

Political Geography: An Introduction

Code:	
Term:	Spring
ECTS credits:	6
Lessons per week:	120 min
Language:	English
Instructor:	Adam Bence Balazs
Form of study:	Seminar

Prerequisites

The aim of the course is to provide a general introduction to geopolitics through the specific lens of political geography. As an introduction, the course does not have specific prerequisites other than being curious about the outside world, from the ongoing geopolitical issues to longer-term history and the many aspects of culture, including science and literature.

Course Objectives

The course will develop the students' sense of scale and understanding of different time spans at work in geopolitical issues. The focus on space and time will improve their means of orientation on the global map. The interdisciplinary approach of the course will widen their range of interests in a discovery fashion.

Methodologically, students will:

- ✓ Learn how to locate a geopolitical event in space and time
- ✓ Practice the art of pros and cons in shaping their own opinion
- ✓ Practice the basic skills required to debate a political topic
- ✓ Learn how to identify political stakes in literary texts (classics)
- ✓ Learn to orient themselves in texts as well through weekly exercises in textual understanding

Contents

What role plays the environment in geopolitical conflicts? We mind the environment when the issue is about climate change. How about focusing on the environment even when the topic is not directly – or not yet – related to global warming? The terrain and the topography explain an important part of conflicting situations, well before it comes to the usual 'connections' to ethnicity or religion. As a matter of fact, there are much more immanent causes to conflicts than the usual 'clashes' between

different cultures or civilizations. The geographical location, the connecting/dividing role of natural boundaries (mountains, lakes, oceans) shape history on the long term. Access to drinking water, the sea and major trade routes are key in the way conflicts unfold on the local, regional, or continental scale. Ethnic tensions and religious differences tend to be excuses, or narratives, that have the ability to mobilize opinion, but certainly not to make it more objective.

Human societies shape the environment and the environment shapes history. The environment means space, and space works on different scales. The ability to grasp how different scales – from the most local to the global – are at work in a regional conflict is crucial to get the big picture. ‘Big picture’ does not mean a distant, global point of view, but rather this very sense of scale that allows us to see how globalization can be at work on the regional or the local scale.

Moreover, this sense of scale needs the time factor to turn really objective. The same way there are different scales in space, there are different layers of time at work in a political or geopolitical event. Short-term causes and consequences get combined with medium-term processes and longer-term continuities. The idea of the course is to learn to see these different time spans on a geopolitical map.

The course will focus on a set of ongoing geopolitical conflicts and unveil the immanent causes behind black-and-white narratives. We will examine the geostrategic location of Afghanistan, analyse the nation-building processes in the Sahel and its complex border regions. We will adopt different points of view on one and the same topic: the topic as seen by Russia, as seen by China, as seen by the West, etc. Different global players have different angles, i.e., use different ‘maps.’ To understand the world according to another region is like understanding the counterarguments of an opponent in class.

To complete these means of orientation in geopolitics and to enlarge geopolitical issues to other connected fields and domains, the course will put a specific methodological focus on textual understanding. Every week, we will practice the art of the *composed text commentary*. Like geopolitical topics, texts require maps. It is the reader’s task to draw these maps, to gather the points addressed in a short text in thematical groups and see how the given text provides a set of answers to questions it does not necessarily ask in an explicit way. Such a text commentary or ‘map’ calls for practice and exercise. Throughout the semester, we will progressively build up the required skills to get in a good command of the texts we read – to appropriate their sense, meaning, and structure. Texts have their own geography.

Readings

Badie, B.: *New Perspectives on the International Order*

Balzac, H.: *Ferragus*

Baudelaire, Ch.: *The Flowers of Evil*

Borges, J. L.: *Fictions*

Bouvier, N.: *The Way of the World*

Calvino, I.: *Invisible Cities*

Conrad, J.: *Amy Foster*
 Conrad, J.: *Heart of Darkness*
 Hobsbawm, E.: *Fractured Times*
 Hobsbawm, E.: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*
 Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Tristes Tropiques*
 Mahbubani, K.: *Has China Won?*
 Mahbubani, K.: *Has the West Lost It?*
 Poe, E. A.: *The Man of the Crowd*
 Pratt, H.: *Corto Maltese*
 Said, E. W.: *Culture and Imperialism*
 Said, E. W.: *Orientalism*
 Simmel, G.: *The Sociology of Space*
 Swift, J.: *Gulliver's Travels*
 Terkel, S.: *Chicago*
 Terkel, S.: *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession*
 Traven, B.: *The Death Ship*

Evaluation Criteria

40% Written assignments. 3 position papers during the semester and a longer paper at the end. Position papers: 1000-1200 words. Final papers: 6 pages, Times New Roman, 1.5 spaced.

30% Group assignments. Students work in groups of 3 or max 4 on a longer reading and present it between weeks 11-14 (topics and roadmaps will be clarified during consultations prior to the 'Reading Week') – see weekly content.

20% Textual understanding, text commentaries. Students will resolve short weekly exercises based on the readings.

10% Active participation in class.

Comments on the evaluation criteria:

1. A student who does not talk but pays attention and shows evidence of it in written tasks is considered as actively participating (you have the right to be shy).
2. Beyond the listed percentages, what is evaluated is the individual progress. You do not get grades for the position papers, group presentations or the final papers, what I look at is the progress you make throughout the semester. If your first position paper is weak but the final paper is consistent and has integrated lessons from the group assignment, then chances are you are close to A or B.
3. A mid-term evaluation will be provided to help students signpost their own progress.

Course Evaluation (%)

A – excellent:	100-93%,
B – very good:	92-84%,
C – good:	83-74%,
D – satisfactory:	73-63%,
E – sufficient:	62-51%,
Fx – fail:	50-0%.

Passing a course assumes that student was not absent at more than 4 lessons.

WEEKLY CONTENT

Week 1 (11.01)

Introduction: Space and time, scales and layers. What is political geography? The 'geo' part in geopolitics. Maps and perspectives: how to reflect on our own present?

Week 2 (18.01)

Where is Afghanistan?

Simple questions might trigger rather complex sets of answers. We will locate the Afghan situation on the map and see how multiscale the still ongoing situation is in Central Asia. We will reflect on the use of cardinal points in politics (Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East, etc.). We will consider the different layers of time at work in the Central Asian context: the short term (the American/Western retreat), the medium term (twenty years of 'war on terror') and the longer term (imperial and colonial legacies).

Topics: scales, time spans, Imperialism, Orientalism

Reading: Nicolas Bouvier: *The Way of the World* (excerpts)

Week 3 (25.01)

Orientalism: The Imagined Geography of the Oriental Other

The effective geopolitical location of Afghanistan could not be complete nor critical enough without the imagined geography of the Orient, i.e., the way the West has mapped the 'East' since colonial times. The maps of imagination are part of political geography. In the case of a country like Afghanistan, in the middle of the Silk Roads old and new, it is crucial to distinguish immanent geographical reality from the imaginary part – but also to see how political and real such imagination can get.

Topics: Imperialism, Orientalism, politics and fiction, imagined geography

Readings: Edward W. Said: *Orientalism* (excerpts); Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 4 (01.02)

The Sahel: a regional conflict on the borders of the desert

How far is the Sahel from Europe? Do different European countries have different maps of Africa? We will examine the specificity of the Sahel on the map to understand the ongoing regional conflict and reflect on the dynamics of borderlands: a 'dynamic' triple border can be whether constructive or destructive. Based on the geographical cornerstones of the Sahel conflict, we will think through the

nation-building processes in the region – before examining how similar certain challenges are to European cases.

Topics: borders, borderlands, interstate dynamics, Colonialism, nation-building, the weak and the strong

Readings: Bertrand Badie: *New Perspectives on the International Order* (excerpts); Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 5 (08.02)

Nations and Nationalism

The discrepancies in the nation-building process in West Africa call for an in-depth examination of nationalism since the French Revolution. The ‘nation’ is indeed a modern concept, and no nation is properly speaking older than industrial modernity. However, slight discrepancies in the nation-building process – in Africa and in Europe – can be serious sources of conflict. The constructivist approach of nationalism allows us to see similarities rather than differences between Europe and its intercontinental neighbourhood.

Topics: nations and nationalism, chronology, constructivist and essentialist interpretations, modernity, Europe and Eurocentrism

Readings: Eric Hobsbawm: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (excerpts); Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 6 (15.02)

Where is Europe?

After having mapped a couple of non-European geopolitical cases in the contemporary world, we can come back to the Old Continent in a more critical way. Bridging the gap between nation-building processes is at the heart of the European project. However, the post-war narrative of the European construction has reached a point of exhaustion. It is key to locate Europe in a non-Eurocentric way on the global map and reflect on how fragile some of our most cherished achievements are. Europe is not isolated from the world, the Old Continent is *in* the world – and not necessarily in the centre of it.

Topics: Eurocentrism, Western Balkans, Turkey, European Union, perspectives

Readings: Georg Simmel: *The Sociology of Space*; Nicolas Bouvier: *The Way of the World* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 7 (22.02)

Industrial Modernity: The Radical Geography of Industrialisation

Eurocentric worldviews, discrepancies in the nation-building processes, intercontinental differences: in the global world, we tend to look for old-new differences between cultures and civilizations due to a certain homogeneity of most human societies. We look for differences within a framework of

similarities. As a matter of fact, we are all moderns – except for some non-modern societies studied by ethnologists. What does ‘modern’ mean? It is a word of current use but its definition is quite a challenge if we stop at it. Modernity – our own modernity deserves a reflection.

Topics: modernity, industrialization, urban infrastructure, Paris in the 19th century

Readings: Edgar Allan Poe: *The Man of the Crowd*; Charles Baudelaire: *Exotic Perfume*; *Invitation to the Voyage* (poems); Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 8 (01.03)

READING WEEK

Week 9 (08.03)

Central Europe between regionalism and provincialism

Once we have a critical angle on Europe’s relative place and role in the contemporary world, it makes sense to further examine the regional scale of things at home, after having examined it in Asia and Africa. The regional scale is a highly promising one within the European construction, a scale in political geography that might deepen European integration. However, intellectually speaking, regionalism is threatened by the comfort of provincialism. Central European countries are not an exclusive set of examples.

Topics: Eurocentrism, regionalism, provincialism, Central Europe, politics and culture

Readings: Eric Hobsbawm: ‘Mitteleuropean Destinies’ in *Fractured Times*; Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 10 (15.03)

China in the Global World

After a couple of weeks in Europe, let us sail again abroad and examine China as an emerging – or emerged – power in the contemporary world. A source of concern and anxiety, Chinese power needs to be replaced in its environment and chronology to be estimated in an objective way. The country’s discrepancies, the complexity of the nation-building process, social inequalities can be highlighted on geopolitical maps. Before the group presentations (Weeks 11-14), we will reflect on our fears and how to put a name on them.

Topics: China, the Pacific, Exclusive Economic Zones, One Belt One Road project

Readings: Kishore Mahbubani: *Has China Won?*; Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques* (excerpts for the text commentary exercises)

Week 11 to week 14 (22.03-12.04)

Group presentations

Students will do presentations in groups of 3. They are expected to develop a topic addressed in the seminar and based on a longer reading they have the time to work on during the reading week. The aim is to do interactive presentations where the members of the group debate their topic with pros and cons before discussing it with the audience.

Topics:

Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness* (Colonialism)

Honoré de Balzac: *Ferragus* (Industrial Modernity)

B. Traven : *The Death Ship* (Industrial Modernity)

Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels* (Imagined Geographies)

Week 15 (19.04)

Conclusion

Audio-visual material: Hugo Pratt: *Corto Maltese* (animated series)