



Article
scientifique

Compte rendu de
livre

2016

Accepted
version

Open
Access

This is an author manuscript post-peer-reviewing (accepted version) of the original publication. The layout of the published version may differ .

[Review of:] The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about
Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate / Robert D. Kaplan. -
Random House, New York, 2012

Fall, Juliet Jane

How to cite

FALL, Juliet Jane. [Review of:] The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate / Robert D. Kaplan. - Random House, New York, 2012. In: Environment and planning. D, Society & space, 2016.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:81840>

Robert D. Kaplan, [*The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*](#), Random House, New York, 2012, 432 pages, \$28.00 hardback, ISBN 9781400069835.

The Revenge of Geography? What the Chaps Tell Us about Coming Conflicts and Their Own Cognitive State

Oh dear, poor Geography, someone thinks they have rediscovered you again!

Geography, says Kaplan, while dead as a practical form of knowledge serving statecraft, is worth unearthing in these uncertain times. It apparently offers new insights into the balance of world power and how to maintain it as it is. With the enthusiasm of a new convert, Kaplan announces that he “will introduce readers to a group of decidedly unfashionable thinkers, who push up hard against the notion that *geography no longer matters*” (page xix, his emphasis). I am a geographer: I should be pleased that someone noticed we exist. It is sufficiently rare to be noted. My enthusiasm was however terrifyingly short-lived. Sometimes it is better to be ignored. For against ideas of flat worlds or the end of history, Kaplan has a plan: to read geographical writers from the early 20th century and to make them relevant for today. This is coyly presented as original freethinking, and all the more credible for including the tale of his own damascene conversion over American military intervention in Iraq. Geography has the solution!

The Revenge of Geography is written as a series of carefully chosen case studies, much like Jared Diamond’s popular books that have similarly complicated relationships with environmental determinism, albeit with different political agenda. Choosing case studies is of course an effective way of pedagogically making a point. We all do it. It also allows the author to choose situations that agree with the point he is trying to make: America is threatened, and he knows how to fix it. “The United States, bounded by two oceans and the Canadian Arctic, is threatened only by the specter of Mexican demography to its south” (page 189), he tells us. Like Diamond, he is particularly intrigued and worried about China, and like him thinks its recent rise has something to do with the shape of its borders. So geography has the solution, albeit that written by dead old white men who lived in some style in the early 1900s in the imperial metropolises of the world, and who spent inordinate amounts of time worrying about things like the shape of mountains, rivers, and the location of seas. Old-style geopolitics, in other words.

This return of old geopolitical heroes is however neither new nor original. Popular books presenting neorealist positions do much to reassure American readers that hegemony is necessary, and that it is here to stay. This is similar in flavour to ideas put forward by conservative think tanks such as the now-defunct *Project for a New American Century* or Kaplan’s own *Centre for a New American Security* and other similar proto-academic think-tanks. A North American readership is assumed throughout, and Kaplan repeatedly signals shared destiny with his audience: “to recover our sense of geography, we must fix the moment in recent history when we most profoundly lost it, explain why we lost it, and elucidate how that affected our assumptions about the world” (page 3, emphasis mine). He ends by saying that “we must be a balancing power in Eurasia and a unifying power in North America” (page 346, emphasis mine).

Like others before him, Kaplan is uniquely obsessed with the idea of natural borders, seeing these as guarantees of political stability. This appears connected to his view of history as a

form of geometrical teleology: if only nations could be the right shape, then prosperity would be ensured, since the worst scenarios are always emerging within “artificial states”. Artificial states are simply the wrong shape, with the wrong borders, in the wrong place, or with the wrong inhabitants. They are the ultimate Other. Ethnic heterogeneity is repeatedly identified as a cause of conflict, and ethnic homogeneity implicitly – and explicitly – presented as a solution (“violence broke out in the ethnic *mélange* of Yugoslavia rather than, say, in the uniethnic Central European states of Hungary and Poland”, page 8). In this, Kaplan’s writings are similar to those of Alberto Alesina and William Easterly (Alesina & Spolaore 1997; Alesina et al. 2006; see Fall 2010 for a critique) and many other conservative thinkers who overemphasize cartographical geometry and ignore economic and political power relations, as well as continuing postcolonial imbalances. That the United States of America has one of the longest linear state borders in the world, a near-classic “artificial border” (should one believe in such things) seems to escape him.

Luckily for Kaplan, the biophysical world offers many features on which to inscribe manifest destiny, if only one chooses carefully, and he argues that “it is geography that has helped sustain American prosperity and which may be ultimately responsible for America’s pan-humanistic altruism” (page 32). The particular physical geography he chooses to highlight is that the US is apparently surrounded by water: “since the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites have oscillated between quasi-isolationism and idealist-minded interventionism: all of this at root because of two oceans” (page 33). This unique quasi-insular position, however, does not appear to apply to Mexico, since the geography that really matters there is demography. This was made clear to Kaplan when he returned to the southern United States “because of the turbulence and semi-anarchy I had experienced amid over 100 million Mexicans for weeks just to the south” (page 334). So apparently while geography always matters, it’s up to sensible and rational men to choose exactly which sort of geography to pick and choose from. To make sense of what is happening in Mexico, and why this poses a unique threat to the United States, he invokes Arnold Toynbee’s comments about Rome and the Barbarians. Full of nuance, this book is not.

Fear features heavily in *Revenge*: fear of upsetting the balance of power, and fear of unidentified Others doing so. There is also a less specific but no less noticeable undercurrent of fear of a loss of manliness, of “good men” (page 19) just needing to join forces to reclaim what is justly theirs, through a combination of virility and military power. Kaplan’s style of writing makes use of many images, and he would much prefer to suggest for instance that “Central Europe was ravished” (page xvii), rather than invaded. The need for heroic male figures is repeatedly invoked, such as when he suggests that “true realism is an art more than a science, in which the temperament of a statesman plays as much a role as his intellect” (page 24). This is the old-style geopolitical fantasy of having a unique role as adviser to the Prince, of a geography linked to military power and strategy. This is precisely the type of geography that so many contemporary geographers have fought so hard to distance themselves from, and have repeatedly identified as intellectually, as well as politically, suspect. A historian of ideas might additionally be surprised by the strange rewriting of the history of geographic thought found in this book. Kaplan suggests for example that Fernand Braudel’s work is but a summation of traditional geopolitical thinking (page 323); that John Brian Harley, Nicolas Spykman, and Harold Mackinder all share ideas about what maps are, apparently all agreeing that they are morally neutral (page 27); and that the idea that “nature imposes, man disposes” comes from W. Gordon East writing in the 1960s and so on, not from Vidal de la Blache’s approach to geography in France at the turn of the 20th century. Still, that might be unnecessarily pedant.

So if this book isn't any new contribution to social and political science, or to geography, is it nevertheless an interesting wake-up call, but not for the reasons Kaplan imagined? Geography, and political geography in particular, has undergone much soul-searching in recent years related to its own contorted links to masculinism. Much undoubtedly remains to be done. This has led to a fascinating internal debate about the specific viewpoints adopted by critical geopolitics (see for instance Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Sharp 2007). These proposals to rethink the implicit biases and focus on Big Men and geopolitical views-from-nowhere resonated within the discipline, calling in particular for a renewed focus on ground-level, local, and embodied sites of moral propinquity or nearness, rather than geopolitical postures that Kaplan sees as simply rational. Hyndman's invitation to develop a strong feminist geopolitics "to extend the work of arguably disembodied critical geopolitical analysis by (re)situating knowledge production as a partial view from somewhere" (Hyndman 2004, page 309) made a lasting impression on many geographers. Recent returns to less critical geopolitics that reflect new fears in an uncertain world, as well as the apparently reclaimed term of 'geopolitics' by geographers without its 'critical' prefix, means that the discipline would do well to continue the soul-searching. But, I would suggest, Kaplan is not going to be any use in this, nor in anything else.

Let us simply hope that next time someone thinks they have rediscovered geography, it will be for something proponents of the discipline can actually be proud of.

Juliet J Fall, Département de géographie et environnement, Faculté des sciences économiques et sociales, Université de Genève, 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland

References

- Alesina A and E Spolaore E 1997 On the number and size of nations. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* **112**(4): 1027-1056.
- Alesina A, W Easterly, and J Matuszeski 2006 Artificial states. *NBER Working Paper 12328*.
- Dowler L and J Sharp 2001 A feminist geopolitics? *Space and Polity* **5**(3): 165-176.
- Fall J 2010 Artificial states? On the enduring geographical myth of natural borders. *Political Geography* **29**(3): 140-147.
- Hyndman J 2004 Mind the gap: bridging feminist and political geography through geopolitics. *Political Geography* **23**(3): 307-322.
- Sharpe J 2000 Remasculinising geo-politics? Comments on Gearóid Ó Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics*. *Political Geography* **19**(3): 361-364.