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# Political Geography

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## Editorial

### To forty more years of *Political Geography*



Our annual editorial this year marks the 40th anniversary of *Political Geography*. Journal anniversaries are, of course, time for celebration and reflection on progress the publication has made. But events of the past few years challenge our sense of what this celebration might look like. Today, as we approach the third year (and twelfth variant thus far) of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we might appreciate the humor of founding editor Peter Taylor, who used the occasion of the journal's 10th anniversary arriving in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party to quip:

“Truly the world has been turned upside down and although we cannot claim the credit – we have yet to sell the rights to ‘*PGQ: The Movie*’ – this is not the time for false modesty: *PGQ* [*Political Geography Quarterly*, the journal's original moniker] set out to be and succeeded in becoming the flagship in the revival of political geography, the erstwhile moribund backwater of the geographic community” (Taylor, 1992: 5).

With thirty years of hindsight, we can certainly recognize, albeit in a different register, Taylor's sense that the world has been turned upside down. But just as in 1992, in 2022 this “turning” remains in the present perfect tense, an ongoing, dizzying and disorienting process, a carnivalesque ride on stormy seas that refuse to settle. As we scramble for footing, an event such as an anniversary in the midst of such tumultuous weather affords us an opportunity to come up for air, both to celebrate the achievement of forty years of *Political Geography* and take stock of how the world, and together with it geography, have (and in some cases, have not) changed. We as a journal have made ‘progress’ of various sorts – especially in terms of widening the scope of political geography and including more voices and perspectives. But this progress is taking place in contexts that, if anything, are marked by greater precarity and deepening injustice. Globally, for instance, we seem to be driving ourselves toward climate catastrophe. The academy, as well, while less consequential than planetary change, seems to be moving inexorably toward precariousness (and maybe we've already arrived – certainly this is the case for numerous colleagues). What does progress mean in contexts in which we seem to have so little power to change the direction we are heading in?

In our 40th anniversary editorial, we thus want to take this opportunity to celebrate the journal's progress in several areas, while also speculatively yet strategically looking ahead to demands future decades may bring. We may not, as Taylor noted tongue-in-cheek, be able to claim credit for world-historic events, but we *can* use anniversary celebrations to consider the kinds of issues political geographers may face, and the kinds of responses our disciplinary and institutional positions enable us to provide. Here, we see three specific areas that are both

worthy of reflective celebration and also conducive of critical reflection on the current and future state of political geography.

First, since its founding issue, *Political Geography* has always prided itself as a publication that celebrates pluralism. This is a theme that the journal's editorial teams have consistently emphasized, from its founding editorial to its ten- and thirty-year anniversary editorials (Taylor et al, 1982; Taylor 1992; O'Loughline et al 2012), and it has been arguably the key source of the journal's vitality and relevance over its forty-year history. To again quote from Peter Taylor's ten-year anniversary editorial: “When [*PGQ*] was launched, geography was suffering from a surfeit of confrontational posturing behind antagonistic approaches to research. *PGQ* eschewed these conflicts and welcomed a variety of research paradigms which we terms traditional, positivist and radical” (Taylor, 1992: 6). While this animosity may persist in some sub-disciplines, thankfully, in many ways the discipline as a whole has become less territorial and more welcoming of diverse research approaches. At the same time, what ‘pluralism’ means now has certainly changed, in no small part due to effects of the paradigm-upending collapse of the Cold War and emergence of the Anthropocene as a problematic for thought - impacts that were just beginning to appear on the horizon in 1992. As several agenda-setting *Political Geography* plenary lectures over the past decade have demonstrated, these events have challenged taken for granted understandings of spatiality, territoriality, materiality, sovereignty, politics and the political, and have provoked a range of theoretical, methodological and epistemological innovations that continue to reshape the sub-discipline's contours (Elden 2012; Dalby 2013; Bonilla 2020; Steinberg 2021). In the process, the “traditional, positivist, and radical” research approaches Taylor described have been supplemented by waves of critical research that feature new (and varied) approaches to the discursive and material found in critical geopolitics, feminist political geography, border studies, and the cultural turn in state theory, to name a few, and new ethical and epistemological challenges raised in feminist geopolitics and decolonial approaches to political geography (Buhaug et al., 2016). As events of the past thirty years have rippled across the fabric of our existence, political geography has become arguably more pluralist than it has ever been, which has helped to sustain the sub-discipline's vitality and relevance within and beyond academic geography.

At the same time, newly emerging conditions give the sub-discipline's appreciation for pluralism a renewed sense of urgency. To take one example, catastrophic climate change impacts are already destroying lives and livelihoods across the global South, and disproportionately impact economically and racially marginalized communities in the global North. Issues of environmental justice and climate justice have become increasingly prominent within geographic research, and the

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sub-discipline has much to offer to these debates. The journal's most downloaded and cited articles regularly focus on environmental-oriented topics, such as climate change and conflict (Barnett & Adger, 2007; Selby et al., 2017), degrowth (Hickel, 2021), disaster politics (Bonilla, 2020), extractivism (Dunlap, 2019), and conservation (Asiyanbi et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2020; Dutta, 2020). But there continues to be room for growth. Research in geography and cognate disciplines on these topics has been driven by work in fields such as political ecology, Black and Indigenous studies, urban and cultural geography, and the environmental humanities. For another example, resurgent white supremacist violence, exclusionary nationalisms, and the recalibration of liberal governmental rationalities around the expectations and demands of white privilege raise pressing questions on transformations in everyday state practice and social movements, to name a few, that have long been a hallmark of political geographic research.<sup>1</sup> These themes have also been a focal point for research in sub-disciplines such as Black geographies (McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Woods, 2017), political anthropology (Bonilla, 2015; Thomas, 2019) and critical Indigenous studies (Povinelli 2011; Coulthard 2014): each, in their own way, situates contemporary political events in the long histories of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence.

In each case, an appreciation of diverse research practices, agendas, and theoretical frameworks can serve to broaden our understanding of the kinds of issues and responses events such as climate change and emergent white supremacy are raising for research and activism within and beyond political geography. The styles of pluralism long advocated and promoted by the journal are more ethically and epistemologically necessary than ever before, particularly given the emerging onslaught on anti-intellectual rhetoric and legislation from many right-wing movements that seek to forcibly close down critical thought and debate on contemporary insecurities and inequalities. *Political Geography's* continued support of epistemological pluralism can thus resonate on at least two fronts moving forward: it can continue supporting efforts by political geographers to expand beyond the traditional canon (Naylor et al., 2018; Smith, 2020); while also providing space for a variety of styles of research that each, in their own way, contribute to our understanding of emergent imbrications of the spatial and the political.

Second, along these lines, over the past decade *Political Geography* has introduced a variety of publishing initiatives designed to promote pluralistic engagement on the sub-discipline's core questions. The 2016 launch of the Setting the Agenda section consolidated all non-full length articles under the journal's editorial guidance. This has allowed the journal to focus greater editorial attention on non-traditional publishing formats, such as Intervention collections, which have been essential for building bridges between political geography and, *inter alia*, mobility studies (Merriman et al., 2017), border studies (Johnson et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2017), and decolonial theory (Naylor et al., 2018). In 2020, the journal launched its Virtual Forum section, which features rolling series of short commentaries from researchers in multiple disciplines on specific contemporary topics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, degrowth, exclusionary nationalism, and populist political ecologies. These alternative publishing formats provide researchers within and beyond political geography a wider range of outlets to publish scholarly work that can speak to pressing issues of the day in a timely manner and allow political geographers to help actively shape, rather than respond to, emerging debates in multiple disciplines.

Taken together, over its forty years, *Political Geography's* appreciation for diverse research approaches and its use of alternative formats to promote a pluralist publishing agenda have helped to place the journal, and the sub-discipline, in a favourable position to take advantage of growing interest in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research into

so-called 'grand challenges' associated with the Anthropocene – even if this potential has not always been realized (O'Loughlin, 2018). Issues such as climate change adaptation, energy system transitions, biodiversity conservation, migration, water quality and security, and public health, to name a few, raise pressing questions on social and environmental governance. While interdisciplinary work in these areas tends to be dominated by scholars from more applied research disciplines such as economics or public administration (particularly branches influenced by new institutional economics), these are research areas where political geographers can mobilize their topical expertise in ways that contribute to ongoing efforts to construct alternative, more radical forms of interdisciplinary science that are not tied to the priorities of economic growth and development (see Castree et al 2014; Castree 2016). As national research funding agencies, high profile philanthropic organizations, and international development donors increasingly direct financial resources towards 'grand challenges', there is a pressing need for political geographers to both critically explore and participate in new political geographies of interdisciplinary knowledge production in the Anthropocene.

This brings us to a third area for both reflection and, somewhat counterintuitively, celebration: as we celebrate our fortieth anniversary, there is a growing recognition that our universities, our discipline, and even our journals (including this one) are important sites of struggle over the meaning of progress, justice, fairness and equity. Of course, these are perilous times: academic freedom is under sustained political assault, national governments continue to target higher education sectors for budget cuts, and academic labor conditions are increasingly precarious and toxic, both socially and psychologically. But these assaults indicate, to us, the continued power of academia, and its potential to spearhead new practices of radical, collective care. The pressing need to create alternative forms of academic practice within and outside the university has been a topic of considerable work over the past decade, both across critical scholarship (Harney & Moten 2013; Bhambra et al 2018) and within geography (McKittrick, 2021) and political geography (Jackman et al., 2020; Smith, 2020). At *Political Geography*, the editorial team has used recent editorials to reflect on the heightened sense of precarity within academic geography, and academia more broadly, represented by the casualization of academic labor, cuts to essential support staff, and the growing stress and strain many of our colleagues endure on a daily basis (Grove et al., 2021). In 2020, we launched the journal's annual Early Career Research Paper Award competition, which recognizes outstanding scholarship published in *Political Geography* by an early career researcher, and have recognized winners in 2020 (Asiyanbi et al., 2019; Simpson, 2019) and 2021 (Dempsey, 2020). This is a narrow form of support, to be sure, but it indicates one way amongst others that academic journals can mobilize the limited resources at their disposal to support colleagues who may be in precarious situations.

The need to continue drawing attention to precarious conditions our colleagues are regularly subjected to has taken on new importance in the final months of 2021 as well. The Al-Jazeera I-Unit podcast series 'Degrees of Abuse,' released in October and November of 2021,<sup>2</sup> which shared testimony from brave survivors of sexual harassment and abuse from perpetrators in academia, including a political geographer, starkly illustrates how fields that pride themselves on critical scholarship can still be sites of everyday aggressions and dehumanizing violence that compound many political geographers' already precarious situations. Predatory behaviors should have no place in the sub-discipline, or the discipline as a whole, but the grim reality is that these conditions have been far too common throughout past decades, and are often supported by institutional practices that reward perpetrators while silencing or punishing victims who speak out about their abuse. Here, we recognize and support the important efforts of our colleagues in specialty groups

<sup>1</sup> For *Political Geography* plenaries on these topics over the past decade, see, e. g., Till (2012); Coleman, (2016); Amoores, (2021).

<sup>2</sup> The 'Degrees of Abuse' series is available at the Al-Jazeera I-Unit's podcast homepage: <https://omny.fm/shows/al-jazeera-investigates/playlists/podcast>.

such as the RGS's Political Geography Research Group and the AAG's Black Geographies Research Group, who have used their institutional platforms to call attention to ongoing forms of everyday violence within the discipline and share information on support resources.<sup>3</sup>

Read together, these conditions suggest to us the need for styles of political geography that seek not only to continue refining the contours of the field while building bridges with other disciplines, but that also turn the sub-discipline's considerable analytical resources inward, to critically examine and transform the everyday practices that make "political geography" what it is, for better or for worse. We have organized a series of sessions at the 2022 AAG annual meeting to celebrate the journal's 40-year anniversary, and we hope this will provide a platform for *Political Geography* to highlight and support the work many of our colleagues have done to make the sub-discipline, and the discipline as a whole, a welcoming, supportive and safe space for all scholars. The next forty years of *Political Geography* will hopefully see the field direct its analytical talents and capacities towards analyzing the everyday environments that suffuse the practice of political geography, and continue building a sub-discipline that can meet both the analytical and practical demands of a world that continues turning upside down.

To forty more years of *Political Geography*!

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<sup>3</sup> To view the RGS Political Geography Research Group Statement, see <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KnThCC7OVm1dIPFdkkzXbEtxiUD4E1zlsFzLveHV3HU/edit> (accessed 21 December 2021). The Black Geographies Specialty Group's 'Call for Transformative Racial Justice', is available at: <https://blackgeographies.org/2020/06/10/black-geographies-specialty-groups-call-for-transformative-racial-justice/> (accessed 21 Dec 2021).