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# By whose words shall we know and to what end? Genealogies and its Others in geography

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## Abstract

The discursive and material tensions between words and ideas within geography have real impacts on the lives of peoples and the places we describe and study, and thus we should not take such tasks lightly. Political geography is limited by relying on existing genealogies and the limits of Anglo-based language. Silences and gaps can be better addressed by engaging with scholarship and ways of being from 'other' places as well as enriching genealogies to include postcolonial and feminist scholarship. While we can argue over the tracing of keywords or problematic interpretations in genealogical interventions, we should also at the same time be accountable to what has been and is continued to be overlooked, ignored, erased, or captured.

## Keywords

Genealogy, geopolitics, political geography, postcolonial, text

Thank you very much for inviting me to comment on John Agnew's article. As I am not a political geographer per se, but rather an interlocutor of various strands of geography, the invitation at first seemed like a daunting task to me, but then also a significant opportunity to make modest contributions in a critically important discussion not only in our discipline but within the academy itself. As a critical development scholar from the global South, my comments will be informed and shaped by my own interdisciplinary training and experience as well as epistemological and social locations. I found Agnew's article to be an erudite and fascinating contribution to encourage conceptual pluralism. In my sympathetic reading of the article, the key idea put forth is that words matter, but they matter in context and need to be historically assessed while also constantly re-evaluated and reinterpreted vis-à-vis the work

they do in the contemporary world. The discursive and material tensions of words and ideas have real impacts in the lives of peoples and places, and thus we should not take them lightly.

Agnew argues that geographers have a long history of excavating meanings of words, that is, tracing the genealogies of terms and how or why they arose the way they did. He appreciates such efforts, and does not discount such overtures, but carefully warns scholars to not fall into the trap of 'static nominalism' (i.e. not being able to see the current import of words but rather being stuck in their past usage and meaning). He accomplishes this

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by providing a deconstruction and reconstruction of three common terms in geography (geopolitics, region, and territory). While historical meanings and the genesis of any word are important, Agnew demonstrates how authoritative meanings of common terms can fall apart when a range of other ideas, events or situations are taken into account. He points out that we should be particularly careful not to overemphasize context or become rigid in genealogical explanation, but be open to the fluidity of contexts and its role and influence in the germination of meanings of terms/ideas, and how meanings change all the time and can thus have different registers.

At some level, such analysis harkens to the inherent semiotic tension between signifiers and signified, which have been debated considerably across disciplines. This essentially highlights Agnew's concern of wavering between rigidity (i.e. a fixed meaning that is immutable to reinterpretation) and empty signifiers (i.e. a word can mean anything to everyone) in our usage or invocations of common geographical terms. As such, exploring the plurality of meanings is encouraged, as well as heeding the importance of providing definition of how a term/idea is being used and then how it is engaged in real world contexts. As such, the caveat is that usefulness of words and ideas should not be essentialized, that scholars should not become reductionist, and that everyone should remain alert to the practical impact and import of what they describe. One could argue that we should accept that there is no real transcendental justification of any idea, even if we constantly look for it to justify our ontologies and epistemologies. The inherited parameters of any word or idea must thus not be taken for granted. As Agnew puts it, 'Etymology is not and never has been destiny' (p. 318). In other words, genealogy is not teleology.

Another important point made in the paper is that, while it is considered good academic practice to trace ideas and cite past scholars (as a way to validate one's own conceptual lineage and intellectual claims as well as do 'due diligence'), Agnew warns scholars of becoming inflexible with their own interpretation and becoming conformists. The politics of citations and working within the artificial limits of sub-disciplines, genres, or bodies of literatures can actually discourage

interdisciplinary scholarship and learning and thereby thwart cross-pollination of ideas and exploration of the multiplicities and contestations of meanings outside of 'the norm'. This is an important warning in my opinion, one that scholars should heed more carefully.

Overall, I agree with Agnew's general position and appreciate the careful analysis and the intellectual caveats he has provided in the paper. I have three interrelated points that I would like to raise, which I hope may be constructive in advancing the line of argumentation put forth by Agnew. These are not meant to be criticisms of the article but highlight broader associated concerns for us as geographers and as simultaneous consumers and producers of knowledge.

First, while querying texts is important, we should also be very wary of the limits of language used in any text. Not all language can capture the complexities of reality (real or imagined). Yes, language does matter, but linguistic slippages have to be accounted for in tracing the lineage of ideas and words. Words can simultaneously enable and disable, they can open up aspirations and imaginaries, or they can foreclose them. Various discursive formations can alter or influence our perception of reality, and vice versa. This is not just a Derridean concern of *différance* or the limitations of words but also the problematic hegemony of some languages in our understanding of the world. Operating within the dominant language of English (or other Latin-based languages), and within the confines of Enlightenment-induced theories, can be rather limiting, and we should be cognizant of this. The Eurocentric nature of geographical ideas and terms thus raises the concern of whether they are even valid globally, as other worldviews and ways of knowing are not fully accounted for in our lexicon. What is region, territory, or state in the 'real worlds' of disparate cultures and places? It would be important to know how other language systems, belief systems, and cosmologies work with our common geographical terms, and how this may or may not influence Anglo Geographies as these revered words/ideas evolve over time. The hegemonic nature of English-based geographical knowledge may actually be constraining us in the end, as has the Orientalist legacy of our discipline. The established work of postcolonial scholars,

such as Edward Said, has already demonstrated such concerns and laid the foundations for further geographical work in this regard that is much needed.

Second, how have the histories of colonialism, imperialism and empire influenced what we say or what can be said? Most of the so-called Third World inherited an imposed system of words and meanings as well as tactics of governance and rule from European colonizers. This imposition of words and ideas through brute force as well as through systematic colonization of the mind (through education systems, legal systems, etc.) has meant that postcolonial subjects like me are generally expected to know what the word 'state' means and what it signifies, and how as a citizen I am supposed to behave. Yet, in many places of the so-called Third World, identification to one's ancestral village or ethnic grouping or linguistic lineage are far more important than one's (oft-token) citizenship in the modern Westphalian nation-state system, which is not only a relatively recently configured system but also ushered in across the global South largely in the post-WWII era as colonial empires crumbled and formal decolonization took place. Yet, the nation-state constricts who we are in relation to not only the ideological and repressive apparatuses of the state, but also how we are geopolitically and socioculturally placed in the world vis-à-vis the nation-state we are identified with now: for instance, where we can go (e.g. mobility allowed or not, visa or visa-free, etc.), or how we are deemed 'valuable' or 'desirable' (e.g. Muslim-majority nation-states generally have a negative status in present day and historical geopolitics, as well as in the tropes used in the media and in the common vernacular, and citizens of such states are often subject to various forms of surveillance and violence, such as US drone strikes with their 'acceptable' casualties since these are happening to 'other' bodies in distant places). On the other hand, identification through ethnic grouping or religious affinity or other notions of belonging can often be more important forces of solidarity and identification than any spatial clustering such as territory or state, even if the latter defines much of our lives in practical terms. As such, global connectivities outside of the common geographical terms and

definitions we use need to be explored more carefully to elucidate how they entrench, complicate, or disrupt what we know and how we describe the world. The simultaneous existence of multiple systems that define our realities can cause cognitive dissonance sometimes, especially for those occupying liminal spaces and plural diasporic identities. Common geographical terms thus become fractured and challenged or even rendered irrelevant.

Lastly, while meanings change with context and time, they also change depending on who is being asked to define anything or provide a view/perspective that is different from that of dominant powers that have the privilege to define and the power to name. If the goal is to better understand the real world that ideas refer to, then we must query who generated the ideas, then and now, and what perspective or vantage point is being espoused. If the true intentions of genealogical work are to find multiplicities and pluralities, we must be cognizant of how ideas and terms are configured and constituted. Whose voice are we really hearing in our genealogies? Who is silenced or left out? What biases are inherently built into any historical knowledge? Histories of racism, sexism, and othering of various forms are hardwired into our disciplinary knowledge base. Thus, we need to account for privilege and complicity over space and time. Moreover, what is considered the 'real world' in the first instance? Or, whose world matters and whose reality is being considered? We thus must very carefully mobilize the descriptions for any aspirational terms/ideas, for they can become acts of violence, both discursively and materially. Subaltern voices and registers are generally absent, as they are often spoken for or represented in problematic ways. Therein lies the power of historiography in recent scholarly work. Multiplicity of interpretations and opinions can only be possible if there is willingness to widen and deepen the meaning and import of any term/idea, as well as ethical tracing for genealogical gaps and silences. For instance, feminist scholars have only in recent years started to make inroads into the historically white, Western, masculine discipline of geography. Postcolonial scholarship is increasingly challenging and rewriting commonly held histories of ideas and events across the social sciences. Attention to issues of race, gender, sexuality, location, history,

and other intersectionalities of social differentiation can thus alter what we think we know, and how we came to know it, as well as the ways that ideas/words come to matter at all. Attention to and accounting for all this not only enriches our knowledge (both in the acts of reinterpretation as well as in reconstruction) but also unsettles and challenges our commonly held ideas and terms. Thus, epistemic violence may indeed be a generative and productive starting point!

In conclusion, I want to applaud John Agnew for opening up the debate about how words matter in relation to how the world works, and the importance of questioning inherit terms and ideas. While we can

debate the tracing of keywords or problematic interpretations in genealogical interventions, we should also at the same time be accountable to what has been and is continued to be overlooked, ignored, erased, or captured. I would urge fellow geographers and scholars to continue the conversation to foster more productive engagement with critical pluralism and other ways of knowing and being in the world. Thank you.

### Reference

Agnew JA (2014) By words shall we know: is the history of ideas enough to understand the world to which our concepts relate? *Dialogues in Human Geography* 4(3): 311–319.