

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

A tale of two GPEs: Decentering macro-geopolitics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9842n710>

Journal

Environment and Planning A Economy and Space, 50(2)

ISSN

0308-518X

Authors

Sheppard, Eric
Leitner, Helga

Publication Date

2018-03-01

DOI

10.1177/0308518x17737171

Peer reviewed

A tale of two GPEs: Decentering macro-geopolitics

Environment and Planning A

0(0) 1–5

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0308518X17737171

journals.sagepub.com/home/epn



Eric Sheppard and Helga Leitner

University of California, USA

Introducing this special issue, Glassman (this issue, p. 1 of manuscript) reviews the “somewhat short and spotty, if suggestive, history” of the term geopolitical economy. He notes that two GPEs circulate around, presumably shaping, the strange attractor holding together the group of scholars who convene under the label of geopolitical economies of East Asia. Geographical political economy (GPE 1) calls “attention to the specifically spatial dimensions of political economy” (manuscript: 3), whereas geopolitical economy (GPE 2) pushes “specific aspects of geopolitics more to the foreground” (manuscript: 5). Seeking to elevate geopolitical economy from term to concept (and to enroll GPE 1 in this project), foregrounding “the ways that geopolitical and socio-spatial dimensions of geopolitical economy are always already intertwined and mutually constitutive” (manuscript: 10), he highlights three unifying features: Conceptualizing socio-spatial relations flexibly (neither nation-state nor scale centric) and as attentive to history, conceptualizing (nation-) states as institutional ensembles rather than unified actors, and highlighting the geographically variegated nature of (nation-) state/society complexes (Van der Pijl, 1998).

Broadly speaking, we would endorse these three principles, and certainly acknowledge the importance of what Peck (2016) argues is the somewhat neglected field of macroeconomic geographies—indeed we contribute to it (Sheppard, 2016; Sheppard and Leitner, 2010). At the same time, we worry that, as conceptualized here, geopolitical economies implicitly prioritizes a particular set of, globally powerful, actors and scales, with the effect of undermining the visibility and potential agency of alternative loci of enunciation (Werner, 2012)—such as those of social movements and other non-state political actors operating at the local scale—from which alternatives to globalizing capitalism are pursued. As Glassman notes, we have been engaged in the broader project of provincializing critical urban theory as well as Marxian geographical political economy (GPE) (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016; Sheppard, 2015, 2016), a project to which our essay in this collection seeks to make an empirically informed theoretical contribution by thinking from Jakarta to extend notions of accumulation by dispossession. Motivated by the above-mentioned concerns, we reflect here on the implications of our work in Jakarta for (re)conceptualizing geopolitical economy in Asia.

Corresponding author:

Eric Sheppard, Department of Geography, University of California, Los Angeles, 1255 Bunche Hall, Box 951524, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA.

Email: esheppard@geog.ucla.edu

There is no question that any analysis of struggles over urban land in Jakarta must be placed within a global geopolitical “context of context” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015), if the city’s status as a post-colonial metropolis—an ordinary global city in Robinson’s (2006) sense—is to be taken seriously (Roy, 2011; Sheppard et al., 2013). The spatial colonizing policies of the Dutch, who founded Jakarta as Batavia, created an intra-urban geography of formal and informal settlements that persists to this day (Santoso et al., 2009). After successful armed struggle against colonizing powers reluctant to grant Indonesian independence, President Sukarno helped catalyze the post-Bandung movement of former colonies seeking a third way to those of capitalism and communism. Under him, Jakarta was redesigned as a symbol of nationalism and unity in diversity (at least as read from Java): a city reflective of the strong, progressive state he sought to put in place. His violent replacement by President Suharto triggered a US-oriented and supported authoritarian regime pursuing Rostowian, market-oriented development (Kusno 2013) that opened up vast tracts of land for commercial real estate and infrastructure development via sweetheart deals involving the Suharto family and Indonesia’s Indo-Chinese family conglomerates, as Jakarta stretched into its current megalopolis (Jabodetabek). Suharto’s demise was triggered by further global event, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, resulting in a liberal democratic domestic political regime characterized by the devolution of power from central to local state institutions (*reformasi*) (Bunnell and Miller, 2011). It was only with the 2014 election to president of the former Jakarta governor Joko Widodo (Jokowi) that the determined grip on power by those associated with the legacy of Suharto seemed to loosen. But deep-seated power structures persist through channels of elite informality and struggles between political parties (Hadiz and Robison, 2005, 2012, 2013). It is evident then that the processes we study within Jakarta are shaped by a long history of geopolitical influences playing out across space and scale.

It is also the case that the evictions and displacements currently ongoing in Jakarta can be conceptualized as geopolitical, in the sense that they are power-laden struggles over who controls geographical space (land). Yet our approach resonates more closely with initiatives by others to extend geopolitics into the local and the everyday, under such labels as feminist geopolitics, everyday geopolitics, and geopolitics from below (e.g. Dixon, 2015; Dixon and Marston, 2013; Routledge, 2003; Smith and Pain, 2012). This is partly a question of scale: The struggles shaping land transformation in Jakarta play out at scales ranging from the household to the neighborhood and megalopolis. Yet it is more than simply down-shifting the scale at which geopolitical struggle is studied. It also is necessary to conceptually extend what is meant by geopolitics, going beyond state-centric conceptions of the geopolitical that focus on the exercise of nation-state sovereign and biopolitical power and supra-national institutions. While it is vital to acknowledge such processes, politics cannot be reduced to the exercise of power: “Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject and deriving from a particular form of reason” (Rancière et al., 2001). We thus seek to attend to the powers and practices of a diverse set of non-state civil society actors in relation to one another, as well as in relation to tiers and agencies of the state. Further, and arguably of particular importance in the post-colony, geopolitical accounts that focus on the powerful run the danger of neglecting the necessity and possibilities of contestations from less powerful places and bodies (Slater, 2004).

For the kind of research we are undertaking in Jakarta, we find GPE 1 more amenable than GPE 2. As we use it, GPE 1 stresses **four** aspects of capitalist political economic processes (Sheppard, 2011). First, *the economy (and society more generally) and its spatialities are complicated*: Political economic processes “produce” distinct, multifaceted spatiotemporalities in particular contexts, but these processes also are shaped by such emergent

spatiotemporalities. The late Ed Soja (1980) enduringly dubbed this the socio-spatial dialectic. Second, *economic processes cannot be separated from other societal and more-than-human processes and events*, even for the purpose of analysis (nor are other processes reducible to or necessarily dominated by political-economic logic). Such econocentrism, hegemonic in mainstream/geographical economics and a lingering hazard also for Marxian political economy, must be resisted. Geopolitical economy (GPE 2) emphasizes how political processes are bound up with and constitutive of economic processes. GPE 1 extends this to incorporate cultural processes: not only discourse and representation, but also identity, subjectification and performativity and materiality—more-than-human agency (Sheppard, 2015). In sum, in GPE 1 cultural, biophysical, political, and economic processes are theorized as being co-constitutive of one another.

Third is the importance of attending to *socio-spatial positionality* (Leitner et al., 2008; Sheppard, 2002). This accounts for the uneven power relations between human agents reflective (and constitutive) of their different social positionalities and intersectional identities, but also how positionalities are shaped by spatial location (Mohanty, 2003; Nagar and Geiger, 2007; Valentine, 2007). Positionality also is an attribute of places. For example, geographical political economic analysis of globalizing capitalism finds that bodies and places occupying marginalized positionalities (e.g. racialized, gendered and in the postcolony) persistently are disadvantaged by capitalist political economic relations that produce prosperity for some at the expense of precarity for the many.

Fourth, it is vital to attend to the *geography of knowledge production*: To where various imaginaries of economy and development and their attendant practices emanate from. Those embedded in the global north habitually imagine a single path to capitalist development and prosperity to be followed by all. The power of this locus of enunciation is such that this discourse has become commonsense. Yet those who conceptualize and/or experience development as entailing impoverishment and marginalization often have a very different take (Escobar, 1995). From this vantage point, alternatives to capitalist development trajectories are both desirable and necessary—other worlds must be possible (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003; Santos, 2008). Indeed, from these loci of enunciation North Atlantic critical social science theory itself should be opened up to the possibility that it may need to be provincialized (Chakrabarty, 2000). In this spirit, it is by thinking through Jakarta that we argue in this issue for extending accumulation by dispossession to contested accumulations through displacement (Leitner and Sheppard, 2017).

Summing up, we do not seek to elevate one GPE as superior to the other. In our view, any such choice (between these GPEs and/or other related conceptual framings) would depend on the specific questions posed, the scale of analysis, and the distinct historical and geographical conjuncture. Indeed, advancing research under the label of geopolitical economies of Asia can benefit from a spirit of engaged pluralism (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010), whereby these different approaches are put in conversation with one another.

Acknowledgement

We thank Jim Glassman for the opportunity to participate in the geopolitical economies of Asia research collective and for stimulating the discussions behind this exchange.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Barnes T and Sheppard E (2010) “Nothing includes everything”: Towards engaged pluralism in Anglophone economic geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 34(2): 193–214.
- Brenner N and Schmid C (2015) Towards a new epistemology of the urban? *City* 19: 151–182.
- Bunnell T and Miller M (2011) Jakarta in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Decentralisation, neo-liberalism and global city aspiration. *Space and Polity* 15(1): 35–48.
- Chakrabarty D (2000) *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dixon DP (2015) *Feminist Geopolitics: Material States*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Dixon DP and Marston SM (eds) (2013) *Feminist Geopolitics: At the Sharp End*. London: Routledge.
- Escobar A (1995) *Encountering Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fisher WF and Ponniah T (eds) (2003) *Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*. London: Zed Books.
- Hadiz VR and Robison R (2005) Neo-liberal reforms and illiberal consolidations: the Indonesian paradox. *The Journal of Development Studies* 41(2): 220–241.
- Hadiz VR and Robison R (2012) Political economy and islamic politics: Insights from the Indonesian case. *New Political Economy* 17(2): 137–155.
- Hadiz VR and Robison R (2013) The political economy of oligarchy and the reorganization of power in Indonesia. *Indonesia* 96(1): 35–57.
- Kusno A (2013) *After the New Order: Space, Politics, and Jakarta*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Leitner H and Sheppard E (2016) Provincializing critical urban theory: Extending the ecosystem of possibilities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 228–235.
- Leitner H and Sheppard E (2017) From Kampung to Condos? Contested accumulations through displacement in Jakarta. *Environment and Planning A*.
- Leitner H, Sheppard E and Sziarto KM (2008) The spatialities of contentious politics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers NS* 33(2): 157–172.
- Mohanty CT (2003) ‘Under western eyes’ revisited: Solidarity through anti-capitalist struggles. In: *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp.221–251.
- Nagar R and Geiger S (2007) Reflexivity, positionality and identity in feminist fieldwork: Beyond the impasse. In: Tickell A, Barnes T, Peck J, et al. (eds) *Politics and Practice in Economic Geography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 267–278.
- Peck J (2016) Macroeconomic geographies. *Area Development and Policy* 1(3): 305–322.
- Rancière J, Panagia D and Bowlby R (2001) Ten theses on politics. *Theory & Event* 5(3). <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/32639> (accessed 11 October 2017). DOI: 10.1353/tae.2001.0028.
- Robinson J (2006) *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge.
- Routledge P (2003) Anti-geopolitics. In: Agnew JA, Mitchell K and Toal G (eds) *A Companion to Political Geography*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 236–248.
- Roy A (2011) Slumdog cities: Subaltern urbanism and itineraries of recognition. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(2): 223–238.
- Santos Bd S (2008) *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*. London: Verso.
- Santoso J, Febrina A and Ferry-Cuellar M (2009) *The Fifth Layer of Jakarta*. Jakarta: Graduate Program of Urban Planning, Tarumanagara University.
- Sheppard E (2002) The spaces and times of globalization: Place, scale, networks, and positionality. *Economic Geography* 78(3): 307–330.
- Sheppard E (2011) Geographical political economy. *Journal of Economic Geography* 11(2): 319–331.
- Sheppard E (2015) Thinking geographically: Globalizing capitalism, and beyond. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105(6): 1113–1134.

- Sheppard E (2016) *Limits to Globalization: Disruptive Geographies of Capitalist Development*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sheppard E and Leitner H (2010) Quo vadis neoliberalism? The remaking of global capitalist governance after the Washington Consensus. *Geoforum* 41(2): 185–194.
- Sheppard E, Leitner H and Maringanti A (2013) Provincializing global urbanism: a manifesto. *Urban Geography* 34(7): 893–900.
- Slater D (2004) *Geopolitics and the Post-Colonial: Rethinking North-South Relations*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Smith SJ and Pain R (eds) (2012) *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Soja EW (1980) The socio-spatial dialectic. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70(2): 207–225.
- Valentine G (2007) Theorizing and researching intersectionality: A challenge for feminist geography. *The Professional Geographer* 59(1): 10–21.
- Van der Pijl K (1998) *Transnational Classes and International Relations*. London: Routledge.
- Werner M (2012) Contesting power/knowledge in economic geography: Learning from Latin America and the Caribbean. In: Barnes TJ, Peck J and Sheppard E (eds) *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 132–146.