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Conclusion

The shape of things to come

Now each man was a nation in himself, without mother, father, brother.

(Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 1990, Faber & Faber, London, chapter 28(1))

Adjusting the focus

In many ways political geography is a perfect metaphor for the postmodern era. People have constantly tried to reshape politically the world in which they live in their own image and attempts to try to limit the extent of the process of transformation have always ultimately failed. The process has also been unpredictable, with new patterns and groupings emerging and flourishing, apparently defying conventional logic and expectations. A generation ago, at the height of the Cold War, few would have predicted the current extent of the EU, encompassing most of the former Communist-controlled states in central and eastern Europe and with active plans to include yet more in the near future. Equally, it was certainly never envisaged that over much the same period the continent of Africa would change politically from a series of large European colonial territories supplying cheap raw materials to the developed industrialised world, into a network of independent states, struggling against poverty and disease to survive in the globalised world economy of the twenty-first century.

In many instances, such momentous changes actually are unforeseen and unplanned, but others owe much to political artifice and design and it has been the contribution of political geography to throw at least a little light on the dynamics behind these changes. In the process, it has also undoubtedly promulgated a very skewed view of the world, focusing on the achievements of some groups which conform to accepted measures of success and significance, while virtually ignoring others.

Historically, political change is viewed as having been driven by men, as opposed to women, and, what is more, men in recognised positions of power, internationally, nationally, regionally, and locally. It is, however, a very partial view and one that is increasingly contested and challenged, especially by women in geography (Domesch, 1991). More than a decade ago, Kofman and Peake (1990) set out what they called a gendered agenda for political geography, with the explicit intention of shifting the focus of debate away from male-dominated orthodoxy, to a more subtly layered view of political change. Their challenge was partially accepted and a new genre of research and writing did begin to emerge, highlighting how differently development and political change had impacted on different groups in society in different parts of the world (Momsen and Kinnaird, 1993), but the inroads were small and there is still much more to do to redress the balance of the debate in political geography in favour of the less powerful and less strident elements in society.

More recently, political geography has still not engaged fully with the challenges posed by the internet and other dramatic advances in information technology (Castells, 1997). Communication is now global, virtually instantaneous, almost entirely unregulated by government, and cheap. This IT revolution is having a fundamental impact on the business of politics and on political geography. There has been a wholesale assault on political boundaries of all kinds, not simply because they can now so easily be transcended, but also because those wishing to do so can alter their line of attack almost at will and are, therefore, almost impossible to pin down, control, and eliminate.

The best known of the international terrorist organisations posing a direct threat to the authority of established governments is Al Qaeda, an organisation founded in 1988 in the wake of the successful guerrilla war waged by the Muslim *mujahideen* to drive the Soviet army out of Afghanistan. Subsequently, it has developed into a worldwide terrorist organisation, aimed at removing pro-American influence and control from the Muslim world, its most spectacular coup being the devastating attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001.

Initially, Al Qaeda was largely based in Afghanistan, but since the American-led invasion in 2002 and the overthrow of the Taliban government in that country, it has transformed itself into a highly dispersed global network of terrorist cells with bases in at least twenty-six countries. The network is coordinated using highly

sophisticated IT systems and technology and operates almost entirely outside the established political networks.

The impact of this, and other less successful and extensive political networks, has been seriously to destabilise the world order, leading the USA to declare a global war on terror, with an enemy that is almost impossible to define in conventional spatial terms. Clearly delineated geopolitical theatres of influence, in the sense that they were defined by Mackinder and others throughout the twentieth century, are increasingly irrelevant, making it imperative that political geographers devise new ways of representing the sway of political power.

Ultimately, however, the most important challenge for political geography is to ensure that it absorbs and takes account of the major regional shifts in political power that are currently occurring in the world. Inevitably the current literature is heavily biased towards Anglo-America and Europe, with the global influence of the USA in particular undoubtedly dominating political discourse and the world political map in recent times. Whilst there is absolutely no immediate sign of that altering fundamentally in the short term, political geographers will need to watch carefully the rapid emergence of other potential super-states, with populations, geographic areas and, increasingly, the economic power to pose a real challenge to American dominance.

Pre-eminent amongst these will be the People's Republic of China, which with 1.3 billion is by far the most populous country in the world, as well as being the fourth largest in terms of area (9.6 million sq km). Even more significantly, its GDP stood at US\$6.4 trillion in 2003, second only to that of the USA and growing at a rate that makes it likely that it will move into first place within a decade. Interestingly, the economic transformation of China has been achieved without the benefit of a market-led liberal democracy, which is usually cited as the keystone to the success of the USA. Elsewhere in the world, India, though somewhat smaller than China with a population of just over 1 billion, is growing even faster, having witnessed an increase of over 20 per cent in the decade up to 2001, while other states in south-east Asia, such as Indonesia, are also now major economic and political influences on the world stage.

It all adds up to a fundamental refocusing of global power. Just as North America grew to challenge and overtake Europe in the early years of the twentieth century, so China, India, and the rest of Asia look poised to do the same at the beginning of the twenty-first century.