

FORUM: REVIEWS AND COMMENTS

**GEOPOLITICS - THICK AND COMPLEX.
A CONVERSATION WITH GERARD TOAL**

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Summary: This contribution centres around a conversation with Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail), held at Goethe-University Frankfurt on 25 October 2018 in the context of the closing events of the project AFRASO (Africa's Asian Options) – a large interdisciplinary project, funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) between 2013 and 2019. The project investigated the heterogeneous spaces of interaction between Africa and Asia and closed with a lecture series, entitled *Afrasian Futures*, to which Gerard Toal delivered the first lecture in October 2018. In this contribution, we address the role and evolution of critical geopolitical scholarship, focussing in particular on Toal's latest book, *Near Abroad*, as well as on wider debates on (trans)regional studies and shifting geopolitical orderings, such as the ones explored as part of the AFRASO project. It starts with an introductory part in form of a brief reflection on the problematic history of and the ongoing unease with geopolitical scholarship in Germany. It then proceeds with sketching out the basic tenets and the evolution of critical geopolitics, whereby it highlights the decisive influence of Gerard Toal's work. In the following, the three conceptual foundations of geopolitical field, culture and condition are briefly introduced, as laid out in Toal's book *Near Abroad* and in the context of his call for thick analysis of geopolitical complexities. After this introductory part, the remainder of this contribution consists of a conversation with Gerard Toal.

Zusammenfassung: Im Zentrum dieses Beitrags steht ein Gespräch mit Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail) im Rahmen der Abschlussveranstaltungen des Projekts AFRASO (Africa's Asian Options), das am 25. Oktober 2018 an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt stattfand. AFRASO war ein umfassendes interdisziplinäres Forschungsprojekt, gefördert vom Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) zwischen 2013 und 2019, das sich mit den heterogenen Interaktionsräumen zwischen Afrika und Asien beschäftigte. Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der Entwicklung der Denkschule der „Critical Geopolitics“ und konzentriert sich dabei insbesondere auf Gerard Toals jüngstes Buch, *Near Abroad*, sowie auf allgemeinere Debatten im Bereich der (Trans)Regionalstudien und der Verschiebung geopolitischer Ordnungen, wie sie unter anderem im Rahmen des AFRASO-Projekts untersucht wurden. Der Beitrag beginnt mit einem einführenden Teil in Form einer kurzen Reflexion über die problematische Geschichte und das anhaltende Unbehagen mit dem „Geopolitik“-Begriff in Deutschland. Anschließend werden die Grundprinzipien und die Entwicklung der „Critical Geopolitics“ skizziert, wobei der maßgebliche Einfluss von Gerard Toals Arbeiten aufgezeigt wird. Im Folgenden werden kurz die Begriffe „geopolitical field“, „geopolitical culture“ und „geopolitical condition“ erläutert wie sie in Toals Buch *Near Abroad* und im Rahmen seiner Forderung nach umfassender Analyse geopolitischer Komplexität auftauchen. Nach diesem Einführungsteil besteht der Rest des Beitrags aus dem Gespräch mit Gerard Toal.

Keywords: critical geopolitics, geopolitical field, geopolitical culture, geopolitical condition, Geopolitik, transregional, AFRASO

1 Introduction

Geopolitical scholarship in Germany has a long and problematic history. ‘Geopolitik’ remains an uneasy term – both in public debate as well as in academia. Even though the history of classical geopolitics is littered with environmental determinism, imperialism, racism and fascism not only in Germany, the term ‘Geopolitik’ carries connotations to expansionist militarism more so than the equivalent terms in other languages. This is primarily due to the entanglement of ‘Geopolitik’ with the death machines of Nazi Germany but partially also to the origins of the term in late 19th century imperial political geography. Through the work of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), political geography developed into a geodeterministic and social Darwinistic ‘science’ (RATZEL 1891, 1882, 1897) around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. Also the term ‘Lebensraum’ (living space) gained popularity in this context. The term ‘geopolitics’ as such is attributed to the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922). Kjellen and Ratzel primarily understood it as the territorial dimensions of the state; and the state itself as a life form (‘Lebensform’). They applied Darwinian thought to states and societies and thus laid the foundation for geopolitics as the study of states as competing organisms (MOISIO 2015; HEFFERNAN 2000). In light of the imperial-expansive ambitions of European empires, similar geopolitical strategies emerged from this contemporary political geography in different national contexts.

However, more specifically in the German context, the term ‘Geopolitik’ has been closely associated with the expansionist aspirations of Hitler’s Nazi Germany and the name Karl Haushofer (1869-1946). Haushofer was strongly influenced by Ratzel’s and Kjellen’s ideas and combined Ratzel’s call for more German ‘Lebensraum’ with Nazi megalomania. At the core of Haushofer’s considerations was the creation of 3-4 ‘pan regions’ – economically and functionally integrated mega-regions each linking an industrial centre with a more or less complementary (resource) periphery (O’LOUGHLIN and VAN DER WUSTEN 1990). Like Ratzel thirty years before, Haushofer’s ‘Geopolitik’ provided ‘scientific’ analyses, justifications and strategies for German militaristic expansion.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the term ‘Geopolitik’ has largely disappeared in the decades following World War Two. Also political geography as a subdiscipline became rather subdued in German-speaking geography – less for lack of interest in political-geographical topics than for the pref-

erence for assigning them to other subdisciplines (social geography, cultural geography, etc.). A turning point to break with this marginalization of political geography in German geography was the conference *Handlungsorientierte Politische Geographie und Critical Geopolitics*, held in Heidelberg on 5-7 May 2000. From the conference emerged the German speciality group for political geography (*Arbeitskreis Politische Geographie*) as well as a landmark edited volume summarizing the contributions of such a ‘new’ approach to political-geographical research in the German language (REUBER and WOLKERSDORFER 2001). The conference thus laid the foundation for an increasing examination of political-geographical and geopolitical topics in German-speaking geography - and above all for their labelling as such.

A decisive impulse for this evolution was the school of thought of ‘critical geopolitics’ and the explicit distancing from previous forms of political geography and geopolitics that came with it. It was not least through this “(legitimising) theoretical framing of critical geopolitics” that the term ‘Geopolitik’ re-entered German-language debates (BACHMANN and STENMANN 2019, 173) – most notably through the work of a group of scholars around Paul Reuber (REUBER 2016, 2012; ALBERT et al. 2006; REUBER and WOLKERSDORFER 2002, 2001; REUBER 2000). In particular in the German context, critical geopolitics’ distancing from classical geopolitics, i.e. ‘Geopolitik’, was crucial. However, also its broadly post-structural orientation and the theoretical ambition of breaking with and questioning familiar patterns of thought and supposedly rigid assumptions led to an emerging ‘Kritische Geopolitik’ in German geography. More widely also political geography as a subdiscipline has attracted increasing interest and thus returned to the core of the German-speaking community since the Heidelberg conference in 2000 (REUBER 2012, 94).

2 Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail) and the beginning of critical geopolitics

A key figure for the emergence of this school of thought of critical geopolitics has been Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail). While still a PhD-student at Syracuse University, he responded to a piece published by his masters supervisor, John O’Loughlin (with Herman van der Wusten), that called for a more active role of political geography as rigorous peace science (VAN DER WUSTEN and O’LOUGHLIN 1986). TOAL (1987, 196) rejected this “instrumentalist problem-solving model of science”, arguing against an empiricist po-

litical geography and suggesting that geography needs “critical theory to empower its analyses [and] distance it from hegemonic discourses on international politics”. The focus should be on problematizing “hegemonic discursive practices” - otherwise geography as discipline “remains an aid to the practice of statecraft” (ibid, 197).

The work of Toal (and others, most notably Simon Dalby and John Agnew) has since had a major influence on the development of critical geopolitics and its impact in the discipline of (political) geography. Even though Toal initially rejected being labelled a ‘geopolitician’ (see below), he soon became the name most often associated with this ‘new’ school of academic geopolitics. Toal’s *Critical Geopolitics* as well as an edited volume, entitled *Rethinking Geopolitics*, were landmark publications that attracted wide-spread attention across the social sciences (Ó TUATHAIL 1996; Ó TUATHAIL and DALBY 1998) and thus consolidated critical geopolitics as a school of thought that had the deconstruction and problematization of hegemonic discourses and power relations at its centre.

From the beginning, it has been concerned with exploring how dominant discourses shape geopolitical agency and processes by way of questioning hitherto unchallenged assumptions about the constitution and workings of ‘geopolitics’. Geopolitics was to be “critically re-conceptualized as a discursive practice” (Ó TUATHAIL and AGNEW 1992, 192) and respective analyses should be concerned with “the politics of the production of global political space by dominant intellectuals, institutions, and practitioners of statecraft in practices that constitute ‘global politics’” (Ó TUATHAIL 1996, 185). A key point of inspiration for many students of critical geopolitics has been John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge’s 1995 classic *Mastering Space*. They understand geopolitics as

“the division of global space by institutions (states, firms, social movements, international organizations, armed forces, terrorist groups, etc.) into discrete territories and spheres of political-economic influence through which the international political economy is regulated materially and represented intellectually as a natural order of ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’, ‘friendly’ and ‘threatening’ areas. It is that set of socially constructed, rather than naturally given, practices and ideas through which the international political economy is realized geographically. [...] We share with an emerging school of ‘critical geopolitics’ the view that geopolitics is implicit in both the practice of

and writing about all types of international relations.” (AGNEW and CORBRIDGE 1995, 4-5)

Since the 1990s, critical geopolitics has evolved and broadened as both a methodological and conceptual lens for geopolitical inquiry which encompasses “various ways of unpacking the tropes and epistemologies of dominant geographers and scriptings of political space” (POWER and CAMPBELL 2010, 244; see also BACHMANN 2019a; MOISIO 2015; DODDS et al. 2013).

It is, however, beyond the scope of this intervention to attempt to summarise the breadth (and depth) of critical geopolitical scholarship. Nevertheless, before proceeding to the conversation with Gerard Toal below, it is worth reflecting on some key aspects of his latest book, *Near abroad: Putin, the West, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. In the book, Toal introduces three conceptual foundations for critical geopolitical analysis: geopolitical field, culture and condition that shall be briefly explained in the following.

‘Geopolitical field’ is understood as the “socio-spatial context of statecraft and the social players, rules, and spatial dynamics constituting the arena” (Ó TUATHAIL 2017, 9). Contrary to classical geopolitics, this view rejects geo-determinism as well as naturalistic and exclusively territorial conceptions of the state. Borders are not natural but socially constructed. Toal therefore suggests a more “expansive and open conception of the geographical setting of statecraft, one concerned with how power structures (like states and markets) have produced spaces and places, territories and landscapes, environments and social agents” (ibid).

‘Geopolitical culture’ refers to the “spatial identities and understandings of [states’] position and mission in the world [and] the ongoing debate about it” (Ó TUATHAIL 2017, 10). Critical geopolitical scholarship should strive for understanding the formation of such cultures “in all their complexity, isolating organizing myths, favored narrative forms, prevalent conceits, and competing traditions within different cultures” (ibid). This includes particular attention to the social and discursive dimensions of ‘making’ geopolitics, including stories, emotions, perceptions, desires, etc. (see also MOISI 2009).

The term ‘geopolitical condition’ describes, then, “an enduring concern in geopolitical writings with how emergent technological assemblages – military, transportation, and communication infrastructures – transform the way in which geopolitics is experienced, understood, and practiced” (Ó TUATHAIL 2017, 13). It refers to materiality and tangible infrastructure that influence how “the game of geopolitics is played

within geopolitical fields as well as how geopolitical cultures now operate” (ibid), including the transmission of geopolitical events and crisis around the world through different forms of (social) media, thus making ‘geopolitics’ visible and felt everywhere and instantly around the globe.

While all three conceptual foundations are important aspects for critical geopolitical analysis as laid out in *Near Abroad*, the most central and extensively treated one is perhaps that of geopolitical culture. In many ways, this is coherent with prior orientations in critical geopolitics trying to understand and deconstruct hegemonic discourses. Yet, a point that Toal convincingly lays out is that, despite a possible slight tilt towards geopolitical culture, the three conceptual foundations are ideally to be examined in their interplay in a strive for ‘thick’ geopolitical analyses. Such analyses rest

“on recognition of the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and peoples. Grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world, it strives to describe the geopolitical forces, networks, and interactions that configure places and states. It recognizes that local conditions matter, that agency is rarely singular, that power is exercised geographically, and that location, distance, and place influence its operation.” (Ó TUATHAIL 2017, 279)

This is decidedly different and scientifically more solid than “viewing geopolitics as a grand game” (MURPHY et al. 2018, 293) between the world’s major powers as often expressed by popular geopolitical commentators – also in Germany (KLINKE 2018).

It is against this background of providing a novel conceptual grounding for thicker geopolitical analyses and the transformation of complex geopolitical power structures, that the conversation with Gerard Toal was conducted. It took place in the wider frame of the closing lecture series of the project AFRASO (Africa’s Asian Options) at Goethe-University Frankfurt in October 2018. The empirical context was thus a different one. While Toal examines geopolitical transformation processes of Russia’s Near Abroad, the empirical interest of AFRASO has been in African-Asian geopolitical orderings. As part of this project, we have examined such Afrasian spaces of interaction in terms of their imaginaries and their materiality as well as through the lenses of emerging sets of literature on transregionalism and postulated geopolitical shifts from Global South-North to Global South-South relations (MIDDELL 2019; BACHMANN

2019b; SCHULZE-ENGLER et al. 2018; KARUGIA 2018; MIELKE and HORNIDGE 2017; SCHULZE-ENGLER 2014). So, while the empirical focus differed, Toal’s conceptual work relates to many aspects that the AFRASO project addressed with a focus on Afrasian geopolitical constellations and processes. It is in this context, that Gerard Toal delivered a lecture entitled *Theorizing Geopolitics Amidst Intense Spatial Crises* at Goethe-University Frankfurt on 25 October 2018. The conversation with him was conducted on the same day by Veit Bachmann and appears in the following.

3 A conversation with Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail)

Bachmann: Many thanks, Gerard, for your visit here in Frankfurt and for taking the time for this conversation. I would like to start with a few questions related to your book *Near Abroad* (Ó TUATHAIL 2017), and maybe more specifically on the three theoretical foundations that you open up: geopolitical field, geopolitical culture and geopolitical condition. Let’s start with geopolitical culture, which, in essence, I understood as what critical geopolitics has been doing over the past 30 years. As a first question, I would be interested in learning more about the process of adding geopolitical field and geopolitical condition as additional dimensions for analysis. How did that process evolve for you? Did you feel that it had become necessary to add more tangible aspects beyond discourse and practice that critical geopolitics has long engaged with before?

Toal: Well, these concepts are not new to someone who has considered my work over the last 25 years. I wrote an essay on geopolitical structures, quite a while back, which has these categories. I wrote an essay for the *Annals*, which also talked about our geopolitical condition (Ó TUATHAIL 2000). So in my mind these notions were there for quite a while. In one sense, they are part of the heritage of students of geopolitics. In a way you can find conceptualizations similar to these in the works of classical geopoliticians. If you want to be very crude about it, you can talk about classical geopolitics as formed in the shadow of Darwin and so there is a consideration of ‘Man’ (in the sense of humans) in ‘the environment’ with ‘tools.’ So you have the conditioning environment, you have the human as identified within nature yet somehow transcending nature, and then you have technology. In Mackinder this becomes ‘geographical realities,’ ‘spatial mentalities,’ and the ‘spatial revolutions’ brought on by new forms of transportation and communication.

Mackinder's consideration of spatial mentalities is really a crude analysis of geopolitical culture. He thinks, of course, in essentialist terms. Thus, in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919) there is the "seaman's point of view" and the "landman's point of view." He also thinks in terms of national stereotypes. "Look back to old Froissard or to Shakespeare, and you will find your Englishman, Scotsman, Welshman, and Frenchman with all their essential characteristics already fixed" is how he puts it (1919, p 200). But, in the German case, he talks about 'Kultur' as something separate and Prussian rather than representative of all Germany, essentially Prussian militarism (MACKINDER 1919). So even within his work, you can see him isolating and condemning one geopolitical tradition within the broader geopolitical culture of a competitor state.

Mackinder is very concerned about how technological change is going to transform strategic space. So that's in the 1904 essay, where he is talking about transcontinental railway infrastructure projects like the trans-Siberian railway under construction at the time. It is of course a very 19th century conception and he is catching up late to a concern that had been in the British imperial culture for quite a while (MACKINDER 1904). There is an essay by O'Hara and Heffernan that documents the longstanding anxieties with the British Empire about the development of railways in Asia (O'HARA and HEFFERNAN 2006; HEFFERNAN 2011). That was part of the discourse of the time, Berlin to Bagdad etc, infrastructural project anxiety (like we have today with China's 'Belt and Road'). Then in 1919 he added the internal combustion engine – airplanes, submarines and motor cars – to his 'spatial revolution' thesis. So all of this is to say, this is not something that I have invented, it's something that I am trying to develop from classic geopolitics and make clear as a potential, heuristic template for students of critical geopolitics to do critical geopolitics. It is my goal to try to write that up in a short book, which would provide an alternative to categories that are dominant in international relations.

Bachmann: So, part of what my question was getting at was, why now? I mean this in a sense that these facts, the more tangible and graspable facts of geopolitics, have been there for quite a long time in traditional geopolitical thinking. And yet critical geopolitics has for long been concerned with analysis of geopolitical cultures, the second of these three dimension. And yet, here and now, you decidedly opened it up in the book in the sense of these three aspects of field, culture and condition. Why does it come now? Why does it come in the context of your study on Russia?

Toal: You see, your colleague Martin Müller wrote an essay criticizing critical geopolitics as being all about texts (MÜLLER 2008). That's wrong. That's just an incorrect reading. If you go back and look at *Rethinking Geopolitics* (Ó TUATHAIL & DALBY 1998), a lot of my essay in that is concerned with technology, a lot of it is concerned with geopolitical structures. So, I don't think it's new, I think that people sort of drifted towards the discursive. In the initial book, *Critical Geopolitics* (Ó TUATHAIL 1996), I will grant you, there is a lot of deconstructive techniques, but I never thought of it as something that was just about texts at all. It's about practices. So if you look at the essay on practical geopolitical reasoning in the case of US foreign policy towards Bosnia that I wrote a long time ago (Ó TUATHAIL 2002), that's about performance. It's about the ways in which it is materially made and put forward. There is also a concern with the power of emotions and the power of the unconscious. It is not simply about the representational and the discursive. There is also concern with the hegemonic power and hegemonic spatial structures from my very first publication in 1986. So I think, that's a bit of a distorted reading, too easy a reading, to say that critical geopolitics is about texts and discourse.

Bachmann: What you mentioned was indeed what I wanted to get to next: the aspect of emotions and affect. I have been asking myself how do we, as researchers studying these two aspects of emotion and affective geopolitics on the one hand and more hard, tangible structures on the other, how do we bring them together? How can we study those two together in critical geopolitical analysis.

Toal: So, I think that the notion of geopolitical field, culture and condition and how we put this together, that's the knob of the challenge. I moved from structures to field in part because of Bourdieu. Bourdieu is working with the structure-agency challenge. He has field and habitus and, in fact, Mackinder talks about habit in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, too. How do we study those? Well, it depends on what one's goal is, whether you are writing a history, which encompasses 200 years or whether you look at a particular event. *Near Abroad* is focused on two events – 'Russian invasions' – and is anchored around them. I think there is room for a lot more research on larger structures. The starting research question always is: what are you seeking to explain, what's the beginning and end point of your empirical research? And then from there you can begin to talk about structures, begin to talk about agency, you can begin to talk about the larger

technological forces, which are conditioning time and space. Of course, these are heuristics and I think that's how Bourdieu understood them too. These are tools that try to help us think, but what is it you are trying to explain, what is it you are trying to understand. You start from that particular moment.

Bachmann: Two other key terms that are of interest to us are in the context of transregional studies are 'actors' and 'spaces'. Maybe we start with the former. Who are the key actors in your approach? Who are the actors that are shaping field, culture and condition and so forth? The first impression, we might say, is that powerful states remain the key actors. But then you go beyond that and also analyze how a particular culture is narrated on very different levels. So, who to you are the vital actors of analysis to look at?

Toal: So, one of the things, that I think is interesting about the geopolitical tradition and that separates it from what has become International Relations in the contemporary sense, that is International Relations as a particular field of study really dominated and shaped by American social science, is that geopolitics has empires as its key actors, whereas International Relations is all about states. So there is a discussion of the Westphalian state and the system created by the Westphalian state and that is their idealized conception. And there is a whole realist conception of unipolarity and multipolarity built upon that. There is a neo-realist conception about structures and the feature of the international system as being without a hegemonic ordering power and therefore an anarchic structure. Those are the actors for International Relations and when they are engaged in their parsimonious theorizing, they come back to states as rather uncomplicated, rational, national interest optimizing self-help pursuing entities. And I think what is distinctive about critical geopolitics is that it doesn't fall into that, as Agnew would say, 'territorial trap'. States from the outside are complicated things. They are not necessarily coherent, they have multiple bureaucracies and they have interest groups fighting within them. Then you have a geopolitical field, which features some actors that are not states. Actors like transnational military alliances, transnational ideological movements, transnational separatist groups and terrorists. Obviously one has long had the transnational religious structures and transnational networks of merchants and bankers. These are all actors that are between different spaces. So, this is not a billiard ball conception of international affairs, the ultimate parsimonious creation of realist International Relations. What I try to do in *Near*

Abroad is to provide a multi-scalar account of geopolitics: breakaway entities, parent states, neighboring states, metropolitan states, clashing great powers. It's a dense field, with individuals and movements traversing the scales. One of the challenges for students of critical geopolitics is to give it the complexity that it deserves. I think that conveying this complexity can make Critical Geopolitics a preferable alternative to parsimonious International Relations.

Bachmann: The second point would be the question of space. I know this a very big question, but since the critical geopolitics project started about 30 years ago, the discipline of geography or maybe even more generally the social sciences, have seen a sequence of spatial turns and of prioritizing of different spatial dimensions at different times. And I am particularly thinking now of the 2008 Jessop et al. paper, where they trace these sequence roughly from a prioritization from territory to place, scale, networks and so forth (JESSOP et al. 2008). So, these spatial turns have somehow structured geographical thinking for a quarter a century if you so want. How did these turns, how did the prioritization of, let's say networks or geopolitical places, play into your work of critical geopolitical analysis?

Toal: I don't know that I could answer that myself, because I don't have consciousness of a certain spatial turn occurring in the discipline at large and then impacting the research I do. With one exception. I think that the literature on affect, the term affect is one that, I felt, was quite significant. I began to think much more systematically about it and that came from, in part from, the non-representational turn within the discipline of geography, but of course, the affective term is something in social science writ large. The influence of feminist thinking is something that is quite central, too. So, that's less of a spatial turn and more broader 'turns' in social science. And beyond, the work on Bosnia is a work that is conceptually shaped by some of the work that John Agnew does on space and place and locale. You know, if I got anything from him by osmosis, it is this respect for the distinctiveness of places, places as a complex site within which a lot of things are going on, some in situ and some in connectivity.

Bachmann: One particular spatial category that is of interest to us in the AFRASO project is the 'region'. And of course the region itself has a long history in geography, a very problematic history also, that stretches from the discipline's regional geography in the 1920s

and 30s to notions such as macro regions or regional integration. And I would be interested in possible connections of such regional ideas to your approach of geopolitical field, culture and condition. This approach, in *Near Abroad*, is articulated in reference to Russia and the relations with its neighbours, but can it also work for something much less clearly defined than Russia, for a 'region' if you so want? Can it work it work for Southern Africa as a region? Can we use it, if it's something much more fuzzy, something much less clearly defined than a state. Can we talk about field, culture and condition in that sense?

Toal: Sure, I believe you can. Southern Africa is and was a geopolitical field and I know more about it during the Cold War than in the contemporary geopolitical field. For instance, Renamo was a separatist/terrorist organization created by the South African state in order to destabilize Mozambique after the revolution. In Angola, the South African state was also involved in supporting Savimbi and in Namibia it was highly involved. The South African state sought to buttress *apartheid* and to create a barrier between it and Marxist states in its 'near abroad.' So, that is a history of that region as a Cold War battlefield and a geostrategic space. The United States was a party to this destructive policy unfortunately.

One of the questions I would have, is whether the AFRASO project is one that is not about the geopolitical? Is it a form of geoeconomics, without the geopolitical involved? Well, let me rephrase that. So, the geostrategic would be to me a layer which is, as a geopolitical field, at a more fundamental level than the geoeconomic, which is built upon the geostrategic. And then you have the geo-governance, and then you have the symbolic, and all of those together, those different fields together are the geopolitical! So, to have this thick sense of the geopolitical you need multiple fields and to think of the interaction between these multiple fields. AFRASO seems to be about the spatialities of geoeconomic connections and flows. But, well, you tell me?

Bachmann: I probably wouldn't reduce it to the geoeconomic in the sense that it includes a variety of broader non-economic aspects. It certainly is about connections, trying to find out about connections and relationality, not always in material terms, often also in ideological and imaginary terms, when it comes to imaginations about it.

Toal: Geo-cultural.

Bachmann: Geo-cultural very much.

Toal: And then, when it comes to geo-governance, when it comes to the regional institutions and the particular forms that they have.

Bachmann: Yes, regional institutions amongst them. In my case this would be the East African Community as a regional institution. But it is also more about these transnational and transregional connections between Africa and Asia, for instance in terms of literature imaginaries about the common space of the Indian Ocean. Or in the direction that Phil Steinberg suggests as regards maritime spaces to create a collective space of Afrasian imaginaries or interaction (STEINBERG 2009, 1999).

But to stick for a moment with the notion of regions, and area studies more concretely. I would be interested in your thoughts about this. Do you have the impression that area studies and regions, as units of analysis, are coming back into focus through reterritorialization debates? I have the feeling that, while deterritorialization debates are still quite prominent in a lot of social sciences, in geography, reterritorialization debates are becoming much more important for the past six or seven years. And my question is, if the area, the region as a unit of analysis, is coming back in a much more important way through these reterritorialization debates?

Toal: So, well the initial conceptualizations of deterritorialization and reterritorialization were that those processes are unfolding together. With deterritorialization was a reterritorialization on a new scale, so it was an ongoing process. A dialectic.

Bachmann: The territorial state lost relevance, the territorial region gained relevance.

Toal: Yes! And today we have the backlash, the particular rhetoric that is coming from the Right about the importance of sovereignty and 'not losing control of our border' and 'the need to reestablish control'. In this political discourse, there is desire for visible reterritorialization. But, of course, that's a particular rhetorical performance, which has lots of contradictions. This rhetoric actually posits not a world of self-sufficient states but an alt-right-globalization, which is, in one sense, a concentrated form of neoliberalism driven by fantasies of states as global trading firms escaping an empire of regulation. A penal fantasy – hard borders – and an escape fantasy co-exist. So, it's about no free movement of people, but yes to free capital and yes to unregulated trade in commodities.

Bachmann: Selective mobilities.

Toal: Yes

Bachmann: Well, the AFRASO project took major inspiration from postcolonial literature studies. And a dilemma we have been struggling with over the past few years is that, somehow we see ourselves confronted with regions as powerful imaginaries, like Southern Africa, or even Africa as a whole, or even ‘the Global South’ as a whole. But at the same time we try not to essentialize them, which is of course always a risk that you run then. So we want to take them as imaginaries and seek to frame them in relationship with other spatial imaginaries. Africa with Asia. We are aware that this is very essentializing in a sense and would be interested to hear from you if this dilemma pops up in your work. For instance, when you talk about the post-Soviet space, which is of course also highly heterogeneous, but still it is a useful unit of analysis of as a geopolitical imaginary. How do you deal with it?

Toal: So, what you are talking about are meta-geographies. And the way I would conceptualize those is that these are ‘geo-GRAPHS’, commonplace spatializations which function within rhetorical performances. So, we have to look at the ways in which they are wielded and the context in its specificity. Of course, there are all sorts of representational and affective economies at work. So, when you say Africa, well, I can imagine that in a speech of Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen it functions as a signifier in a certain racializing way, but I can also imagine that in a speech of someone, perhaps, who is celebrating art and is celebrating music and celebrating a cosmopolitanism, Africa is seen as sort of space of creativity and of movement and of human dynamism.

I would look at the particular rhetorical performance rather than beginning abstractly. You can talk about a particular rhetorical performance and then contextualize it within larger symbolic economies. But the study of critical geopolitics was from the outset concerned with these meta-geographic signifiers: ‘the West’ versus ‘the East,’ the ‘Oriental mind’ of the Soviets (the phrase Kennan used in his famous article of 1947), the ‘Free World,’ the ‘Third World,’ etc. And what we are seeing in history in particular and it is quite exciting to study with the advent of digitalized archives and machine script search, is careful attention to the genealogy of these common-sense spatializations. For instance, what’s the history of the term ‘the Free World’. You know there are histories of the term ‘the West’, which are quite interesting. I think

critical geopoliticians or critical geographers have an ear for new emergent spatializations and what they mean. I am going to talk a little about that tomorrow, about the rising popularity of the notion of ‘the gray zone’ and how that is functioning today.

Bachmann: You mentioned newly emerging spatializations; and this emergence has been of interest to us in the sense of a transformation of geopolitical power hierarchies away from the traditional power centers in the Global North to increasing power centers in the Global South. And on this, funnily enough, China is often included and sometimes even Russia is included in this idea of the Global South. So, the idea is how to approach this geopolitical transformation in terms of how do we imagine geopolitical power structures to look like? Where are new actors coming up? When does the ‘Near Abroad’, if you so want, become the center and develops another new ‘Near Abroad’ that maybe used to be the center?

Toal: Sure! Well, I think, what we can do as students of geopolitics, is to make the case that this needs to be documented in its thick complexity and that we should move well beyond the hegemonic conceptualizations that are found in International Relations, such as unipolarity or multipolarity. To me this is an indication of the poverty, the extreme poverty of International Relations as a rhetoric. Unfortunately, that rhetoric is now in the practice of certain states, persons, who will use those terms, because they’ve been trained in International Relations. It probably is inevitable that there would be a certain amount of essentialization. So, we have this constant rhetoric of ‘the rise of China,’ and talk of ‘power transition’ and the so-called ‘Thucydides’s Trap.’ To me what is interesting is the ways in which China is redefining its immediate community and the ways in which it is creating connections across the globe in terms of the flow of commodities produced in China and the flow of investment from China – very significant in Africa as you know. Thickly describing the emergent global footprint of China – in production, in infrastructural investment, in advanced telecommunications, and let’s not forget the carbon footprint too – is really much more interesting than talking about supposed timeless laws about unipolarity and transitions to multipolarity.

Bachmann: It is much more THICK

Toal: Yeah! Yeah! It is.

Bachmann: It captures the complexity.

Toal: Yeah! And, as you know, there are certain companies, like Huawei, that are making China a global brand, and then there are certain institutions within the military in China – the navy – that are pursuing an alternative agenda. As you know, there is a contradiction between the imperative to create a sphere of influence, which has some kind of a perimeter ‘closed seas’ quality to it, and the imperatives of a global trading state which requires free flows of containers and shipping. How is the co-existence of these two logics to be explained? You have to look at the nature of the state, the nature of the power structure and its global connections. In *Near Abroad* I refer to Michael Mann’s work and the four network of powers that he has. How do they crystalize together in particular states at particular times? That is an empirical question and requires in-depth study.

Bachmann: I would now like to go into a slightly different direction, which is more general about your 30 years of experience in critical geopolitics and the genealogy of the school of thought. Concretely, I would like to start with what can maybe be considered a dilemma. And that is the role of deconstructive, critical social science, and its relevance to policy makers, to practice oriented work. In a sense critical geopolitics started out with a strongly deconstructive orientation and this has changed in particular in your work. You moved away from this early orientation, from the texts you wrote in the late 80s, from this “let’s stay away from any interference in politics or political action” to doing much more concrete, I don’t know if you like to use the word ‘applied’, but certainly practical work. Also, your book now is targeted, and you emphasize that, at a much broader audience than only the academic community. I would be interested to know how this transition was for you? What triggered it? How did you deal with it theoretically? How can we square the circle to go from a critical, deconstructive school of thought to one that works applied with policy recommendations and does applied work?

Toal: Yeah, it’s a very good question. I think that certainly it was the case that early critical geopolitics was very critical, and it came from a politicized place. I think, it was a legitimate reaction against the militaristic dangerous politics associated with Cold War geopolitics. Remember the 1980s were an uneasy time, a ‘second Cold War’ haunted by the possibility of nuclear war. The deployment of Pershing II missiles to Germany was galvanizing to us in the peace movement. Things changed for me in a number of ways. The first time that Peter Taylor used the term ‘critical

geopolitics’ to me – it was in his response to reviews of the manuscript I submitted to *Political Geography* on the US policy to El Salvador – I didn’t like the term at all. I protested: “I’m not a geopolitician! I don’t want anything to do with geopolitics.” I only adopted the term under protest. But one of the things that I grasped is if you’re making a political critique, you’re actually arguing that there is a better way. That there is a set of policies that we should be pursuing but that we are not pursuing. What I objected to was that, therefore, one has to inevitably turn into a geopolitician who is coming up with four recommendations or how to deal with this particular crisis or that particular crisis ...

Bachmann: Or to do consultancy.

Toal: Yeah, you’re not a consultant! I think scholarship is really fundamental and central to critical geopolitics. That’s its strength. It should follow the facts wherever they lead. It should be robust, open to critique and so in that sense, that’s where continued progress can come from, being open to further critique. And in terms of the evolution of my own trajectory and the influence of the geopolitical context. I think, we were extremely lucky with the way the Cold War ended. And I think, we are now back to a moment, which is potentially very very dark and I am quite concerned about it. But we got 30 years of relative peace, but not everywhere. One of the things that I got pulled into was the Bosnian War. Here it was very evident to me that there was a role for an outside authority to try to impose a solution and impose a particular set of policies. First of all, stop the war. And that was grounded in European values, that what was occurring across Bosnia were things that reminded us of the Second World War. And so, therefore, I was supportive of the US intervention in Bosnia and a more robust role for the US. Of course, you know, how it unfolded was that the French presidency changed and Chirac comes in. And Chirac together with Clinton began a more robust response to end the war. So out of that experience came an appreciation for the ways in which the US military power can be positive, can help support liberal democratic state emerge after Communism. And so, I was also supportive of the Kosovo War, which is a war that was unpopular with a lot of people on the political Left. I remember having a debate at one point with one woman, who said that “How can you be for this? Critical geopolitics is against wars?”. No, it’s not against wars per se. It’s not a pacifist intellectual enterprises, as I see it. It is about making arguments about the contemporary geopolitical conjuncture and

about trying to understand that conjuncture. And, inevitably, it is about developing a judgement, a political judgement on it. I am not someone who is by nature an activist, who knocks on doors on Capitol Hill or elsewhere saying “We’ve got to do this!”. But I certainly was very supportive of the US role at that time. And after that, the context changed in the 2000s with Bush coming to power and I was against pretty much everything that he did. In 2001, how he responded to the 9/11 attacks, the intervention in Afghanistan, which didn’t need to be... the government didn’t necessarily need to be overturned and then the travesty of the Iraq War, which was just a plunder of the highest order and has actually turned out even worse than I expected. I remember at the time thinking that this is bad for the international system, this is bad for the United States but it might be good for the Iraqi people. I was thinking in particular of the Kurds, and the particular situation in Kurdistan where they were protected by ‘no fly’ zone up in the north, protected against Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist state, a brutal authoritarian state. But I was wrong about that. I think that objectively, you can make the argument that, under Saddam Hussein’s rule, more people would have lived. Well over a hundred thousand people, maybe many more, died in that war and the country has been in turmoil since then. It has now in engulfed Syria. This is a travesty, it’s a crime what has happened there. And keep in mind that in the United States, the pro-war pundits, they’re still there, they’re still writing for the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. It is just outrageous.

Bachmann: And you write about that quite clearly in the opening of *Near Abroad*, when you say, the US legitimized pre-emptive war through the Iraq intervention. For me it was the first time that I could think of where such a blatant violation of international law has been tried to be justified. And in so doing, in the end, to use your words, legitimize pre-emptive war. Of course, not only for the US, but also for other countries.

Toal: Yeah, that’s right. And you know, it was a complete own goal. They did not need to do that! Because, de facto, states reserve the right to defend themselves and implicit in that is the fact that at a certain moment, they may think that they need to act pre-emptively, which is not to say, that it is legitimate, but there’s a difference between leaving all of that tacit and unspoken, and actually fully articulating a new doctrine in front of the world. It was an act of imperial hubris of the highest order and self-defeating in an incredible way. I don’t know if it is an answer to your

question, but it certainly is a set of influence and a set of experiences.

Bachmann: So how then do we square the circle of rigorous theoretically informed scholarship and making practical impact? How do we do it?

Toal: So, well making practical impact. I think, that I do not see the goal of critical geopolitics as coming out with reports, which have executive summaries and three options laid out. Instead I see it as a part of a larger democratic culture, in which we as a community of scholars have to have fidelity to scholarship, to particular norms, criteria of scholarship and have to hold that fiercely in the face of political attack. And then through education and through our productions, through use of our skills we have to seek to produce books and op-eds that go out into the public arena for democratic debate. That’s the extent of our influence. That’s the nature of our influence. It may not be enough in as much as the domain, the space between that intellectual democratic culture and actually policy making, the space between those two is colonized by this ecosystem of think tanks, that essentially are marketing the particular preferred policies of interest groups and their funders. And that is a great frustration, but that’s the nature of the world we are living in. And they are unaccountable, because they endure, even though the particular policy recommendations they have made often have been disastrous. You know, one just lives in hope that by producing work that goes into the public arena, it can have some kind of an impact. Books travel to the strangest places and get into the hands of people we might not expect. Even if they’re dislike some of the arguments, they would have encountered them and they have to raise their game in response.

Bachmann: I would slowly like to come towards the end, but maybe ask you one or two very brief questions about the particular German context. And before that, even more specifically about the place we are in at the moment: Frankfurt and the Frankfurt School. When you first started to write about critical geopolitics, you were mentioning the importance of including critical theory into geographical or political-geographical analysis. And subsequently you’ve been, of course, one of the main authors to include critical theory into critical geopolitics and geography more widely. What impact did the Frankfurt School have on your work?

Toal: I think, they had an influence in a broad way rather than in a specific way. I discuss *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* in the chapter on US reading of German

geopolitics during World War II in *Critical Geopolitics*. So that's a specific case. More generally, the project of producing theory which questions power structures in the name of social democratic ideals rather than serves power structures, that to me is the essence of critical thinking, of critical geopolitics. It holds out the ideal of deeper forms of freedom in our society. That didn't come from the Frankfurt School alone but certainly they were part of the traditions that influenced me.

Bachmann: Maybe for the particular German context we talked about before. You know well how difficult and laden the term 'geopolitics' still is in the German context. Where do you see key contributions that German scholars could usefully make to critical geopolitics or geopolitical scholarship more generally? Given the history of the term in German, it remains difficult and problematic. For instance, you would probably not find many scholars in the German-language context that would consider themselves geopoliticians, let alone 'Geopolitiker' or 'Geopolitikerin'. Nonetheless, there is quite a bit of scholarship in Germany that is probably mainstream critical geopolitical scholarship, but people are very reluctant to refer to it as such. Is there a particular way of how you think German scholars could engage or contribute to this school of thought in a way that comes out of this particular history of the term?

Toal: Well, of course, the first would be to engage with the genealogy of the term geopolitics in Germany and the ways in which that unfolded. I think that's something that there is not sufficient research on and awareness of, certainly within the English language context. The term 'Lebensraum' is notorious, yet how well do we know its genealogy, and political career in depth? Perhaps there are careful historical studies on this in the German language of which I am unaware. I know that Timothy Snyder devotes the first chapter of his book *Black Earth* to this, and offers an ecological interpretation of the Nazi program. But when did 'Lebensraum' become instrumentalized as a catch phrase in the political discourse of the 1920s and the 1930s? What was its career as a catch phrase? So that's number one: the historical legacy of key geopolitical terms. Number two, what's coming next? German scholars need to challenge any affective political drive to whitewash or rehabilitate the rightwing geopolitical tradition in Germany. We all have a duty to truth and informed deliberative debate about the past in democratic societies. So therefore, I think, there is a real need to anticipate how populism threatens that.

Number three: we need German-centered interpretations of the contemporary conjuncture. We need to understand how the contemporary geopolitical condition shapes the practice of statecraft. Is it a case that social media is producing a culture now which is angrier, more polemical, more polarized, more affective? There is a real need to understand the weaponization of social media for commercial and geopolitical ends. Adapting our public spheres to protect democratic debate is something most states have to do now. German scholars can help contribute to this project.

Bachmann: ... and one that is not of a nationalist territorial sense.

Toal: Yes! And if you look at it from 50 years ahead, I think, the climate is going to be a major issue, (but we'll have to leave that for another time). We need to be aware of the fact that social media are not a benign set of technologies, these are very addictive technologies. These are technologies which are, in many ways, antithetical to the values that we need to sustain democracy.

Bachmann: When I read your comments about that in the conclusion of *Near Abroad*, I was wondering if this is way of essentially more direct government-populace interaction, similar to a stream-lined media in a more autocratic society. And Trump of course is the best example to circumvent a critical media as a force of democracy, for communicating directly with the audience that likes you anyway and giving them just the kind of information that the political sovereign wants to transmit.

Toal: Yeah, and you also dominate attention. You create government by shock and outrage, and in that sense, it is a governance form that shuts down normal democratic politics. This is concentrated monopoly of the 'eyeball economy,' the 'attention economy.' Others making arguments are drowned out. Politics becomes a reality show of outrage, the president a type of 'shock jock,' a Howard Stern like character that people do not necessarily like but they constantly follow because they are interested in his latest outrageous act.

Bachmann: Given, of course, power by the office, in particular Trump as president now.

Toal: Yeah, the bully pulpit takes on a new meaning, when you have a bully at the pulpit.

Bachmann: Gerard, thank you so much for this conversation.

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