1 Placing political geography

Then lands were fairly portioned;
Then spoils were fairly sold:
The Romans were like brothers
In the brave days of old.

(Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, 1842, Horatius, 31)

Political geography as a subdiscipline within contemporary human geography

One of the enduring fascinations of human society is the way in which the competing claims over the control and management of land and resources are played out. Unlike the mythical concord of Macaulay's ancient Rome, the reality is that individuals and interest groups of all kinds and at all levels are continually vying with each other to promote their own interests, thereby destabilising and changing the existing order and remaking the world in their own image. *Political geography, in the broadest sense, is the academic study of all these varied resource conflicts and the way in which they are resolved*. In other words, it is about the forces that go to shape the world we inhabit and how they play themselves out in the landscape across the globe. As such, it is relevant to everyone who is curious about the way we live and wants to understand better what might be happening all around them.

Political geography as a subdiscipline within contemporary human geography has seen its star rise and fall since it emerged as a distinct subdiscipline within geography at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it is now firmly established at the core. Political geographers have become increasingly important since the early 1970s in questioning the apparently self-evident orthodoxy that had typified much of economic

and social geography for several decades previously. They have shown not only why generalised laws about human behaviour are by their very nature often flawed in practice, but also that individuals and minority groups matter geographically, in that they are invariably the initial drivers for change in the bigger picture, decisively influencing the terms of the debate and the way it evolves. One might say that people rather than peoples matter and that political geography has recently been at the forefront in incorporating that message into the geographical discourse (Painter, 1995).

The American geographer Edward Soja (1989) was amongst the most forceful of the critics, bemoaning the neglect of political economy in geographical research and writing and arguing for a more people-oriented approach. However, since the 1990s, such criticism has been increasingly hard to sustain as a growing band of radical geographers have challenged the traditional models and order, and begun to rewrite the foundations of human geography as a whole (see, for example, Harvey, 1989, 1996, 2000; Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998; Peet, 1998) (Box 1.1). David Harvey, more than any other individual, has been central to the debate, determinedly arguing the central importance of political economy for more than thirty years and gathering growing numbers of converts along the way. In *Spaces of Hope* (2000) he shows how the possibilities of globalisation and the image of a borderless world have been promoted by exploiting the possibilities of satellite imagery and other new technologies. He also shows how, somewhat ironically, this liberation has re-focused attention on the body and the needs of individuals. The big project now is how to bring these widely separated viewpoints together in a way that does disservice to neither: it is a challenge that political geography is well placed to accept and one that it cannot afford to ignore.

The nature, scope, and development of political geography

Political geography is an inherently dynamic subject and the nature and focus of the debates at its heart within modern geography have changed substantially over time. In what has been referred to, admittedly in a slightly different context, as ‘a century of political geography’ (Taylor, 1993: 1–7), it has been valued radically differently at different times, both within geography as a whole and outside. Inevitably, the different developmental phases do not fall neatly into discrete packages, clearly

Box 1.1

Modernism and postmodernism

Modernism is a cultural movement that rebelled against nineteenth-century Victorian values. Victorian culture emphasised nationalism and cultural superiority and placed humankind above and outside nature and the natural world. Modernists blamed the Victorians for evils such as slavery, racism, and imperialism, as well as later for the First World War. Modernists emphasised humanism over nationalism and argued for a much more liberal approach to cultural differences, which judged different cultures in their own terms, rather than in relation to European high culture. In their view, humankind was part of nature and there were multiple ways in which the world could be viewed, all equally valid. This in turn led them to reject decisively the Victorian distinction between the civilised and the savage, the driving force behind most of the great expeditions of imperial discovery in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Despite its more liberal view of the world, modernism was, nevertheless, characterised by a liking for grand theory and epistemology, valid knowledge or, more crudely, giving preference to an elitist view. Postmodernism, on the other hand, adopts a much more sceptical stance towards such grand claims and is highly suspicious of so-called fundamental laws and unchanging relationships that transcend such things as the constraints of time and space. Pluralism is, therefore, the main feature of postmodernism, along with an acceptance that any event, or situation, may be open to a potentially infinite variety of equally valid interpretations. The result is profound disagreement between postmodern scholars about the relative value of different interpretations, and a tendency to reject any kind of established orthodoxy. This has led many on the Left, including many geographers, to be extremely wary of accepting the postmodern movement as a real advance in the understanding of how societies work.

Reading

Harvey, 1989; Jenks, 1992.

separated in time, but Figure 1.1 illustrates in very general terms how the sequence of four phases fits together to form a logical progression.

In many ways political geography has always been a mirror of the times, very much reflecting current concerns, be it the lure of global empires, or a determination not to see individuality and the contribution of individuals swamped by higher-order priorities. The concentration on the current reality of people's lives has also led to marked variations of

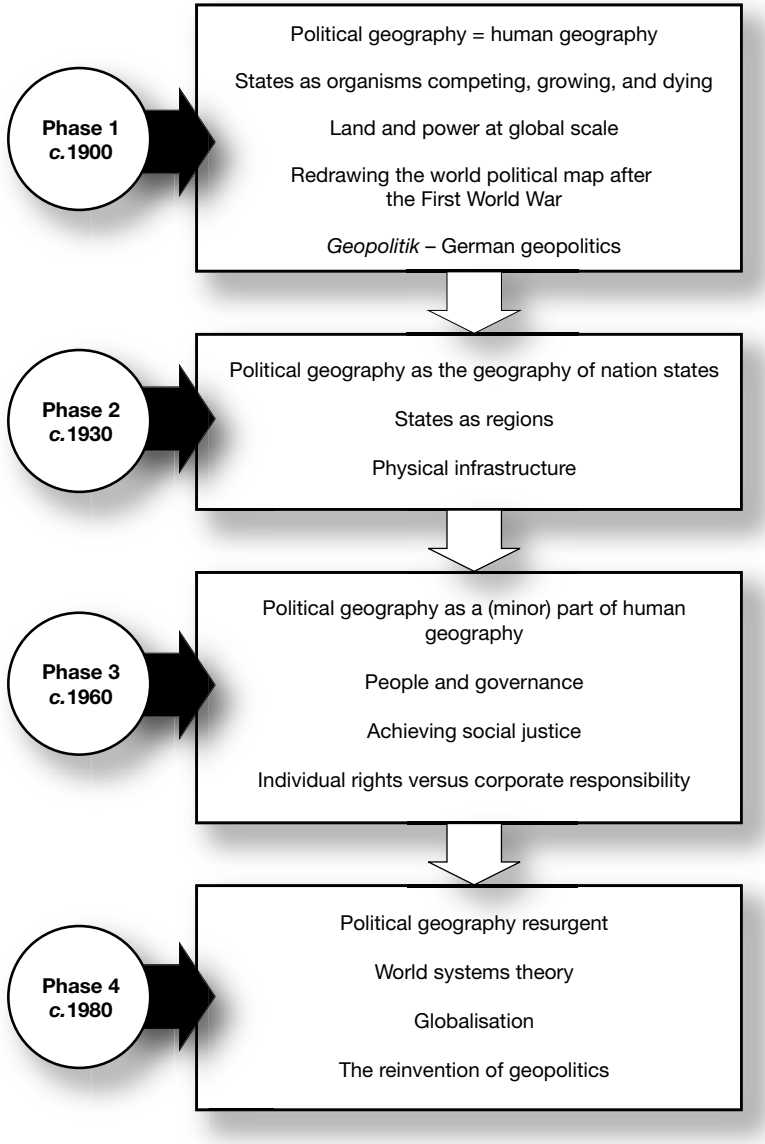

Figure 1.1 ***Major phases in the development of political geography***

emphasis between different societies and national academic traditions. Nevertheless, the roots of political geography (Figure 1.1, phase 1) lie firmly in the ferment of ideas about the nature of evolution emanating from Charles Darwin and his critics in the second half of the nineteenth century (see 'Environmental determination and the state' in Chapter 8). These ideas transformed scientific, and social scientific, thought at the time and have continued to influence the terms of much of the debate about the dynamic underpinnings of society ever since (Stoddart, 1966, 1981).

It was then, too, that modern geography began to be defined as a coherent academic discipline and political geography was seen as reflecting what would now be considered the whole range of human geography, rather than just one specialised part. The key person in this process was the German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel, whose *Politische Geographie*, first published in 1897, for the first time analysed systematically the dynamics of the relationship between human societies and the land on which they lived. He argued that states and peoples need the exclusive control and use of territory and that they will require ever increasing quantities as they develop and grow. The expansionist and competitive undertones of Ratzel's thesis are now viewed as highly controversial, potentially destabilising, and threatening to the prevailing political order, but their influence was nevertheless profound and long-lasting (Wanklyn, 1961; Cohen, 1964). It should also be remembered that at the end of the nineteenth century they were very much in tune with the general spirit of the age, with the hectic last throes of colonial expansion still in full swing and European states vying with each other in 'the scramble for Africa', which saw the whole of the continent except for Abyssinia – modern Ethiopia and Eritrea – under their colonial control. Any reservations about the morality of states seeking to expand their territory would have received short shrift at the time (see 'The spread of states' in Chapter 3).

On the contrary, Ratzel's ideas were enthusiastically built upon by geographers and used as the basis for interpreting the world order and how it might best be developed (Burghardt, 1969). In the forefront of this movement was the Englishman Sir Halford Mackinder, whose Heartland theory purported to explain the relationship between land and political power at a global scale, thereby demonstrating what he termed 'the geographical pivot of history' (Mackinder, 1904; Dodds and Sidaway, 2004). It is without doubt one of the most powerful ideas ever to be propounded by a geographer, explicitly influencing strategic thinking for more than a generation, notably through his best-selling book

Democratic Ideals and Reality: a study of the politics of reconstruction (1919). This global approach reached its apotheosis in the wake of the First World War, when Mackinder and a number of other geographers acted as official advisers in the negotiations that led to the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which began to put in place a new order, creating and recognising a radically revised political map in Europe and what had become the Soviet Union (see 'Geography and the world order' in Chapter 9). Indeed, the American geographer Isaiah Bowman, who was also part of the negotiating team, extended the practical proposals in the treaty into *The New World: problems in political geography* (1921), a global survey of states and other political jurisdictions in the post-First World War era and a justification for the essential rightness of their deliberations (Smith, 2003).

For political geography this can now be seen (with the invaluable gift of hindsight!) as a defining moment, initiating a shift of the academic focus away from a rather simplistic application of laws and theories developed in the natural sciences to social and political phenomena. Gradually states themselves became the centre of attention and the new orthodoxy was a drive to understand the essential components of a stable political entity (Figure 1.1, phase 2). What were the preconditions necessary for the huge variety of states, with all their different shapes, sizes, and geographies, to coexist without exercising predatory designs on each other's territory? It also had the effect of subsuming political geography into the wider debate about regionalism, which became the dominant discourse in geography as a whole in the second third of the twentieth century, with its focus on finding natural, self-sustaining regions at all levels of human activity, from the international and national to the local (Hartshorne, 1939).

Not that the taste for grand global designs disappeared without a significant last hurrah. As described above, Mackinder's Heartland theory still enjoyed considerable popularity and the frontier thesis of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner continued to be the standard explanation for the inexorable spread of the United States across North America, as well as for the other continental-scale colonial expansions in Australia and southern Africa (Turner, 1894; Meinig, 1960; Kearns, 1984). However, in Germany the ideas of Ratzel and his followers enjoyed a true, if somewhat perverted, renaissance. Deprived of much of its former territory in Europe after its defeat in the First World War, as well as of all its overseas colonial territories in Africa and the Middle and Far East, Germany was eager to latch on to any argument for

their reinstatement. A group of geographers worked enthusiastically to develop the pseudo-science of *Geopolitik*, which sought to justify a dynamic relationship between peoples, the land they occupied, and states, arguing that the latter must expect – and be allowed – to expand to accommodate legitimate aspirations for the exclusive political control of territory. It was by any standards a self-serving mission, which received more or less open support from the National Socialists of the Third Reich after 1933, a regime with the explicit aim of restoring Germany's former imperial greatness and the lands covering most of Central Europe that went with it (Bassin, 1987a).

The German *Geopolitik* movement did enormous damage to the credibility of political geography. The very idea that politics at the national level could and should be driven by inexorable geographical laws became an anathema and academic geographers retreated into approaches to human geography which all but excluded political considerations. For what was left of political geography as such, the state itself became the focus of attention, with the emphasis on issues such as the nature of frontiers and boundaries, and the centrifugal and centripetal forces working respectively to pull states apart or hold them together (Gottmann, 1952).

For all practical purposes the middle years of the twentieth century were an era of stagnation for political geography, devoid of any real theory and largely reliant on descriptive statements of the obvious. The leading edge of human geography was rooted in economic theory and spatial science, with the uncertainties associated with individual people and societies largely relegated to the comfort zone of regional geography. Once again this was very much in step with the tenor of the times, with the Cold War division of the globe into the Communist and free worlds accepted as a fact of life and a belief that conflicts within the free world could be resolved by rational argument, which all too often meant exclusively economic argument. Although a gross oversimplification of reality, it nevertheless successfully excluded the political from the greater part of the geographical debate and, in the process, banished consideration of the interests of minority groups of all kind to the margins.

As the apparent certainties and confidence of the Cold War years, and the global political world order that went with them, began to ebb away towards the end of the 1960s, there was a revival of interest in political geography. The focus, however, was less the state and competition between states at a world scale, than the conflicts and tensions over time

and space between individuals and groups at all levels – international, national, regional, and local (Cox, 1973). Nor was the process only driven by a revival of interest in political geography itself. Economic and social geography, which for more than two decades had furnished the dominant paradigms in human geography as a whole, began to incorporate political conflict ever more prominently into their explanations of the workings of society; it was through this that political geography began to reassert its influence (Woods, 1998). Geographers who did not first and foremost see themselves as political geographers set in train the changes which led to a fundamental reassessment of the nature of political geography (Figure 1.1, phase 3). Pre-eminent amongst them was David Harvey whose book *Social Justice and the City* (1973) firmly demonstrated that life in cities varied, depending on who you were and where you lived, with rich and poor, men and women, and whites and people of colour inhabiting very different worlds. It showed that there was endemic and systematic discrimination against certain groups, leading to political conflict being an integral part of the urban experience. For instance, rather than urban planning being viewed as a politically neutral technical exercise, according to the new orthodoxy it came to be seen as an arena of conflict where the interests of different competing groups living in the city were played out. The fight to save the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge from being sacrificed for an extension to the runway at Kennedy Airport in New York in the late 1980s is a classic example of such conflict. Another is the redevelopment of London's Dockland. The docks themselves had fallen into disuse and decay as they became too small and congested for the needs of larger, modern shipping, and eventually they were replaced by new inner urban office and commercial uses. However, the change was at the expense of existing local jobs and communities. The political conflict centred around whether the economic advantages of new investment should be allowed to outweigh the damage and disruption to the local population, especially as they had little chance of sharing directly in the benefits themselves, because of their lack of the necessary skills.

The stimulus for much of this new analysis originated from Marxist (Box 1.2) interpretations of social relationships, but it is now generally accepted that such conflict is fundamental to all types of society and that politics and political conflict are integral to understanding the dynamics of change. Indeed, political geography has been defined as 'the analysis of the systems of class/group conflict over time and space' (Dear, 1988, p. 270) and the new perspective has propelled it from the periphery to

Box 1.2

Karl Marx (1818–83)

Karl Marx was a philosopher, social scientist, historian, and revolutionary. He was also the most influential socialist thinker of the nineteenth century. He was born in Germany, but emigrated, first to Paris and later to England. London was his home from 1849 until his death in 1883 and it was here that he produced most of his influential writing. During his lifetime, discussion of his ideas was largely confined to a limited circle of European left-wing revolutionary thinkers, but after his death, his two best-known works, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and the three-volume *Capital* (1867, 1885–94), achieved worldwide popularity and influence. They formed the philosophical basis for the Communist revolutions that created the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, as well as those in many other states in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The books made people understand much more clearly the importance of economic factors in shaping society, and their analysis of class structure and conflict transformed the study of history and social science, even though many of Marx's expectations about the future course of the revolutionary movement have never actually materialised.

In common with every other area of social science, Marx's influence on human geography has been profound, providing the dominant theoretical framework for analysis for most of the second half of the twentieth century. Marxist theory was particularly important in developing the understanding of the dynamics of urban areas, providing geographers, and others, with a cogent way of explaining how the modern city functions.

Reading

Castells, 1977; Gregory, 1978; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1992.

centre stage in the geographical literature. The majority of the major academic journals in human geography are now replete with studies of different kinds of local conflict and the ways in which they have been resolved; this is especially true of *Political Geography* (formerly *Political Geography Quarterly*), a journal founded in 1982 specifically as an outlet for the burgeoning research in political geography.

The renaissance in political geography does not stem solely from a greater appreciation of the complexities and tensions in local decision-making. Another penetrating insight, initially originating from Karl Marx in the middle of the nineteenth century, was the inevitable globalisation

of the world economy. This too has been adopted and developed by political geographers into a theory explaining the nature of the relationship between states and peoples with markedly different levels of economic development (Taylor and Flint, 1999). World systems theory places the relationship between the developed and the developing worlds in an unequivocal perspective, illustrating the way in which industrial societies are so structured that they inexorably hold those that are less economically advanced in a dependent and subordinate position from which they have little chance of escape (Figure 1.1, phase 4).

The renewed attention being paid to the global scale has also reawakened the interest of political geographers in geopolitics. Freed of its predatory antecedents in interwar Germany, geopolitics is now a lively branch of political geography, analysing the way in which states relate to each other to form coherent interest groupings in an increasingly globalised and internationalised world (Ó Tuathail, 1998). Geopolitics as a political activity, of course, never went away, but for more than a generation after the Second World War, it was virtually ignored by political geographers, who were embarrassed by the uses to which it had been put in their name. It is now once again making a substantial contribution, not least in furthering understanding of the international free trade system that is at the heart of the modern global market economy (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). The world today is dominated by international companies that dwarf many of the states seeking to encompass and control them. As a result, the relationship between private capital and the state has fundamentally changed from the traditional model where governments were largely able to dictate the context for international development. It would be facile to claim that the situation is now simply reversed, but the dominance of governments is being seriously challenged by the free movement of capital across national borders across the world, thereby creating a new sort of geopolitics that includes important actors other than the traditional states, such as transnational and multinational companies (see ‘Transnational corporations’ in Chapter 11).

The challenge for political geography is how to retain coherence in the face of demands that it interpret both an increasingly globalised political order and local populations that are ever more politicised. It is an exciting challenge and, as was pointed out above, one that is integral to understanding the dynamics of the modern world, where the revolution in communications has led to a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between time and space that is reshaping the structures of political power at all levels.

Learning outcomes – the logic and structure of the book

The aim of this book is to present a contemporary view of political geography and, to this end, it is divided into three major sections. Section A, Process and patterns, looks at the fundamental ideas that have shaped political geography and made the subject what it now is. The key to this is the *concept of human territoriality*, which reflects the apparently insatiable human desire to define exclusive territories over which people can exercise some degree of control (Chapter 2). To a very large degree *maps and the development of cartography* enabled them to do this, so that the evolution of maps and map-making are inextricably entwined with the development of political geography. As cartographic techniques became increasingly sophisticated, so the precision with which space has been divided up has become ever greater, to a point where maps are now normally the ultimate evidence where demarcation disputes over land and territory are concerned.

Once territories can be clearly and unequivocally defined, more formal political entities have to be devised. The most powerful of these is the state, traditionally one of the ultimate symbols of undisputed political control. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which the *idea of the state* have evolved and the phenomenal proliferation in the number of independent states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also touches on their limitations, particularly in the context of modern economic, social, and technological conditions. Chapter 4 considers internal workings of states and how they may be made to function as coherent entities, looking at the different mechanisms for allocating the *exercise of power and the distribution of resources*. It also examines how the internal structures may be made sufficiently flexible, so that they can accommodate the change necessary to ensure that states remain vibrant and relevant to the people they serve.

States are often presented as symbols of unity, coherence, and stability, encompassing within their frontiers a population united by a common allegiance to a political ideal. The reality, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, is that all states are made up of many different peoples, more or less loosely held together by a set of political ideals. *Differences in language, ethnicity, culture, gender, and religion* all combine to produce an, at times, volatile mix, which can sometimes erupt and threaten the very future of the state itself. At the extremes, such discontent will crystallise into calls for a new political order, which can lead to the creation of new

states. *Irredentism*, where people feel closer to a neighbouring state than the one in which they actually reside, is a common and persistent phenomenon across the globe and is fundamental to explaining why the world political map is, and is always likely to be, in a constant state of flux.

To be successful, therefore, the internal structures of states must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate change and to incorporate new groups and new interests. In democracies this is catered for by freedom of association and the ability to form new political parties. Chapter 6 examines the process by which *informal pressure groups* develop and evolve into *established political parties* and the essential role that these play in the functioning of the political landscape. Central to the whole question of political legitimacy are elections, the system through which the changing will of the people is expressed. All states have elections, though the extent to which they are permitted to allow people to exercise real choice varies greatly. There is little choice in only being able to vote for a single candidate and all electoral systems curb to some degree the freedom of candidates to stand, even if only by requiring that they demonstrate minimal support and the ability to raise a financial deposit. Chapter 7 explores how the *geographical analysis of electoral results* has been used to uncover subtle differences in the internal political landscape of states and reveal pointers to the dynamics of change.

Section B, Ideology and geopolitical visions, shifts the focus from the individual state to *visions of global hegemony*. Powerful states have always sought to dominate others, either by military conquest, or by imposing their own particular versions of the truth. Empires have waxed and waned as a result, but in the past hundred years political geographers and academics from other disciplines have played an important part in providing justification for expansionist yearnings, which challenge the status quo (Chapter 8). The truth is that all states are ambitious and have some kind of world view, as Chapter 9 demonstrates, even if it is only limited to how they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Indeed, a mutual understanding of each other's respective world views is an essential ingredient in *maintaining global political stability*.

Many expansionist dreams and policies are based on a belief that land is not politically incorporated. Such justification was used extensively in the nineteenth century as European-dominated empires drew much of Africa, America, Asia, and Australasia within their orbit. In the second half of the twentieth century the equivalent, though much less bloody, conquests

have been of the *oceans*. Until the late 1940s only a thin sliver of sea around the coast was considered part of the national territory of states, the rest, the high seas, were viewed as international waters and beyond national political control. This has now profoundly altered, with most states claiming ocean territory up to 200 hundred nautical miles from their coasts. As Chapter 10 shows, this has radically altered the global political map and generated new conflicts between states over access to resources in the sea and beneath the seabed.

The final section, Section C, Beyond the state, looks beyond the conventional political map at the limitations of the state idea for understanding the true dimensions of social and economic relations at a global scale. Chapter 11 considers *internationalisation* and the whole *concept of globalisation*, focusing on the questions of deep-rooted inequality that characterise the world and examining the extent to which dependency is a necessary precondition for the *functioning of the capitalist world economy*. Globalisation has certainly brought with it huge opportunities, not least in terms of *mass worldwide communication*, but it has also put many important issues beyond the control of states and other formal political institutions. *Environmental degradation and resource depletion* are characteristic of such issues and many companies and other economic entities are bigger and more powerful than the states that try to manage and control them. This then raises serious questions about the relevance of the existing political order for enabling people to maintain a modicum of control over their own lives.

The response has been a *proliferation of international agencies* in the course of the twentieth century (Chapter 12). Globally, through organisations like the United Nations, and regionally, through bodies such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), states have come together in ever closer union to try to meet the global challenge. However, the evidence is that such groupings are as vulnerable as states themselves and have always been subject to shifting allegiances and pressures for change.

Political geography and political geographers have undoubtedly contributed to the understanding of the processes of political change in the course of the twentieth century. Chapter 13, the final chapter in the book, looks forward to how they may now be able to contribute to our understanding of the *challenge of change* in the twenty-first century.

Key themes and further reading

This chapter conveys what is meant by political geography and how it has developed as a distinctive subdiscipline within geography. The differences between the four main phases in that development, as summarised in Figure 1.1, should now be clearly understood. The main concepts to be discussed in the rest of the book should also now be apparent.

A host of political geography textbooks have been written since Friedrich Ratzel first coined the term in 1897. In recent times, the most influential and accessible is *Political Geography: world-economy, nation-state and locality* by Peter Taylor, which was first published in 1985; the fourth edition is written jointly with Colin Flint (1999) and the book provides an essentially structuralist and Marxist approach to understanding the political geography of the world at a variety of different scales. An excellent introduction to the theory of political geography is provided by *An Introduction to Political Geography: space, place and politics* by Martin Jones *et al*. (2004), while *Political Geography* by M. I. Glassner and C. Fahrer (2003), now in its third edition, provides a compendious and very well-illustrated overview of the field. For a more advanced critique, *Making Political Geography* by John Agnew (2002) offers a most stimulating analysis, and *Politics, Geography and 'Political Geography'* by Joe Painter (1995) offers a wealth of insights into the links political geography has developed with other areas of social science, especially at the local level. To see political geography in action, *Social Justice and the City* by David Harvey (1973) is still a revelation, more than a generation after it was first published. More than any other book in recent times, it has changed the way in which geographers understand cities and the dynamics of settlements in general. All Harvey's books are thought-provoking, none more so than *Spaces of Hope* (2000). Taken together, they provide a fascinating insight into how human geography generally, including political geography, has evolved over a generation.