

Chapter 1

Introduction

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In the summer of 2014, Kobani became the epicenter of struggles to redraw the political map of the world region known as the Middle East. Located in Syria at the Turkish border, Kobani is routinely described as a Kurdish city (of roughly 50,000 inhabitants before the war) because the majority of its population is ethnic Kurds. It is also known by its Arabic name – Ayn al-Arab (the Arabs’ spring in Arabic, spring as in “well”) – a toponym that the Syrian regime imposed in its Arabization campaign of the 1980s. Kobani has been part of the Syrian state since it was created as a French protectorate under the authority of the League of Nations after the First World War and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) had also proposed an Ottoman successor state that would have encompassed most of the region’s ethnic Kurds, but Kurdistan did not survive the Turkish revolution and the final Peace Treaty signed in Lausanne in 1923. With the lands that would have been Kurdistan ultimately divided between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, Kurdish nationalism has been variously incited and repressed in the region ever since.

Before becoming the epicenter of conflict, for two years Kobani had been part of Rojava, the territories controlled by Kurdish forces in the north and northeast of Syria during the Syrian civil war. In September 2014, Kobani came under siege by Islamic State (IS), a religious movement that emerged during the Iraq war against Western forces. By the time of the siege, IS had gained control of significant territories in northern Iraq and northern Syria. These were regions where autonomous Kurdish authorities had become more or less well established during the Iraq war and the Syrian civil war respectively. In claiming these territories, IS forces attempted to cleanse them of populations hostile to its rule, such as Christian minorities and Yezidis, either by forcing them to convert to IS’s particular interpretation and practice of Sunni Islam, or through practices of displacement, massacre, and the sexual enslavement of women. With IS on the move, hundreds of thousands of Syrians fled over the nearby Turkish border. Yet because of its own “Kurdish question” and its opposition to claims for Kurdish autonomy in eastern Turkey, the Turkish government was slow to heed its Western allies’ calls

for intervention in Kobani. By early October 2014, Kobani had become the place where the struggle for the future of Kurdistan (in Syria and beyond) was being fought, while the geopolitical stakes of the war against Islamic State became clear: The outcome of this struggle had the potential to redraw the political map of the region.

Kurdish rule in Kobani and the IS siege on the city both need to be understood in relation to broader historical and material developments. The Syrian civil war, which had led to Kobani becoming part of the Kurdish territory of Rojava, evolved from protests challenging the regime of President Bashar al-Assad that began in March 2011. These protests were directly connected to the uprisings that rocked the region and collectively became known as the Arab Spring, a ferment that led to regime change or civil war in several Arab states, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. The international community intervened selectively in these events (sometimes militarily, as in Libya), but largely seemed unable (and sometimes unwilling) to act to protect human lives and human rights in the region or to promote democracy and security. By 2014, as Syria was plunged deep into civil war and the power of IS grew, some young people from Western countries (many of whom had no previous links with the region) traveled to Syria to support the movement. This flow of fighters revealed the interconnections between the Arab world and Europe and, at the same time, generated widespread sentiments of insecurity that echoed the anxieties of the early 2000s following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington and, later on, those on Madrid and London – anxieties that were stoked by the swelling flows of refugees into Europe.

The tragic and highly complex situation of Kobani and its connections to historical, regional, and global dynamics illustrate the importance of geopolitical literacy and the potential for political geographical analysis to illuminate the dynamics and contingencies of current affairs. The complex play of alliances between states and non-state actors, of international organizations and transnational networks, is unintelligible without an understanding of the history and geography of intergroup relations and the geopolitical battles that have shaped the political map of the region. Moreover, we can only begin to make sense of these historical and geographical features with the analytical tools that political geography provides for us. The key concepts presented in the first section of this volume are mighty instruments for analyzing competing claims to power, statehood and sovereignty, the role of territory and borders, the loss of security, and the invocation of justice, as well as more general issues of citizenship, scale, and governance.

The chapters collected in the second section, “Theorizing Political Geography,” provide a series of lenses offering different perspectives; in reading these, one might ask oneself what a feminist geography, a children’s geography, or a postcolonial geography of a situation might look like. How, for the case of Kobani, might these various approaches bring different aspects of the conflict under the spotlight? How might they open up opportunities for different resolutions, through different (territorial) arrangements? Finally, the themes presented in the other sections of the *Companion* – written before the Summer 2014 confrontation between Islamic State and Kurdish forces in Northern Syria – also provide tools for obtaining a better grasp of specific dimensions of ongoing events. These chapters present state-of-the-art political geographical approaches to nationalist movements (think of Kurdish parties), religious movements (IS), social movements (grassroots protests against Assad’s regime), social media (the mobilization of the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe), electoral geography (the difficult organization of elections in newly established states and postautocratic regimes), sexual politics (the sexual enslavement of girls and women in conquered territory), migration (the large flows of Syrian refugees into Lebanon and Turkey), imperialism and world views

(the resistance to Western influences in the Arab world), the role of regional institutions (such as the Arab League and the European Union), urban materialities (the fate of Kobani does indeed echo that of many cities under siege in recent history, such as Beirut), and more. Some of the themes might seem less directly relevant to the particular case of Kobani, but even then they do shape the context in which the international community operates when it weighs up the possibility of intervening in the region, how and at what cost. Indeed, the rise of the BRICS economies – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – and the demand for resources make the stability of the region a global security issue, on top of the moral issues regarding human rights; however, the financial and climate crises limit the (material) capabilities of many states to act.

The scholarly work covered by the *Companion* does not provide ready-made solutions to the tragic events in and around Kobani. Political geography is no magic. The production of academic knowledge is a slow and painstaking process and its circulation is characterized by serious oddities (addressed in the last chapter of this volume) that should not prevent academics from making sure that their expertise informs their politics and that their voices are heard in public debate. More importantly, engagement with political geography can greatly enhance anyone's ability to make sense of ongoing events in order to develop their own opinions and boost their agency in the issue – an engagement that necessarily takes place under the constraints of existing conditions, although understanding these constraints better is a necessary step toward empowerment and change.

Introducing political geography

This book is a new edition of a *Companion to Political Geography* published more than a decade ago (Agnew, Mitchell, & Toal 2003). It focuses on recent developments in the field. For much of its history, the subdiscipline of political geography has been centered on the study of the state and its territory. At the time when geography was being established as an academic discipline in Western universities at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, political geography – a term coined by French statesman Turgot in the eighteenth century and established by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel with his landmark volume *Politische Geographie* (1897) – was at the heart of the production of geographical knowledge in service to imperialist and nation-building projects (Godlewska & Smith 1994). Geography at the time was largely understood in physical terms and the political was generally restricted to questions of the state (Agnew et al. 2003). Political geographical analysis thus involved explaining the success and actions of states and their elites based on their physical locations and resources. At the turn of the century, British geographer and politician Halford Mackinder offered a global model linking world history to geography in an influential lecture at the Royal Geographical Society. He warned that the arrival of the railway had made the British Empire, as a sea power, increasingly vulnerable to threats from control over the “heartland” of Eurasia and that Germany as a land power (after the Russian Revolution and German defeat in the First World War he substituted Russia) and potential allies in Eastern Europe could replace the British as the dominant world power (Mackinder 1904). Geopolitics, a term coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1916) to capture what he saw as the geographical basis of world politics, emerged as a metonym for political geography and an expression of an organicist conception of the state and interimperialist rivalry (Parker 1985). Because geopolitics as statecraft later became associated with justifications for German territorial expansionism and ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe during the Second World War,

the latter part of the twentieth century saw not only “geopolitics” but also political geography being pushed aside in favor of more supposedly objective fields of study.

That the trajectory of political geography in the second part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first is one of revitalization and diversification is routinely signaled in readers, handbooks, and textbooks (such as Agnew & Mamadouh 2008; Cox, Low, & Robinson 2008; Flint & Taylor 2011; Agnew & Muscará 2012) and plainly demonstrated in the pages of the core journals of the discipline (*Political Geography*; *Geopolitics*; *Territory, Politics, Governance*; *Space and Polity*; *Environment and Planning D*; *Antipode*) and in the reports in *Progress in Human Geography*.

However, the renewal of political geography began in the 1960s and was initially premised on development of the spatial science of electoral geography (Cox 1969; Taylor & Johnston 1979) – a field that continues to gain in depth today (Warf & Leib 2011). By the 1980s, critical approaches, including Marxism and “world systems theory” (Wallerstein 1979), began to reorient the subdiscipline toward questions of inequality, dependency, and social justice (Taylor 1982; Smith 1984). As political geographical research gained momentum, questions of borders, territory, political identity, power, and resistance emerged as central to its constitution (Wastl-Walter 2011). And while geopolitics re-entered the US foreign policy lexicon with Henry Kissinger’s use of the adjectival form in the 1970s (Hepple 1986), its study was reborn in geography in the late 1990s, but this time from a critical perspective that problematized powerful geographical framings of world politics and statecraft (O Tuathail 1996; Dodds & Atkinson 2000). This strand of critique proliferated, producing new fields of study (Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp 2013) such as popular geopolitics (Sharp 1993; Dittmer 2010), and at the same time converging with other critical approaches such as feminist political geography, which had begun calling into question the premises of masculinist political geography since the beginning of the 1990s (Kofman and Peake 1990; Staeheli 1996; Staeheli, Kofman, & Peake 2004). In the decades that have followed, feminist political geography has been a significant force in the expansion of the subdiscipline, prying open the question of how “the political” is spatially constituted and pressing against scalar hierarchies to include questions of embodied political practice (Smith 1992; Blunt 2000; Marston 2000). Geopolitics, once defined as “the geographical basis of world power,” has thus, for some political geographers, become a way of thinking about (world) politics as constituted through everyday spatial practice and experiences (Thrift 2000; Fregonese, this volume).

To the extent that the traditional concepts of states and territory remain important foci for political geography, they have also been significantly rethought. The state is no longer the empty container or billiard ball of international relations (Agnew 1994; Jeffrey this volume). Political geographers have unpeeled the onion of sovereignty, examining its contingency and improvisation (Jeffrey 2013), its divergence from state power and territoriality (Agnew 2005), and the paradoxes of sovereign exceptionalism (Mitchell 2006; Minca 2007; Secor 2007; Mountz 2013; Barkan, this volume). Territory, that other traditional term of political geography, has undergone new genealogical critique that calls into question its logics and constitution (Elden 2009, 2013; Painter 2010; Del Biaggio, this volume). Other concerns that have likewise been central to political geography since its inception have also taken on a new life. As the border becomes unmoored from its traditional mappings (Paasi 1996; Price 2000) and reconceptualized as a “technology of spatial or socio-spatial division” (Amilhat Szary, this volume), border studies have not faded from political geography but instead come to form an increasingly vibrant field. Scale, a concept that has not been the exclusive provenance of

political geography but has nonetheless played a prominent role in shaping the subfield (Flint & Taylor 2011), has likewise been subject to rigorous debate, the upshot of which has been the emergence of new understandings of its utility and limitations for political geographical work (Marston, Jones, & Woodward 2005; Jonas, this volume). In short, political geography has not so much departed from its central themes as continued to work through them.

At the same time, political geographers today are deeply engaged at the heart of the subdiscipline with questions that Halford Mackinder could never have foreseen. Some of these concerns, such as environmental geopolitics, were also prominent in the previous volume of the *Companion to Political Geography* (Agnew et al. 2003), but have only become more acute under current conditions (Barnett & Adger 2007; Raleigh & Urdal 2007; Dalby, this volume). Likewise, the previous volume also featured political and social movements; with the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and anti-austerity protests in Europe punctuating the second decade of the twenty-first century, these engagements remain highly relevant today, at the same time as the explosion of information and communication technologies calls forth new perspectives (Adams, this volume; Koopman, this volume). Our new volume also demonstrates how political geography has continued to grapple with currents that circulate more widely than the subdiscipline. For example, as religion becomes subject to greater attention across the social sciences and in geography, political geographers too have begun to move beyond categories such as “fundamentalism” and “ethno-religious nationalism” (Appleby 2003) to rethink religion in relation to politics, place, and identity (Hopkins, Kong, & Olson 2013; Sturm, this volume). Similarly, growing attention to children’s geographies across the discipline has pried open political geography to encompass the agency and subjectivity of children in ways that productively challenge scalar logics and the constitution of the political (Kallio & Häkli, this volume). And intersecting with work in cultural geography, political geographers have found that they have an important role to play in crafting an understanding of the political as not only a product of representations and representational practices, but also imbued with materiality, the non-human, and the affective (Müller, this volume).

The first edition of the *Companion to Political Geography* was a landmark statement about the nature of the subdiscipline that also sought to set the research agenda for political geography. A decade after the publication of that edition and seven years later than that of the *Sage Handbook of Political Geography* (Cox et al. 2008), the second edition of the *Companion* aims to account for the intellectual and worldly changes that have taken place in and around political geography. The impacts of Osama bin Laden’s attacks on the United States in 2001 were new to the authors writing for the first edition and there was no way of anticipating their full implications for geopolitical praxis (Martin, this volume; Muscarà, this volume). Additionally, the rise of China as a geoeconomic superpower has begun to influence the field (Power, this volume), as have new concerns about financial crises (Christophers, this volume), the (geo)politics of nature and resources (Furlong & Norman, this volume), and the neoliberal, security, and biopolitical processes associated with migration (Samers, this volume). Intellectually, the practice-based turn in geography has had a significant influence, as have concepts ranging from postcolonialism (Woon, this volume) and the notion of the Anthropocene (Dalby, this volume) to new understandings of the role of non-human actors in networks of power (Müller, this volume; Fregonese, this volume; Painter, this volume). This new edition thus represents a fresh look at the subdiscipline of political geography overall and our changing world.

Outline of the book

There are always multiple ways of dividing up a subdiscipline and so, by definition, there are limitations to every chapter outline. Here we have attempted to combine coverage of the major concepts in political geography while ensuring sufficient flexibility to acknowledge change and dynamism in the field. Our first section, “Key Concepts in Political Geography,” is the longest. Here we have asked contributors to address those concepts that we consider to be foundational. Historically, political geographers have focused on the most overtly spatialized concepts, such as **borders and boundaries**, **scale**, **territory**, **sovereignty**, the **state**, and other scales of governance (**federalism/multilevel governance**), and the geographies of **conflict** at different scales and across varied landscapes. Each of these is the focus of a chapter in this section, all of which draw out the traditions of each concept and the ways in which political geographers have engaged with the ideas more recently. Less overtly geographical concepts are also covered in this section, with authors outlining the spatial processes driving the concepts and their geographical implications. Although it has a long history in the understanding of the politics of the state, the concept of **security** has become ever more important to the practices of statecraft, as technological and bureaucratic practices are increasingly used to maintain protection from a range of extra-state dangers (from people to pathogens). **Violence**, **justice**, and **power** are at the heart of understanding the political process. Political geographers’ interest in power was stimulated by engagement with the ideas of Michel Foucault in the 1990s, which generated work engaging with much more complex and even “positive” or “creative” forms of power. This interest has continued and the multiplicity of the operations of power through different political and apparently apolitical systems has also led to re-examinations of our understanding of violence and justice as concepts, which have implications and effects seemingly contradictory to what more formal practices of politics seem to suggest. More attention has been paid to the population of the state and people’s relation to the state and to each other, centering around the issue of **citizenship**. Consideration of the ways in which various populations are drawn into politics and managed by states has also been stimulated by Foucault’s work and, more recently, the influence of Agamben has led to a new interest in **biopolitics**.

The second section, “Theorizing Political Geography,” shifts focus from the concepts themselves to the ways in which geographers have understood them. Clearly, there is considerable overlap with the chapters in the first section, in that those explored the different ways in which their concepts had been dealt with in political geography. However, the authors of the chapters in the second section have foregrounded the ways in which their terms have been reconceptualized and the new paths that have been explored. This applies to **spatial analysis** and the rich application of new technical tools to expand and visualize this mode of analysis. Although conventionally regarded as an approach at the service of state and empire, political geography has also had a vital and dynamic tradition of **radical political geographies**, which has consistently attempted to challenge the goals and political heart of the discipline. In many ways paralleling this, one of the most significant retheorizations in the last 30 years or so has been the shift – in academic geography, if not in the wider world – from a focus on classic **geopolitics** to an interest in **critical geopolitics**. This recognizes the impact on political geography of poststructural theories and what has come to be known as the discipline’s “cultural turn.” In more recent years, and notably since the previous edition of this collection, both **feminist political geography** and **postcolonial political geography** have increased in prominence significantly, offering further critique and broadening our understandings of where “the political” is located, and drawing our attention more closely to the everyday and the cultural

as inherently political realms. While both feminist and postcolonial approaches point to agents of political change who have been marginalized from previous articulations of political geography, others have pointed to **children** as another group whose role in the remaking of political life needs to be taken seriously.

At the heart of political geography is a recognition that where political processes unfold is central to the nature and outcomes of these processes. Thus, our third section, “Doing Politics,” considers the how and where of political geographies. **Electoral geographies** perhaps most clearly draw out the geographies of political processes. As they recognize, formal spheres of politics are very powerful in the reproduction of political processes and identities, so we have an enduring interest in **nations and nationalism** and in **regional institutions**. However, although these are widely regarded as formal political institutions, the chapters highlight the sophistication of analysis that recognizes the mundane and apparently informal as equally important to the formal practices of politics. Politics are also made in opposition to the formal institutions of state and region, of course, and so political geographers have offered critique of the **imperialism** of dominant power, and have closely examined the role of **social movements**, including those involved in **religious movements** or engaged in **sexual politics**. New geographies have emerged recently that affect both the remaking of place and identity and the geopolitical scale. Perhaps most obvious is the **rise of the BRICS** powers, and especially the growing political and economic influence of China, in global and regional political geographies. However, perhaps even more disruptive has been the rise of **social media** as a technology that has facilitated both new political identities and communities, while also providing new networks for organizing direct action and the ability to disseminate images of oppression and resistance across the world without the mediation of big news organizations.

While the “cultural turn” undoubtedly had a significant impact on political geography, especially in attuning research to the power of particular representations of the world, it is important not to lose sight of the importance of matter and physical things that are caught up in political networks (or assemblages). The fourth section, “Material Political Geographies,” seeks to put things (and not just processes and representations) center stage. The **more-than-representational** turn has put material at the heart of political geography, seeking to theorize the role and even agency of the non-human actors within political networks and driving the political process. Of course, to a certain extent political geography has long been interested in material, as is made clear in the chapter on **resources**. Similarly, chapters on **political ecology** and the **environment** highlight the changing ways in which nature and environmental issues have been understood by political geographers, and the effects that this has had on the wider environment, most especially in the Anthropocene. Clearly, political geographies of all sorts, however drawn through discourse and representation, are embedded in significant material consequences: Both **financial crises** and geographies of **mobility and migration** are, at heart, understandings of the movement of things and bodies, and the very real impacts of flows and imaginations of states and boundaries on the lives of those people caught up in them, whether economic migrants seeking a better life, or those affected by financial crisis and losing theirs. Thus, a focus on **everyday** political geographies is vital to understanding the impacts of the sometimes abstracted or large-scale processes that are the focus of much political geography.

Our final section, “Doing Political Geography,” contains just one chapter, **Academic capitalism and the geopolitics of knowledge**, which seeks to turn the critical approach of the preceding chapters on the discipline within which we work, to reflect on the kinds of political geographies that we are remaking through our professional practices and our publishing performances.

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