Jason Dittmer, Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity

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The question of how popular cultural texts represent, produce and reproduce events, places and people in constructing personal and collective identities has garnered the attention of scholars from various disciplines, as well as geographers, particularly cultural and political geographers. Similarly, many academics interested in understanding how practical geopolitics (politicians’ and policy makers’ every day policy implementations, including public diplomacy and speeches) use popular media productions to set geopolitical agendas such as the ‘war on terror’ or the ‘war on drugs’, as well as the importance of media in shaping our understandings and interactions with the world (Dittmer and Dodds, Popular geopolitics past and future: Fandom, identities and audiences. Geopolitics, 13(3), 437–457, 2008; Lukes, Power: A Radical View. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Shortly after the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of New York, White House advisors and national security experts from the Pentagon met with Hollywood executives, script writers and movie producers to discuss possible strategies to help in the United States’ war on terrorism, and refine its image around the world, by adopting the language and images of movies (Power and Crampton, Cinema and Popular Geo-politics. London: Routledge, 2007). This underscores the importance of the relationship between policy makers and the culture industry. The vital but often unacknowledged role of popular culture in the representation of international affairs and geopolitics is explored more fully in Dittmer’s book Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity.

He begins his exploration by creating this hypothetical situation: ‘If President Bush had come on television after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in 2001 and said “we know who did this; the terrorists are based in Canada,” and subsequently began to bomb Canada the way the United States in actuality began to bomb Afghanistan . . . ’ (p. 14). With this, Dittmer draws our attention towards a scenario in which such an act by President Bush would lead to an immense public outcry, and the American population would never stand behind such a decision, because Canada and Afghanistan are positioned within popular geopolitical discourse in ways that are different. He further asks: ‘How did Afghanistan come to be understood this way? Why do we think of the world the way we do? What processes feed into these understandings?’ (p. 15). Parallel to Edward Said’s argument in his books Orientalism (London: Penguin Books, 1978) and Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), Dittmer argues that we
live in a mediated world wherein our experiences are filtered through our everyday consumption of popular culture (books, TV, movies, comic books, and radio). Through popular media, we make sense of our world and our existence in it. In other words, popular culture informs and teaches us about our world in a less controversial manner. Thus, who we think we are and who we think we are not is contingent upon how we engage with the popular culture that we consume. However, his investigation of popular culture is not limited to the obvious effects of popular culture. He also questions the many bewildering aspects of popular culture that are embedded in an array of narratives, images, and unnoticed effects of sounds that we often engage with for pleasure.

Dittmer justifies the book’s title and provides the readers with the information necessary to synthesise concepts such as identity, geography, geopolitics, media, popular culture, politics of everyday discourse, and nationality in a manner that is easy to read. The book demystifies analytical constructs in a manner that imparts theoretical and terminological depth to readers by using everyday vocabulary and an easy style. The first two chapters detail the concepts and ideas prevailing in post-structuralist geopolitical thought. The remaining chapters, besides the conclusion, include examples that are crucial for understanding popular culture’s geopolitical implications.

The first chapter visits important concepts, theories, and their historical context. Dittmer in this chapter provides a brief yet surprisingly broad-based discussion of what geopolitics is, the history of geopolitical thought, the discourses and fundamental concepts in popular geopolitics such as ‘imagined communities’, ‘geopolitical imaginations’, ‘banal nationalism’ and how these concepts operate in the realm of popular geopolitics which he defines as ‘the everyday geopolitical discourse that citizens are immersed in every day’ (p. 14). Throughout the book, he provides case studies that explain how popular culture ‘serves to mediate popular geopolitical discourse about who we are and what our position in the world is vis-à-vis those who are different than us’ (p. 14). Thus this chapter is fundamental to understanding popular culture and its role in shaping people’s geographic imaginations, and maintaining their belief about national sentiments and communalities.

Chapter 2 focuses on definition, theorisation and methodologies of popular culture and popular geopolitics. This pivotal chapter is crucial to the rest of the book because it highlights what constitutes popular culture and how it has been investigated by various schools of thought, such as the Frankfurt School, post-Marxism, Lacan and psychoanalytical readings of popular culture. Here, Dittmer also discusses methods for studying popular culture, tackling research questions, and theorising the outcomes though a broad discussion of approaches to engaging cultural texts (e.g. archival research, compositional analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis and ethnography, among others.)

In the remaining chapters, Dittmer provides concise and effective case studies complemented by new concepts, useful maps and well-chosen images. He splendidly illustrates the various concepts in each chapter by offering concrete examples from everyday life. In these chapters, he argues that geopolitical scholars should go beyond investigating the conventional aspects of geopolitics associated with war, diplomacy or geostrategic resources, and to involve themselves in connecting these geopolitical discourses with ‘the type of consumption activities usually undertaken in our living rooms, shopping malls, movie theatres, and on the Internet’ (p. 155). Thus, the case studies provide readers with critical lenses to re-evaluate how their everyday activities (and scholarship) not only reflect prevailing geopolitical trends but also actively
reinforce these trends. The essence of his argument is that ‘the global scale of geopolitics is inseparable from the everyday scale of our lives’ (p. 156). Thus, this book offers a window of understanding to the interplay of popular culture consumed every day and geopolitics produced every day.

This book makes a solid contribution to political geography, integrating theories and applications from different disciplines in a well-organised format. The book will be useful for advanced undergraduates or graduate students, especially those who have had some previous training in political and/or cultural geography, cultural studies, communication or media studies theory. What Dittmer offers is of great merit and provides insights into popular geopolitics and the relationship between popular culture and international relations from a geographical perspective.

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