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Conclusion: Identity, Subjectivity, and Going Forward

This chapter is intended to serve (literally) as a bookend, paired with the introductory chapter. In that chapter the subject matter of popular culture and geopolitics was introduced with identity as a thread that connected them and ran through all the chapters of this book. After a brief synopsis of the book this chapter gives a more extended treatment of the social constructionist view of identity and subjectivity, drawing on the collective insights of the rest of the book. Similarly, while the introductory chapter discussed the project of popular geopolitics and how the book was structured, this chapter will speculate about the future of that project and consider ways for the reader to continue an interest in popular geopolitics beyond this book.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

This book began with a brief introduction to the topic and the book before moving on with two chapters that sought to outline two different bodies of knowledge, those associated with geopolitics and with popular culture. Very briefly the history of each was sketched, illustrating how in the development of both fields of study there had been a long-term shift toward the complication of taken-for-granted ideas by a heightened appreciation for everyday people's ideas and actions. In the case of geopolitics, that involved connecting the inherent politics associated with war and diplomacy with the type of consumption activities usually undertaken in our living rooms, shopping malls, movie theaters, and on the Internet. The

case studies of the last five chapters have tried to show how these everyday activities not only reflect prevailing geopolitical trends but also actively construct them. The global scale of geopolitics is inseparable from the everyday scale of our lives.

A fundamental tenet of popular geopolitics that has emerged is that geopolitics is not only about how we see other people, but also how we see ourselves—our identity. The five concepts highlighted in the case study chapters of this book each addressed the processes through which our identities are generated, contested, and sometimes obscured even to ourselves. Representation of place (chapter 3) is how we describe the Other—the peoples and places that are deemed fundamentally different than "us" or "me." Narrative (chapter 4), related to representation, is a method of understanding how "we" or "I" got to this situation, whatever that might be and wherever it might be going. Affect (chapter 5) attends to the connections between the self and the surrounding environment, geopolitical extensions of the self that are preconscious and usually unaccounted for in the more cognitive elements of geopolitics, like representation and narrative. The active audience (chapter 6) problematized accounts of representation and narrative that ignored the agency of the bodies that consume popular accounts of geopolitics, in some ways arguing the opposite point from scholars of affect, who provide little space for consumers to resist their environment, short of changing it. Hegemony and the subaltern (chapter 7), the two inverse sides of any power relationship, relate to the active audience by problematizing the absolute openness of any audience to a discourse—in other words, that chapter tries to reveal the role of structural and other forms of power in shaping even the ways in which we view ourselves (and conversely how people use power to resist hegemony). The cumulative effect of considering all these concepts at once can be extreme disorientation—we are not the absolute decision makers that we often think we are. Our thought processes are preconditioned by cultural (and affective) influences that we have been inundated with since childhood. We still have the incredible capacity for critical thinking, but it is simply not possible to rise above our own subjectivity and consider geopolitics from a completely objective perspective.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

In chapter 2 we briefly mentioned subjectivity, which we then defined as an individual's sense of self, including perspective, thoughts, emotions, and the like. Subjectivity has been a major subject of controversy across the social sciences, even bridging into disciplines such as psychology (e.g., Salgado and Hermans 2005).

For a long time, it never would have occurred to scholars to question how we know who we are. René Descartes' famous Latin dictum *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") was the first and last word on the subject. The subject as Descartes conceived it was a singular, coherent consciousness that existed through time (indeed, this is how most people conceive of themselves in everyday life). This notion has been subsequently branded the Cartesian subject given its close association with Descartes.

> **René Descartes** French mathematician and scholar, known as the father of modern philosophy

> **Cartesian subject** Notion that the subject is singular and unified throughout time

Sigmund Freud's theories of the subconscious (*id*) as something separate from the conscious, rational self (*ego*) began the process of questioning the notion that there is a core to us that is in control. However, the social constructionist perspective on the subject makes this simple distinction between ego and id seem elementary. Social constructionism is part of a larger postmodern perspective that has animated much of the work in popular geopolitics that is described in this book. Social constructionists have been very critical of the innate value of knowledge (you will recognize this notion from chapter 7, among others). Rather than using language to try and describe a fundamental truth (like who you really are), language and discourse are tools used to make action possible. Note the parallels in the following quote from psychologists João Salgado and Hubert Hermans between the social constructionist notion of the subject and our ideas of representational binaries and Orientalism from chapters 1 and 3.

> **Ego** In Freud's system, our rational/cognitive processes

> **Id** In Freud's system, our unconscious drives

> In this way, the construction of meaning is completely dependent on relationships between people, including self-related meanings. Each context specifies certain social and relational games, by which people try to make themselves intelligible to others and try to make others intelligible to themselves. In other words, meaning is a matter of linguistic and social negotiation. Selfhood, in this matter, is only a particular case of intelligibility: what I am is a matter of how we symbolically and pragmatically negotiate the meanings assigned to my own person. (Salgado and Hermans 2005, 6)

Thus, when considering the role of identity in popular geopolitics the subject is generally considered fragmented or nomadic (Deleuze and

Guattari 1983; Radway 1988). Instead of a monolithic subject, individuals take various subject positions that reflect different roles or identities that the individual recognizes. The popular notion of a singular, Cartesian self is constituted through interactions of your biological self with discourses (Hall 1996). Again, here are Salgado and Hermans (2005, 6); note how their "sense of identity" parallels our discussion of narrative in chapter 4: "The sense of continuity and permanence—the sense of identity—is something that arises from the continuous processes of creating and granting intelligibility and coherence in the course of relationships with others."

> **Subject positions**   Many different identities from which we select in different social situations

To further complicate matters, as our bodies come into different relations with discourses, different subject positions emerge (Grossberg 1987). Even a relatively young adult can look back on some earlier time (early adolescence is always good for some laughs) and recall an incident where he or she acted entirely differently than he or she would now, such as being embarrassed about a trait you have that you now celebrate (or are at least okay with). Sometimes those memories even take the perspective of the third person—we know we were there, we know what we did, but we remember it all as a story, just like we remember stories that we did not actually take part in (like a plot from television, or a friend's funny story you have heard a few times).

Once we acknowledge that the "self" changes over time (i.e., there is no fundamental "me") it is a smaller step to recognize that the self often changes over very short time spans, flipping back and forth between different subject positions. This should not be surprising when we consider how social life is saturated with multiple (and often competing) discourses. Janice Radway describes it thus (1988, 364, emphasis in original):

> Social subjects can be multiply addressed by discourses that coincide or overlap, but they can also be addressed by discourses that contest and even contradict each other. This possibility for discontinuity highlights the other feature of the larger process of subject formation I want to stress—that is, the fact that social subjects *actively* participate in the process (although by that participation they do not fully control it or its effects) by deliberately articulating bits and pieces from several, often competing, discourses themselves.

In other words, we can actively contribute to the changing of our selves by actively engaging with some discourses and institutions over others. When presented with rival discourses that appeal to contradictory elements of our "selves," we can actively intervene to decide how (and who) we want to be in that instance, as we saw in chapter 6 in the example of

evangelicals tacking back and forth between their subject positions as both Christian and American. We saw this again in chapter 7 via Salam Pax's harnessing his subject positioning as both Iraqi and as cosmopolitan; we are not prisoners of our subject positions, but we cannot exactly leave them behind either.

The social constructionist perspective of the subject, which as you can see has served as the philosophical underpinning for this book and for much of popular geopolitics, has nevertheless come in for some criticism. One such criticism is that social constructionism, in its disdain for the notion of a core self has left no room for private experiences that are not shared with others through discourse. If all "I" am is a narrative that holds my disparate elements together, who is telling the narrative?

This problem is addressed by Mikhail Bakhtin, who was a scholar of culture who came up with the idea of dialogism (1982). Dialogism originally referred to the idea that texts are always in dialogue with each other (see chapter 2 for our discussion of intertextuality). However, this is more than simply authors (or musicians, filmmakers, or whatever) being influenced by one another. Instead of a unidirectional influence (forward though time, with prior works influencing new ones), dialogism argues that older works are influenced by new works—always capable of being reinterpreted and thus changing in meaning. The implications of this for subjectivity can be seen by replacing the "works" in the previous sentence

> **Mikhail Bakhtin** Russian philosopher; famous for his contributions to literary theory and rhetoric

> **Dialogism** Notion that texts are always in correspondence with each other, forwards and backwards through time

with narrators. "The self cannot be understood . . . except in relation to an audience whose real and imagined responses shape the way in which we define ourselves" (Kelly 1992, 44).

Thus, Bakhtin holds out the possibility of an essential self, one that can only be glimpsed from outside ourselves; that is, as we said regarding popular culture in chapter 6, the audiences with whom we interact themselves have a role in defining who we are. This is not only true in a literal sense, but also in the sense that our selves are always in dialogue with each other. "If we assume that thought is, in fact, a dialogue with oneself . . . we do not need to assume that self-consciousness is grounded in a kind of internal or homuncular ego or observer. Consequently, it is pos-

> **Polyphony** Literally "multiple voices"; in literature, the possibility of a novel capturing multiple points of view rather than just the author's; in the study of identity, the constitution of the self through conflicting subject positions

sible to admit that self-consciousness is a matter of communication with oneself . . . , a matter of our ability of relating with ourselves" (Salgado and Hermans 2005, 10). Bakhtin then argues that there is no self without polyphony—they are mutually constitutive. This makes intuitive sense when laid alongside our discussion of geopolitical identity (Self/Other) found in chapters 1 and 3.

This discussion has been a winding, yet too brief, tour around one of the deepest human questions—"who am I?" Subjectivity is a topic of interest to scholars from a multitude of disciplines from geography to psychology to literature. It is impossible to understate its relevance for topics such as geopolitics and popular culture, as can be seen from the way in which our discussion of subjectivity in this chapter has intersected with ideas that we encountered in every other chapter. Therefore it should be clear that the processes by which self-identity is generated are paralleled by the processes by which collective identities (nations, religions, political parties) are constructed. The difference lies in the specifics of the discourses involved and the scale of the media involved. Our personal identities are formed through interaction with others, most often face-to-face but sometimes via technological mediation. Our collective identities are also formed through dialogue, but more often these interchanges take place through popular culture and other mass media. Hopefully this book has provided the grounding to go forth and engage in the world with a more sophisticated understanding of the processes in play and how it is possible to fit into them.

THE FUTURE

Popular geopolitics was described in the introductory chapter as both a subject matter and a project. While these are distinct, their futures are obviously tied together. If anything, the short history of popular geopolitics has been a successful one, with more people getting involved and new perspectives being introduced from both other areas of geography and from other disciplines. However, much like human geography itself, there is so much theoretical foment that it is difficult to foresee the future. For instance, developments in nonrepresentational theory call into question the philosophical underpinnings of popular geopolitics, and a popular geopolitics that was focused on audiences rather than texts would look very different from the popular geopolitics we have today, becoming closer to cultural geography and cultural studies than to the rest of the work done in critical geopolitics. All of these futures are wide open, and in fact the most likely scenario is an as-yet unforeseen development that shakes everything up in new ways.

The end of this book is hopefully not the end of your interest in popular culture and geopolitics. If you are interested in going forward with the topic, it could be a never-ending source of interest and passion. There are two distinct ways in which to carry on.

Continuing Reading

This book has provided the background in ideas and concepts that are necessary to engage with the academic literature that is out there. There are a number of journals that publish material related to popular culture and geopolitics. A sampling of titles is included in table 8.1. Of course, it is not necessary to be reading academic journals to be continuing your education in popular geopolitics. More and more books are becoming available on the topic, both from the traditions of geography and also international relations, such as Joanne Sharp's *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (2000) and Cynthia Weber's *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* (2005). Poking around in a neighborhood bookstore or online should uncover many others.

Contesting Discourses, Performing Identities

Still, there are many other ways to learn about popular geopolitics than just by reading. In fact, there is something to be said for learning by doing. Of course, we are all "doing" popular geopolitics all the time

Table 8.1:   Journals That Publish Papers about Popular Geopolitics

Political Geography
Geopolitics
Annals of the Association of American Geographers
Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers
Environment and Planning D: Society and Space
Geography Compass
Social and Cultural Geography
Cultural Geographies
Gender, Place, and Culture
Antipode
ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies
Arab World Geographer
Security Dialogue
Millennium: Journal of International Politics
British Journal of Politics and International Relations

whether we know it or not because, as we saw in this and the preceding chapters, our everyday lives are enmeshed in geopolitics—they are mutually constitutive.

Remember how in the last two chapters we discussed the openness of culture, its fundamental pliability. The opportunity is always present to engage with geopolitical discourses and intervene, not only to reshape our society but also ourselves. The dialogic perspective of identity means that, when we change the discourses we are immersed in, or shift the thinking of the people around us, we by definition change ourselves because it is impossible to know who we are but through social interaction.

So what can you do? One of the strengths of geopolitical discourse is that it makes us feel miniscule and insignificant as individuals. "What can *I* do to change the course of globalization?" "The media representation of Arabs does not match my experience. What can I do?" Nevertheless, our actions and inactions are what generate these discourses, or at least enable them. Therefore, it stands to reason that our actions and inactions can change them, should we so desire. As we saw in chapter 7, there are limits to this because of inequalities in power among various actors, but with good tactics you can often overcome weakness.

The most important thing to have prior to starting out is a definite perspective. This book has outlined concepts and case studies, but it is up to the reader to use those concepts to identify a geopolitical stance. Then, with some tactical thinking it is possible to come up with a plan. Luckily there are numerous ways to intervene in popular geopolitics and impact the processes of identity formation and meaning making that have been outlined in this book. If someone is really into popular culture, and going to make a career out of it, he or she is uniquely placed to influence the representations and narratives that are deployed in public discourse. While the public seems to hate being lectured by heavy-handed celebrities and moralizing movies, that is not necessarily what is needed. What we need is an entertainment industry that is merely socially aware, and does not resort to unsubtle processes of Othering and fear. Instead of this fear and resentment, we could substitute a popular culture that tries to foster more positive relationships between ourselves and our environment (for more on this, see Connolly 2007).

Of course, it is not necessary to make a career out of reworking popular geopolitics. It can begin with a single letter to the editor, entering words and ideas into the public sphere. It can begin with a blog—following the example of Salam Pax, the reluctant international journalistic star. Perhaps someone would like to start a blog that reviews movies, literature, and music from a critical geopolitical perspective. That would simply involve thinking and writing about the popular culture already being consumed and putting those thoughts out on the Internet for public con-

sumption. As Foucault argued, power is constituted through the thousands of daily interactions we all have; therefore we are all implicated in the everyday enactments of geopolitics.