

A New Look at “Old Science”

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| DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2021-19-2-208-215

Okunev, Igor (2021). *Political Geography*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang. 474 pp. ISBN: 978-2-8076-1621-9 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/b17747>

The textbook “Political Geography” written by MGIMO University Professorial Research Fellow Igor Okunev, PhD in Political Science, is very timely and opportune. Interest in political geography in Russia surged in the 1990s when it caught up with economic and social geography as a science in its own right. However, over the past quarter of a century it has lost much of that interest. The focus shifted to its separate aspects such as limology, regional politics study, electoral geography, geopolitics, and some others, which continued to evolve and absorb new knowledge. As a result, social scientists came to believe that everything had already been studied in political geography, and that it itself had veered

off into details, particulars, and specifics, having turned into some kind of an auxiliary tool for other fields of knowledge, such as political science, international relations, and regional studies.

Igor Okunev has a different point of view. His textbook is intended for students studying political science, international relations, and regional studies. The author rightly believes that political geography is a fundamental discipline which helps students build their knowledge and competencies in these areas. This predetermines his original logic of presenting the material, which is divided into twelve interconnected chapters arranged in a certain order. At the end of each chapter, there is a list of key concepts considered, questions for discussion, and practical exercises in the form of interactive debates, business simulation games and so on. This undoubtedly makes the study of political geography more

lively and memorable. In addition, each section contains detailed lists of primary literature and further readings.

The English-language edition of the textbook, released by Peter Lang (Okunev, 2021), is a translation of the book published in Russia by Aspect Press in 2019 (Okunev, 2019). The Russian edition of the textbook, approved by the MGIMO Editorial and Publishing Council, has already gone through two reprints. The book has received wide acclaim in the professional community and has been chosen as the main textbook for the study of political geography in a number of leading universities in Russia and neighboring countries. The Russian International Affairs Council included the book in the 2019 reading list for International Affairs students and experts. The textbook was translated into English by MGIMO lecturers Maria Ananyeva, Natalia Panich, and Nikolai Simakov. The foreword to the English edition was written by Professors Sharyl Cross and Mikhail Ilyin.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to political geography, in which the author invites readers to get a solid grasp of the subject. A visual demonstration of different levels of political and territorial organization of society, supported by tables (pp. 21, 28), is a good technique designed to attract attention. When presenting political and geographical research methods,

the author could not but mention field work (p. 31–33), since he himself for several years had successfully headed expeditions organized by the Terra Cognita club operating under the auspices of the MGIMO Student Academic Society as the Russian Geographical Society's Youth Club. In theoretical terms, the author's innovative ideas of analyzing the organization of political space and distinguishing second- and third-order regional unitarianism and regional federalism—which are not to be found on the modern political map of the world, but technically can exist (p. 26)—are quite interesting.

Chapter 2 deals with global geopolitical systems. While sharing, like many contemporary scholars, the view that geopolitics is a spatial fundamental concept (the geography of international relations) that serves as a basis for the analysis of global politics, the author believes that politics was engendered by geography due to uneven distribution of resources (p. 39). The sections on binary and ternary geopolitical systems certainly deserve attention.

It should be noted, however, that the author's typology of great powers is not indisputable. Based on the stability of this status as a criterion (p. 54), the United States is classified as a "permanent" power, mainly due to its global military presence (about 800 military bases around the world), while Russia is called a

“revisionist” power. This approach is quite close to the classification that has become widespread in modern American political science, which regards Russia and China as “revisionist” powers, although the author for some reason prefers not to mention the latter. But this point of view is questionable because, as is well known, China prefers to position itself as a “rising” power, and we think this definition is more correct than an “emerging” power.

Chapter 3 is devoted to integration groups: transboundary regions, transport corridors, visa-free and free trade zones, customs, economic, currency and other unions. All subsections in this chapter are illustrated by numerous examples. In particular, the Table “Integration Systems of the World” (pp. 104-105) is quite informative and graphic. The author suggests distinguishing structural elements of integration systems such as their core, periphery and contours, which is difficult to disagree with. However, his statement that only two models of integration can be identified at the macro-regional level—European and Eurasian (p. 107)—raises some doubts.

Chapter 4 focuses on the State as a systemic element of the political and geographical structure of the world, its emergence and evolution. It thoroughly analyzes historical forms of statehood and contains interesting material on historical titles

of monarchial states. Much is said about the forms of government and nation-building in terms of building an identity (Thomas Eriksen’s concept of “us” vs “them,” and Corey Johnson and Amanda Coleman’s internal “Other”) and marking a community’s mental boundaries. The author also turns to Edward Said’s concept of post-colonialism to claim that ideas about the backwardness of the periphery can be considered a myth of internal Orientalism. The role of “internal Orientalism” is meticulously explored by studying the processes of building and sustaining Russian statehood.

This chapter also offers numerous examples illustrating various models of relationship regulation in multinational states (pp. 139–141). Separate paragraphs tell of divided states, nations without statehood, sovereign states, and states-jurisdictions. Much attention is paid to failed, partially recognized, unrecognized, and rebel states, with relevant case studies taken from the modern political map of the world. Sections devoted to proto-states are quite interesting. In the author’s interpretation, proto-states appear not as “chiefdoms,” but as separatist projects implemented by sociopolitical organizations or movements in early modern and modern history.

Unquestionable advantages of the work include a detailed analysis of such concepts as ‘autochthony’

'sovereignty' and 'stateness' as well as of the key features of a state that determine its main political and geographical attributes—territory, borders, and capital city. The analysis is based on the principles of the Montevideo Convention, which was signed in 1933 (p. 147). Table 4.5 (p. 147) gives possible examples of a balance between statehood and sovereignty. The author is right in that the fundamental role of the spatial factor in political processes is associated with the variability of scenarios and tools employed for the development of statehood.

It is somewhat unusual, in our opinion, that the political geography textbook includes material on vexillology—the study of the history, symbolism and usage of flags, banners, and colors. Nevertheless, the author believes that this field of knowledge can be considered a subdiscipline of political geography, since it gives an idea about a certain sublimated image of a country (p. 169).

Subsequent sections of the book are more customary for the political geography course. Chapter 5, titled "Properties of State's Territory," studies in detail the political and geographical position of a state (PGP) as its key characteristic. The author introduces the term 'endo-PGP' to assess the situation of a country in respect to its internal elements and center-periphery interactions in relation to internal zones of tension,

conflicts, and political, ethno-religious, sociocultural, and economic divisions (p. 179). A significant role is assigned to the study of a state's size, based on the works of Russian geographers Isaak Mayergoyz and Andrei Treivish (state size indices), and political scientists Josep Kolomer and Mikhail Ilyin (classification of countries according to the ratio of the size of the state to its function in international relations). It should be noted, however, that the author makes a slight inaccuracy in characterizing the Mercator projection: distortions in it do not become increasingly manifested in the north to south direction but increase the size of the territory on the map as they come closer to the poles, reaching their maximum near them.

Based on his previous works, Okunev attaches much significance to discussing the relationship between physical characteristics of a state and the level of development of its political system, thus taking a historical journey into the works of Plato and Aristotle, Charles Louis de Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, James Madison, and Arend Lijphart, as well as alluding to a work of Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte titled "Size and Democracy." This chapter clearly demonstrates the possibility of using quantitative methods for assessing the properties of a state's territory, in particular the size, compactness, elongation, and contiguity

indices. The author not only pays attention to traditional factors in political geography, such as access to the sea or island situation, but also dwells in detail on such specific forms of state territory as enclaves and exclaves, pointing out their various types (pp. 194-200), as well as territorial corridors (pp. 200-201).

Chapter 6 studies the composition of state territory. In addition to land and water spaces, traditional for political geography, the author draws readers' attention to problems related to airspace and subsoil resources—aerotory and lithotory. Sections analyzing various forms of territorial ownership (leased and occupied territories, extraterritoriality, and a wide range of special territorial zones) and types of territorial changes in states (cession, secession, irredenta, annexation, adjudication, retorsion, reprisals, maritime accretion, regression, transgression) are quite interesting and informative. The only comment regarding this chapter is that by the time the book was out of print, the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea had already been adopted, and this fact should by all means be reflected in the section on enclosed seas in subsequent reprints.

Chapter 7 deals with various international territories: high seas, international seabed area, open air and outer space, the Arctic and Antarctica, international straits, sea channels, rivers, and lakes. It also gives a

detailed description of buffer zones, free and no man's land found on the modern political map of the world. This section contains up-to-date political, geographical, and legal information.

Chapter 8 tells of dependent territories that existed in the past and still exist today. Beginning with an interesting discussion on the expansion of humankind as a species, it is largely historical and geographical in nature and covers such phenomena as external and internal colonization, colonialism, imperialism, decolonization, neocolonialism, and post-colonialism. The author did a thorough job writing sections concerning various forms of colonial development and space subordination: missions, reductions, factors, colonial campaigns, crown dependencies, and mandated territories, and so on. At the same time, non-self-governing, unincorporated and incorporated unorganized and organized territories, Bantustans, reservations, condominiums, dominions, satellites and protectorates, as well as dynamic, vassal, associated, puppet, and limitrophe states are also described most scrupulously.

Chapter 9 titled "Capitals and Centers" may be of interest not only to future political scientists, international relations experts and regional studies professionals, but also to geographers, economists, and urbanists. These issues are not new for

the author: he has already addressed them in his monograph "Capital Cities in a Critical Geopolitics Mirror" (Okunev, 2017), some parts of which were partially reworked for this publication. The unquestionable merit of this chapter is the extensive use of mathematical methods that can be employed for studying not only existing capitals, but also cities that claim this status (index of capital eccentricity, coefficient of metropolitanism, Zipf's law, and others). The author dwells on such concepts as multi-capital states and quasi-capital cities, hypertrophy and hypotrophy of capitals; gives sample calculations of the coefficient of metropolitanism and shows a correlation between this parameter and population size. I would particularly like to note Exercise #12 "Metropolitanism" at the end of the chapter: it helps students develop spatial thinking and the ability to generalize existing information and at the same time synthesize new knowledge. However, the chapter contains some inaccuracies and flaws. In particular, it is not quite clear why the same cities—Wellington, Dodoma, and Ottawa—appear as micro capitals of monocentric and polycentric states (Table 9.3. and Fig. 9.5 and 9.6 on pp. 361-366).

Chapter 10, "Borders and Cleavages," covers not only topics that are traditional for political geography, but also a number of issues that will certainly be of interest to future po-

litical scientists and specialists studying international relations and their history. The author's references to the cleavage theory of Stein Rokkan and Seymour Lipset and to Roger Brunet's Blue Banana concept facilitate such interdisciplinary ties. Also worth mentioning are a small subsection on limology, which presents the main approaches to the identification of types of state borders, and a fragment on their delimitation and cleavage. Readers will undoubtedly be captivated by historical facts on the construction of special border structures such as fortified frontier defenses with watchtowers called *limites*, and dividing walls, as well as examples of divided cities. This chapter would probably look even more attractive if it gave more attention to the issues of electoral geography, which, in our opinion, are touched upon just briefly. In addition, it would be interesting to compare the phenomenon of the frontier during the conquest of the Wild West in the United States with gradual incorporation of continental spaces in Central Asia into the Russian Empire that was taking place at about the same time.

Chapter 11, "Regions and Municipalities," considers various forms of the political and territorial structure of states—unitarianism and federalism—and different types of territorial units. It contains ample background information: a com-

plete list of all autonomies in unitary states around the world (p. 403, Table 11.2), a list of Russian regions and their administrative centers (pp. 407-409, Table 11.3), federal territories in different countries (p. 414, Table 11.4), and compound regions of Russia (pp. 416-417, Tables 11.6, 11.7). The author's successful attempt to present federal, judicial, military, and economic districts, as well as time zones in modern Russia in one table (p. 419, Table 11.8) deserves special mention.

In general, this chapter turned out to be very informative, but its content goes beyond the basic course of political geography for undergraduate students. Sections on supra-regional associations, subregional units, subregional autonomies and federations, unincorporated territories, and urban regimes may as well fit into the programs of special advanced studies, including those for MA courses.

The final chapter, "Spatial Identity," reveals the author's desire to cover the entire range of problems related to the political and geographical understanding of space. In our opinion, this is a good basis for future research at the junction of political science, political philosophy, and political geography. And yet, some of its paragraphs could be expanded, since in its current form the chapter looks more like as an annex to the main text, rather than its integral part.

However, my comments do not question key points of the work or diminish its importance; they should rather be viewed as recommendations for the preparation of new publications, which by all means must follow in the future. There is no doubt that the book will be in demand, primarily due to its comprehensive approach and synthetic coverage of current problems in political geography and related fields of knowledge.

A distinctive feature of the book is its universal, encyclopedic character. It is literally filled with relevant information and illustrative material: tables, diagrams, and graphs—all this makes the book much more valuable. The main text is followed by lists of obligatory political and geographical names, terms, and abbreviations, which makes the textbook very convenient for both students and teachers.

The textbook is written in a good and clear language and contains many interesting and little-known examples in each section. Being a philologist by training, the author sometimes allows himself to move away from the academic style and fill the text with beautiful and poetic metaphors, but they always look perfectly appropriate. The fragment telling of the Portuguese colonial empire is quite indicative in this respect: "Colonialism, which was initially conceived in the navi-

gation School of Sagres founded by Prince Henry the Navigator, at the southwesternmost tip of Europe, came to its end in the waters of the Timor Sea between the Indian and Pacific Oceans precisely 555 years later" (p. 291).

I believe that Igor Okunev's new book will undoubtedly find a deserved place among other textbooks for students specializing in the field of social sciences, primarily for future political scientists, international relations experts, and regional studies professionals, and will also

become an authoritative source to be cited by researchers who study a wide range of academic problems related to political geography.

In conclusion, let me say that the proposed textbook is an excellent example of how the author's youthful passion for geography, and particularly political geography, years later led to an original rethinking of the subject, which, in turn, as we believe, will inspire students to study this discipline and will one way or another help a new generation of researchers choose their path in science.

References

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/b17747>