Introduction

Popular Culture—Between Propaganda and Entertainment

Music has a particular role in our cultural imagination. Most everyone understands that music has power of one kind or another. It has the power to make us tap our toes and perhaps sway or head-bob with the beat, or the power to make us remember things from when that song was new. Music can also provide us with the boost to get us through a day in which we are dragging, or conversely can relax us when we are nervous. We usually like that music has these impacts on us, because it allows us to shape our environment to help us with our day—by boosting our energy, helping us forget our worries, or whatever. However, we feel differently about music if it is not in our control. Even someone singing an advertising jingle near you so that it gets stuck in your head all day can be irritating, and a neighbor's throbbing bass at midnight can lead to the police being called. At the far end of this spectrum, the loud application of objectionable music has been frequently used as a form of torture (Johnson and Cloonan 2008). Even music that you *like* can drive you crazy if played at the wrong time. How can something that gives so much pleasure also be so infuriating and disabling? This ambivalence about music says quite a bit—at a minimum the experience of music is inflected by how in control we are of that experience. Even the most basic experience of music, then, is inflected by power and politics.

So what happens then when we expand the frame to include control over things like lyrics, or types of rhythms? Power and politics have always been an important part of music in that sense. Elvis Presley's hip movements while performing were deemed lurid and objectionable; rock and roll itself was seen as promoting juvenile delinquency. Alice Cooper

was met with the same concerns, as was Marilyn Manson, and today it
seems to be rap that bears the brunt of public concern over the types of
behavior it purportedly induces among its listeners, namely violence,
misogyny, and other forms of antisocial behavior. Of course, the naming
of these forms of music as dangerous to listen to only makes sense as a
way of situating other forms of culture and practice as normal, and not
deviant in any way. Similarly, the behaviors that rock and roll and later
rap music have been accused of contributing to are likewise left out of an
invented "mainstream." Thus, criticism of these forms of music over the
years is not just about the music, but about society, and who controls its
limits. It is, in short, political. This is not just true of music, but of all forms
of popular culture, whether it is television, sports, or fashion. It is a con-
tested field, with a lot more at stake than just aesthetics and personal
taste.

So how, then, is popular culture *geopolitical*? One word that is often as-
sociated with media and geopolitics is "propaganda." Propaganda refers
to the intentional use of the media to generate public sentiments that ben-
efit the propagandist. However, it is most often used to designate *other*
people's attempts to do this, as a way of invalidating the message of the
mediated culture. This can be in the form of news stories that are purport-
edly "slanted" against another government, or a film in which the villain
is a particular nationality, or just a song that inspires martial feelings at a
critical moment in diplomatic relations.

The difference between "propaganda" and "truth" often depends on
where you stand, and perhaps on the intentions of the producer, which is
difficult to assess in the world of popular culture. Therefore, this book will
not engage with the idea of propaganda itself, but it is useful as a test—if
popular culture was not geopolitical, why would governments contest it?
Instead, we have plenty of evidence that they do. For instance, Yuri Zhu-
kov (1965, n.p.), writing in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, complained of
Ian Fleming's James Bond novels:

> James Bond lives in a nightmarish world where laws are written at the point
> of a gun, where coercion and rape are considered valor and murder is a
> funny trick. . . . Bond's job is to protect the interests of the property class, and
> he is no better than the youths Hitler boasted he would bring up like wild
> beasts to be able to kill without thinking. . . . It is no accident that sham
> agents of Soviet counter-intelligence, represented in caricature form, invari-
> ably fill the roll of Bond's opponents, because Bond kills right and left the
> kind of men that Fleming wants to kill—Russians, Reds and Yellows. Bond
> is portrayed a sort of white archangel, destroying the impure races.

More recently, the BBC World Service, a branch of the British Broadcasting
Corporation that is funded by the UK government to disseminate news

from a British perspective around the world, has been repeatedly jammed by the Chinese government to prevent an alternative (British) perspective being heard within its territory (Pinkerton and Dodds 2009). Further, when Kazakhstan protested its treatment as an anti-Semitic and misogynist country in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) it was publicly scorned by the American public. However, the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, paid for an advertisement in the *New York Times* and subsequently flew to Washington, D.C. to meet with President George W. Bush in order to foster a more "authentic" image for his country. If popular culture does not matter to geopolitics, then a lot of people are going to a lot of trouble to contest it for nothing.

IDENTITIES: BETWEEN THE GLOBAL AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The idea of propaganda, as stated earlier, is often used as an opposite of the self-evidently true position espoused by the speaker. This is true whether talking about national identities or individual ones (or anything in between). Therefore, who we think we are, and who others think we are, is critical to how we evaluate popular culture. In other words, whether popular culture is propaganda or just entertainment is determined not by its content, but rather by the identity of the consumer. Identity thus is a thread that runs through every chapter of this book.

Identity has become a very politicized term since the 1960s, when various social movements (such as the women's liberation, peace, civil rights, and various anti-imperial movements) highlighted the various ways in which it was possible for people to conceive of themselves as located within society. Since then, processes of globalization have not eliminated identity, as some claimed they would, but instead have heightened attention both to it and the efforts needed to bolster stable place-based identities in the face of ongoing processes of migration and other global circulations of people, goods, and ideas. With people's possible identities drawing on numerous overlapping geographical definitions, and with culture being produced and consumed in new and various places, identity has become less of a taken-for-granted concept than in the past. Instead it has moved to the forefront of the study of both popular culture and geopolitics.

Popular culture conveys information about places, and also originates in certain contexts only to be consumed in various others. In this way it is doubly geographical, conveying ideas about places from one place to another. Identity and power are thus invoked in multiple dimensions. Similarly, geopolitics is about the assignment of values to places, and it

constructs hierarchies of people and places that matter and those that do not. While geopolitics is usually considered to be conducted in very elite contexts, this book argues that it in fact circulates in everyday contexts through popular culture. The idea that geopolitics is only for elites is itself a way of producing identities—those who are active in shaping the world and those who are passive. Like popular culture, geopolitics is doubly geographic—shaping places in various ways and also demarcating the places and people who do the shaping and those who do not. Identity, then, is key to both popular culture and geopolitics. The juxtaposition of these words in the title of this book is therefore not just a label, but a call to consider each topic in relation to the others. A more detailed explanation of individual identity can be found in the concluding chapter of this book, in a section entitled "Social Constructionism and Subjectivity." However, to facilitate that understanding of identity it is best to work through the intervening chapters. So, let us briefly turn our attention to this book and its subject matter, popular geopolitics.

THIS BOOK

Popular geopolitics is a niche within political geography wherein scholars study the everyday experience of geopolitics. As such, the term refers to both the subject matter (which will be outlined through the rest of this book) as well as to the project devoted to improving our understanding of that subject matter. The latter is interesting in that over the past several decades the project has moved in hitches and starts, as various scholars of geopolitics have decided to engage with it, and then move on. There have been notably few people who devoted themselves to it for years at a time. In fact, one of the defining features of popular geopolitics has been its lack of definition—not as a subject matter, but as a group of people.

However, another key feature of the project thus far has been its links to various other academic fields, such as cultural geography, international relations, and cultural studies. Scholars in these fields often produce work that is easily aligned with the project of popular geopolitics even if they would never label themselves as scholars of popular geopolitics. This is because the past twenty years or so have seen an efflorescence of research on popular culture and identity across academia, much of which is relevant to popular geopolitics even if not couched self-consciously within its terminology. Thus, popular geopolitics can be seen as a tiny niche within political geography (itself a niche within a relatively small discipline) or, perhaps more optimistically, as part of a large interdisciplinary project that spans many different perspectives. This book seeks to position itself within both perspectives; adopting the terminology and theoretical per-

spectives specifically associated with popular geopolitics but reaching out to surrounding niches for conceptual insights or particularly excellent case study materials.

This book is intended to be used as a textbook for advanced undergraduate students and as a quick guide for beginning graduate students who are hoping to get a sense of popular geopolitics. As such, it is written in a casual, conversational style that uses numerous examples to convey what can be quite complex concepts. A book devoted to popular culture must necessarily leave out vast swathes of the world's popular culture because the book itself is limited in pages and scope and the world's culture is not; rather it is nearly infinite in scope and continually evolving into new forms and practices. Because of this, tough decisions have to be made about what to include and what to exclude. These tough decisions are made somewhat easier by the author's own limits—drawing upon popular culture that is beyond my experience to make examples is a sure-fire way to undermine the accuracy of this book. Therefore, this book draws primarily on popular culture from North America and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom. Consequently, readers from these regions are more likely to find the examples illuminating, and apologies are due to readers from other parts of the world.

Another limitation in the choice of case studies and smaller examples can be found in the centrality of media to this book. Popular culture itself encompasses a much larger array of practices; these include playing in or attending sports competitions, and making music or going to concerts. These kinds of activities have not gained much prominence in the popular geopolitics literature yet, although they appear to be on the horizon. Perhaps a future edition of this book will be able to incorporate these new literatures. Instead, this book focuses on mediated popular culture, such as books, TV, movies, comic books, and radio. In part this reflects the popular culture literature, which originates from a normative engagement that was originally skeptical of popular culture's value; it also allows overt connections to the geopolitical—it is easier to explain how a song is geopolitical than how playing sports is (although they both are, in different ways—see Foer 2004). With these limitations in mind, this book nevertheless presents a wide-ranging set of theories and case studies that approach the topic of popular culture, geopolitics, and identity from a variety of different perspectives. So what can be expected in the rest of this book?

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND STRUCTURE

The first two chapters set out the history and theorizations of geopolitics (chapter 1), the definitions and theories utilized in the study of popular

culture, and methodologies used by current research in popular geopoli-
tics (chapter 2). In these chapters there will be some references to popular
culture when discussing geopolitics, and to geopolitics while discussing
popular culture, but the two topics are kept relatively separate so as to
give the reader a firm grasp of where the disciplinary concepts come from
and how they can be seen to overlap in isolation. The subsequent chapters
of this book (excepting the conclusion) will be case studies of popular
geopolitics, describing some of the most important concepts and trends in
the field. Chapter 3 will discuss representation of place, which has been
one of the most significant strands of research in popular geopolitics. The
British Empire was chosen as a framing device for this chapter because
the construction of ideologies of empire in a society based on principles
from the Enlightenment has often involved representing places and the
people from there as fundamentally different from those in the imperial
center. Thus, representation, particularly in regards to race, is critical to
understanding how people can justify their (and their government's)
treatment of people abroad.

Chapter 4 discusses the role of narrative in national identity, drawing
on the post–World War II United States as an example of the importance
of narrative because the United States is a nation that more obviously
than most is an imagined community, one that is tied to a narrative of
progress and innocence. The importance of popular culture in constitut-
ing that narrative will be the focus of this case study, drawing mostly on
Captain America comic books. Chapter 5 introduces the idea of affect, out-
lining its connections to both cultural studies and psychology. Affect is, in
contrast to representation, fundamentally focused inward—dealing with
the ways in which popular geopolitics become embodied biologically as
adrenaline, passion, and other sites at the interface between the inside and
outside of our bodies. The popular culture to be studied in this case study
comes from the American video game industry.

Chapter 6 returns to the cultural theory outlined in this chapter, bring-
ing forth the critique that much of chapters 3 to 5 ignores the role of the
audience in producing geopolitical knowledge. This chapter will take this
idea of the active audience, bringing their own experiences and desires to
their readings of popular culture, and apply it to the religious geopolitics
of the extremely popular *Left Behind* series of evangelical Christian novels.
This is a great example because in the evangelical Christian community
differing understandings of scripture have led to differing opinions about
modern-day geopolitics. The final case study will be in chapter 7, and will
turn away from the hegemonic world of Western popular culture and will
instead look at subaltern identities (i.e., those that are marginalized under
current geopolitical conditions). Alternate sources of cultural power have
emerged, such as Bollywood (the Indian film industry), the al-Jazeera

Arab television news network, and diasporic websites. These forms of resistance to hegemony utilize the technologies and social practices associated with globalization to carve out space for their own identity. This case study is of Salam Pax, an Iraqi blogger who provided insight into life in Baghdad during the 2003 invasion. The final chapter, chapter 8, is not a case study but rather pulls all of these ideas together and more fully theorizes the role of popular culture in shaping individual identities. This chapter will also show interested students where they can go to get more information and also how they can themselves contribute to the practice of popular geopolitics.

   Each case study will begin with an introduction to the terminology of the new concept or perspective before briefly outlining any debates in the literature. This section will be followed by an introduction to ideas from media or political geography that are necessary to understand that particular case study. The actual case study will then begin, drawing on the published research and illustrating the relevance of popular culture to the particular understanding of geopolitics highlighted in the chapter. The case study is intended to be both informative and interesting (hopefully you will find it so). Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of what has been discussed and other areas in which the concept could be relevant in everyday life.