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Political Geography

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Editorial

Making time in 2020



At *Political Geography*, the editorial team's annual editorial offers a chance to reflect on the previous year and to consider new directions being taken both at the journal and in the wider sub-discipline. But reflecting on a year such as 2020 presents several challenges, not least because, individually and collectively, our sense of time has become distorted and disoriented. Twelve months ago, the team worked on our previous editorial while attending an in-person meeting in central London. Travelling and congregating now seems like a figment of the imagination or something from a distant era. Many (if not most) of us have spent the past calendar year scrambling to reconstitute our lives and to reorient ourselves in a rapidly changing world, whose dynamics we still struggle to comprehend. Our activities at *Political Geography* are no different: several of our initiatives of the past year such as the release of a special collection of previously published articles on urban policing, state violence and racism (Grove et al., 2020), or the announcement of an early career researcher paper award, are direct responses to conditions created by the confluence of a global pandemic, ascendent fascist movements, and the continued deterioration of employment conditions and job prospects for many of our academic colleagues. In this editorial, we want to reflect on the past year's events and the new demands and pressures these have placed on scholars; we also want to consider how the journal has responded to these events. In the process, we want to foreground an ethic of care that we hope will continue to inform individual and collective efforts to manage and push back on the violent effects of this conjuncture of circumstances. We see this ethic as an orientation that conditions thought and action in all areas of academic practice, including journal publishing. Our purpose in this editorial is not to hold up our activities as uniquely exemplary of this ethic (quite the contrary!), but rather to consider how we might generate a sustained response to the current conjuncture using the institutional and disciplinary resources we command.

In considering how an ethic of care might circulate through academic publishing, we take inspiration from recent feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist scholarship within and beyond political geography (e.g., Dixon, 2016; Jackman et al., 2020; King, 2019; Smith, 2020). These literatures have, in their own ways, worked to destabilize coherent and universalizing accounts of space and spatiality, drawing attention to multiple, differentiated experiences, practices and values that seep beyond the borders of any stabilizing identity. We find these perspectives particularly germane to our current circumstances, as they encourage us to consider how our scholarly activities—our teaching, research, and publishing—may be complicit in the forms of hardship and violence we strive to combat. In some respects, our remit as editors in the field of academic publishing is rather limited. As editors, we control a small marketing budget (usually reserved to fund one to two

plenary speakers per year at international conferences). However, our institutional roles effectively make us gatekeepers of the kinds of research that constitute the subdiscipline as we know it (Benjaminsen et al., 2020; O'Loughlin et al., 2011). This responsibility is not new. As long as publishing has been a feature of the dissemination of scholarly knowledge, those in editorial capacities have had the power to shape what is shared (or not shared) and *how* it is shared (e.g. format, language, and means of access). Geographers focused on the history of the discipline have shed a great deal of light on the role of publishers, editors, and other gatekeepers on the production of geographical knowledges—both by opening up the field to new ideas and perspectives and by maintaining intellectual boundaries.

In 2020, our operations as a journal, and our responsibilities as editors, gatekeepers, producers, and disseminators of knowledge, have come into the spotlight as the exceptional (though now more normal) experience of living in a pandemic intersects with the long-running structural inequalities of globalizing societies. Contributors to this journal have noted that emergency situations are characterized by disruptions in the rhythms and patterns of everyday life (Anderson & Adey, 2012; Bonilla, 2020). These disruptions, in turn, open intervals for action to deal with the effects of the emergency and, potentially, to address its underlying causes.

One challenge currently facing academic publishing is how to facilitate scholarly, theoretically informed analysis of rapidly changing empirical conditions that outpace the (often painfully) slow timeline of peer-reviewed academic journal publishing. Working within the constraints of corporate academic publishing, we have sought to enhance how *Political Geography* can be responsive to the ethical and political demands generated by events over the past year. In fall 2020, we launched a new publishing format, the 'Virtual Forum,' which gives authors the ability to engage with fast-moving circumstances in a manner that is both academically rigorous and quick to publication. Virtual Forums are open-ended, rolling collections of 2000-word Viewpoint commentaries on selected topics. To date, we have begun to publish Viewpoints in two Virtual Forums: Populist Nationalisms and New Geographies of Exclusion; and Place, Power and Pandemic: Political Geographies of COVID-19. In addition, we are preparing to launch Virtual Forums on Political Geographies of Environmental Limits, Scarcity and Degrowth, and on the 2020 US Presidential Election. Viewpoints are published both in the journal's regular Setting the Agenda section, and online, in dedicated Virtual Forum web pages. To promote debate on current events of common interest, we encourage authors to engage with previously published Viewpoints, and to contact the editorial team if they are interested in proposing a Virtual Forum topic.

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Virtual Forums thus offer one response to the cascading, interconnected, fast-and-slow emergencies that have marked 2020. However, what constitutes an emergency, and how that emergency impacts the lives and well-being of others, is itself a product of wider political-economic, racial, colonial, gendered, and sexual inequalities (Anderson et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures used to contain it, have created unique pressures on scholars, compounding the crisis situation that has become an endemic feature of the neoliberalized academy. These pressures are unevenly distributed among scholars and are experienced most acutely by those in more precarious employment situations: postgraduate researchers and teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and early career researchers, all of whom have seen secure positions rapidly dwindle. Permanent, secured, tenured, scholars might be tempted to reassure their students and less secure colleagues by noting that 'It was tough for me too, but it turned out fine.' Such comparisons, besides being insulting and patronizing, ignore the transformations that have been taking place across academia and the hastening of these transformations through pandemic-related austerity. There is a need now, more than ever, for those in secure positions to listen carefully to those who are facing intense uncertainty as they finish their degrees, search for jobs, and send out their first or second paper for peer review. And as we listen, we need to be *active* in challenging the barriers that the academy has been raising to the next generation of geographers who will move the discipline forward long after this pandemic has petered out.

In a journal capacity, *Political Geography* was behind the curve compared with other publications that were already offering some tailored support for early career scholars. The journal has long provided an outlet for scholars at differing career stages – and across different disciplines – but certain structures upheld the prestige of career maturity (for example, invitations to plenary talks). Before COVID-19 even struck, under new editorial leadership, the journal team began to discuss how we might use our capacity as editors to develop an ethics of care for early career scholars. Certainly 2020 has had many low points, but it did prompt us to launch an early career paper prize to recognize and support the next generation of scholars (importantly, we defined 'early career' broadly to take into account factors such as breaks in employment and family/caring responsibilities). Although not an entirely novel idea (other journals offer similar prizes), our approach to the award, we hope, has been innovative. Papers could be nominated or self-nominated, and we created a panel of judges at different career stages to read and evaluate the submissions. Rather than a tick-box exercise, our evaluation involved deep engagement with each paper based on clear but varied criteria. The process worked to identify not just a single 'top' paper, but excellent papers across the board with formal acknowledgement of merited papers so that authors might then add this information to CVs. Prize-winning papers have been made Open Access for a time to promote the work of the award recipients, and a monetary element was offered to provide some small measure of financial support. Our social media and other outlets have been used to share the news and to encourage readership.

On the one hand, critiques can be levelled against such competitive schemes, which like publication per se, rest on the decisions of a select few to determine what constitutes 'merit' (often scholars in some form of stable employment). Yet, on the other hand, the process we put in place has sought to bring these norms to light. Interestingly, the 'winning' papers of the 2020 competition were discovered at an end-of-year editorial meeting to have been amongst the most read and downloaded papers of the year. Perhaps it cemented the panel view about the papers, but it also showed the importance of early-career scholarship to the vibrancy of the discipline (with or without an award).

The award scheme, above all, is intended to support scholars by recognizing the quality of their work and the enormous investments of

time each research article represents. For many early-career scholars, especially those who find themselves in non-permanent positions, time is a commodity in desperately short supply (along with emotional support, empathy, and recognition). Of course, all of us have felt constraints on our time and well-being in the past year. Those with caring responsibilities to children, parents, and friends have seen these constraints increase exponentially with lockdowns and school closures. But, for those of us in possession of comparatively more resources, social connections, institutional 'pull,' and, yes, even time, now is the moment to put our early-career (and precariously employed colleagues) first. This must involve advocacy at an institutional level, but it can also involve giving time to individual scholars to support their work. The early-career paper award initiative is one way, however imperfect, that the journal can support those at the start of their careers. The journal will also continue to offer active editorial support and guidance for early career scholars and to encourage participation in our new, streamlined publication formats. Our aim is to ensure that scholars who are launching their careers in the midst of the present turmoil and retrenchment will be able to set the agenda for political geography (and, as a result, *Political Geography*) for years to come.

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