

dedicated to its key theoretical elements, although I think I have developed them and applied them beyond the original empirical settings of *P&P* somewhat more fully than Dennis Pringle suggests. In a recent book, *Place and politics in modern Italy* (2002a), not yet available when Pringle wrote his commentary, I provide a more detailed sociological account than appeared in *P&P* of how place mediates between human agency, on the one hand, and the socialization processes of observation, practical routine, attachment and reinforcement that channel agency in some political directions rather than in others, on the other. I also explicitly engage the perspective with the rational choice, political culture and multicultural theories that currently dominate in political science and sociology. I believe that this reformulation makes the focus on place seem more relevant, particularly to those who think that social and political theory ought to take human agency more seriously. Of course, as I argued in *P&P*, allowing for the vagaries of human agency does tend to make the possibility of a 'general theory' that totally explains everything rather limited.

Yet I have been disappointed by the limited theoretical impact of *P&P*. I think there are several reasons why the book has not inspired much of a reworking of geographical research agendas or attracted much interest from the mainstream in political sociology. The first is that the book was published just as the cold war was ending. One important intellectual consequence was a sudden flurry of excitement, particularly on the part of the American academics who dominate social science, about a world that could now be made over without the constraints of cold war geopolitics. The collapse of state socialism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union plus the ascendancy of the USA to the status of global hyperpower meant that the world might now be more easily made over in America's image. As Fred Shelley submits, this geopolitical watershed led to an explosion of talk and writing about a 'placeless world' in the making associated with such words as globalization, deterritorialization, time-space compression, a world of 'flows' and 'networks' replacing a world of 'places', etc. From this point of view, where anything is located no longer matters. The world has become like a giant pinhead or smooth ball. Hyped hysterically beyond all reasonable claims about the undoubted revolution in information technology and the explosive growth in global commodity chains, the wildest assertions about placelessness, however, bear no greater resemblance to the everyday realities of most people around the world than do the old arguments about national *Gesellschaft* replacing local *Gemeinschaft* so heavily criticized in *P&P*. Mindless talk about globalization has simply replaced the mindless talk about nationalization that *P&P* subjected to extended critique. Although 'scaled up' from the national to the global scale, the logic of the argument (exemplified by Shelley's own claim about how place is *totally* different after 1989 than it was before) is much the same. *P&P*, therefore, was profoundly out of tune with the major academic trend at the time it was published. The geopolitical context of the time set limits to the possibility of a positive reception (Agnew, 2002b).

In fact, globalization, to the extent that it is real and not purely rhetorical, has been around for much longer than 'since 1989' and is more geographically differentiating than homogenizing in its effects (for a brilliant exposition making both of these points in relation to the historical geography of social identities, see Morley, 2000). Taking first the historicity of globalization, a number of commentators have pointed out that world trade and capital markets were more integrated in the late nineteenth century than they are today. Indeed, financial globalization was the target of populist criticism in many

countries in the early years of the twentieth century. Only between the 1930s and the 1960s, however, did financial markets become relatively closed internationally as inter-imperial rivalry for territorial empires replaced an older, more open global financial order. Cultural globalization, if the word imperialism can be substituted for it as more historically accurate, was a major feature of British, French and, later, US relations with large parts of the world. That *Progress in Human Geography*, a self-proclaimed *international* journal, publishes in English has something to do with this long history of global cultural influence emanating from specific global locations. More recently, globalization has helped hollow out states, as Shelley notes, but in so doing it has also made regions and localities within states more differentially susceptible to influence emanating from distant seats of power. It has not abolished states, regions, or localities. Places are still as important politically as they have ever been. There never was a golden age of placehood that has now passed into history, in the sense of a world of geographically isolated place-communities. Places have always been part of larger spatial realms.

Indeed, looking at the geographical impact of recent globalization leads me beyond this simple affirmation of what I claimed in *P&P* to the diametrically opposite conclusion of that of Shelley. With increased globalization, 'located places', to adopt his vocabulary, have often become *more* not less important in people's lives. I can offer three examples here (space precludes providing more examples, although there are many others I could have included). First, the electronic village has not replaced the need for the 'real thing'. One of the great promises of the Information Age is that people will be freed from the tyranny of geography. No longer would it be necessary to live near the office. No longer, even, would it be necessary to have an office. Cities would wither away as the face-to-face interaction and 'buzz' generated by living cheek-by-jowl were eroded by the power of PCs and modems. Paradoxically, however, what has happened is exactly the opposite. Those who spend much of their days and nights doing e-mail like to run into like-minded souls at the corner coffee shop – hence the boom in urban places attached to the internet economy. The innovations in this economy also do not crop up at random but are tightly associated with the informational and associational economies that come from locating adjacently to those involved in the same business. Second, increased globalization has been paralleled by explosive growth in the number of small countries. At the outbreak of the first world war, only 62 independent states existed in the entire globe. From 1946 to 2002, the number grew from 74 to 194. The result has been a proliferation of small states. Smallness has brought increasing advantages with respect to economic prosperity. A glance at any league table of GDP per capita shows a striking shortage of very large countries and a significant number of small ones. Smaller countries are typically much more open to trade than larger ones and can specialize profitably by serving markets in larger countries. They also benefit relatively more from the informational revolution. Small countries have turned electronic communications into big revenue earners. For example, in 1993 Guyana's telecommunications revenues accounted for a startling 40% of national GDP. The benefits of increased market size can be achieved by joining international clubs such as the European Union. Third, and finally, local government has become increasingly important and powerful in people's lives, not least in the USA. There are many reasons for this, from the use by the Republican Party of the old 'states' rights' rhetoric to the fact that education and crime-fighting policies, largely belonging to states and municipalities, have become national obsessions. But it also seems clear that the devolution of

power relates to the fact that regions and localities find themselves in need of policy tools to increase their leverage over increasingly mobile capital. Not surprisingly, this has led to a wider range of 'standards' and approaches to policy than the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of the federal government in the 1960s and 1970s. Once again, therefore, globalization has been encouraging geographical diversity rather than homogeneity.

If one reason why the book seemed to strike out theoretically was that the target of the nationalization thesis in *P&P* was receding from view and being replaced by a globalization thesis that to its proponents augured an emerging planetary uniformity, another reason was the conception of theory that it offered. Most geographers and social scientists have a positivist understanding of theory. In this view, a theory is a set of statements linking universal processes to universal outcomes. Explanation is the same thing as generalization across time and space. Not surprisingly, this view leaves no scope for difference across time and space. In other words, if theory is all about invariance from place to place, place can have no role in explanation! In the face of this conundrum, postmodernists and those infatuated with the hopeless singularity of places abandon the idea of theory altogether. The fact that postmodernism was on the rise in Anglo-American social science at the time *P&P* was published probably also helped to mute its impact. Postmodernism's lack of interest in ontology and obsession with epistemology meant that the main arguments of *P&P* (almost entirely ontological) were of little concern. What was more interesting was the material on the intellectual history of place. This was more like fun! There is, however, an alternative to both positivist and postmodernist takes on theory, and this is the one that I strongly endorsed in *P&P*. It is the realist view that the causes of human action (particularly the reasons of human agents) operate differentially across space and time because people acquire their reasons from the concrete social settings and affiliations in which they live. This allows for both the role of human agency and the different sets of conditions that work through lifelong socialization to direct agency in some ways but not in others. Places are thus made by the people who inhabit them at the same time that the places help to make them. Observers can only partly tap into this process because of their reliance on place-definitions that are publicly sanctioned (local government units, official place names, etc.) The relative geographical size of places depends upon patterns of activities, network connections and the projection of feelings of attachment. 'Theory', in this perspective, therefore, is a *guide* to understanding place-making and its political consequences, not a specific recipe for what *always* and *everywhere* happens. Of course, this view rests firmly on the conception of humans as active participants in their own lives. If you think that people are total dopes or dupes, then the positivist view of theory is for you.

The focus on *place* was probably also problematic in limiting enthusiasm for the arguments of *P&P*. Not only is this concept usually associated with the more idiographic understandings of geography – the essential uniqueness of regions, etc. – it is also seen as politically reactionary. For these reasons, some have found recourse to other terms such as 'lived space' or have adopted words such as 'territory', usually applied to state or organizational partitions of space, as a substitute for using the word place. Of course, place is what is really intended in both cases. Particularly given to negative appraisal of place as a concept for geographical analysis are those with perspectives with roots in teleological and evolutionary conceptions of human history. Prominent among these would be modernization and neo-Marxist theories that see

human history as an automatic movement from traditional to modern or from capitalism to socialism. Place is viewed as in eclipse or as the geographical equivalent to stasis and tradition. Indeed, from this viewpoint, place is a positively dangerous idea. It is backward-looking and conservative; associated with such bad things as nationalism, particularism and homeland rather than with such good things as modernity, global networks and placeless solidarity. Only when place is dead will humanity blossom. Needless to say, not only is this a massive confusion of what is with what one would like to be (the normative fallacy), it is also a devaluation of a geographical concept that can be rescued from its idiographic connotation and put to work, as it is in *P&P*, as an analytical tool to avoid the two great problems of typical usage of the word 'space' when related to that of 'society': space as a 'mirror' for society and the social and spatial as separable types of process. Place allows for the truly human use of space. If space is the 'top-down' impact of institutional schemes of spatial organization and representation, then place is the 'bottom-up' representation of the actions of ordinary people (Agnew, 2003).

It was as a potential alternative to the two fallacies that I had proposed place as mediating geosociologically between various social influences, on the one hand, and political action, on the other. So often, however, there is massive confusion about the distinctive meanings of space and place. (For a particularly egregious example, whatever its many other strengths as a book, with what seems like a complete reversal in meaning of the two terms, see de Certeau, 1984.) Many glibly write about the 'production of space' when they imply the making of place. Who is engaged in the production differs totally between the two. In the first it is the abstraction of places into a grid or coordinate system and the command or control exercised by powerful institutions; in the second it is the lived experience and everyday activity of people in space. Place represents the encounter of people with other people and things in space (Agnew, 2002c: 4–5). This has obvious political as well as theoretical implications. It implies, above all, the real, everyday possibility of popular political action rather than the assimilation of places and their inhabitants into a commanded space driven simply by the imperatives of capital, the state, or some other singular 'motor' of history.

Finally, the empirical chapters of *P&P* relied largely on studies of voting and electoral geography. By the late 1980s, this focus seemed *passé* to many geographers. Let's face it, elections are bourgeois and boring. 'Real' politics is about strikes, revolutionary rhetoric, demonstrations, sit-ins and other forms of 'direct action'. I would not want to dismiss any of these as topics unworthy of critical empirical examination, but it is undoubtedly the case that elections are an important way in which people communicate their political beliefs and attitudes (in the countries that have them) and that they provide a significant source of information upon which to base interpretations about popular political beliefs, attitudes and actions. Indeed, it was not elections in themselves that interested me in *P&P* but what they said about the intersection between place-making and politics. Much effort in political science and political sociology is still put into electoral studies but, with a few notable exceptions, leading political geographers have moved on to other, presumably greater, things.

Place and politics was an attempt to cross between two fields: to bring together a type of geographical analysis with the established concerns of political sociology. In a time of much glib talk about 'multidisciplinarity', the book's fate, notwithstanding its flaws, is testament to how difficult it is to achieve legitimacy in such an endeavour. My own

view is that the book appeared at a difficult time for its main claims to gain widespread acceptance. Sadly, given the apparent pervasiveness of ideas about theory, place and elections antithetical to its premises and the rampant substitution of globalization/homogenization for nationalization/homogenization in contemporary social science, I am not optimistic that its theoretical message will fare that much better in the future.

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