Celebrating thirty years of Political Geography

Thirty years ago this month, in January 1982, the first issue of Political Geography Quarterly was published. As the authors of the inaugural issue’s editorial essay noted, the time was ripe for a new journal solidifying emergent work in the subdiscipline: ‘Political issues have now become a central focus for modern human geography, providing the most suitable intellectual environment for political geography since the end of the First World War’. To this end, the editors of the new journal declared that their mission was to identify “pertinent research questions” in political geography [and] to try and ensure that [they] get a reasonable quota of the next generation of human geography researchers and to promote more fruitful links with political science and political sociology’ (pp. 1-2).

Since that time, an entire generation of political geographers has come of age reading the journal (which was renamed Political Geography in 1992). For many who became active in geography after the journal’s launch, Political Geography is likely thought of less as the flagship journal that revived a subdiscipline and more as simply one of the key journals that scholars look to for quality research articles, informative reviews, lively discussions, and provocative guest editorials. If this is the case we see that as a sign of success, but we also take it as a warning that now more than ever we need to enable perspectives that push the boundaries of the subdiscipline while, simultaneously, refortifying its core.

Notwithstanding the journal’s acceptance as one of the canonical publications of the discipline, typically ranking in the top 10 geography and political science journals according to ISI impact factors, the journal does have a specific mission as the flagship publication of a subdiscipline. In the introductory essay, the editors of the new journal, after compiling ideas from the editorial board, identified three broad areas of inquiry to be explored in future issues: ‘geographical themes’, i.e. political aspects of spatial topics that are also examined in other subdisciplines of geography; ‘geographical perspectives’, i.e. studies of the spatial implications of topics that are examined from somewhat different perspectives by political scientists and other social scientists; and ‘methodology and theory.’ With thirty years of hindsight, we’re struck by some of the assumptions that lay beneath this tripartite division of the prospective journal’s content. Why, for instance, did the authors of the introductory essay assume that research on the spatial aspect of a political topic would not necessarily be theoretically or methodologically innovative? Why did the authors conceive of a division between ‘geographical themes’ and ‘geographical perspectives’, which assumes a static divide between political geography and other disciplines, or between political geography and other subdisciplines of geography? In other words, why did the authors of the introductory essay choose merely to build bridges between disciplines when they might have proposed to rearrange the academic landscape?

In retrospect, the reticence of the journal’s founders to set out a radically transformative agenda for the journal is understandable, given the few self-defined
political geographers at the time. However, looking back over articles from the past three decades we are happy to note that the editors appear to have been overly cautious. Since 1982, there have been countless cases of cross-fertilization between political geography and other disciplines and also between political geography and other subdisciplines of geography. Some of these cross-fertilizations have changed the way that scholars from a range of disciplines pose research questions and seek answers. A good example of cross-disciplinary influence by political geographers would be the frequent application of insights from critical geopolitics by poststructuralist international relations theorists, while an example of academic interchange within the discipline would be the tendency of cultural geographers (as well as state theorists and political anthropologists) to incorporate political geographic work on territory. To be sure, *Political Geography* is still distinctive in providing a home specifically for research that adds a ‘geographical perspective’ to topics that are normally the domain of political scientists and for research that applies a political perspective to ‘geographical themes’ that are normally studied in a seemingly ‘apolitical’ manner. But if the journal is less alone than it was in 1982 in fusing the political with the geographic we view that as a sign of increasing relevance, not impending obsolescence.

While the authors of the inaugural essay were not able to predict some of the impacts that the subdiscipline would have beyond the confines of political geography, they were prescient in stressing that ‘the most healthy aspect of...political geography is in its pluralism’ (p. 2). This respect for pluralism continues to this day, and we feel that it is reflected in the editorial team, the editorial board, and the articles published, all of which have expanded and diversified considerably since 1982. It is also reflected in the official aims and scope of the journal that appear on the website, a list that similarly has been revised and expanded several times during the journal’s thirty years.

To celebrate our thirtieth birthday, and to assist readers in making their own assessment of how the journal has adapted to changes in the academic and extra-academic environments, we have worked with our publisher, Elsevier, to publish an open-access ‘Virtual Special Issue’ on the *Political Geography* website ([http://www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo)). Early on, it was decided that the heart of this Virtual Special Issue would be reprints of 15 previously published articles that reflect the diversity and growth of the journal. This provided us with an exciting opportunity, but it also put us in a quandary: How were we to select the 15 articles that would best represent the journal? After a series of debates among the editorial team, we decided to adhere to that statement made back in 1982 that ‘the most healthy aspect of...political geography is in its pluralism’ and seek advice from our editorial board. Members of the editorial board were asked to name up to 10 articles that merited open-access reprinting, either because of the influence that the article has had or because of the influence that it should have had. The 22 board members who responded nominated a total of 114 articles, suggesting that the subdiscipline remains as diverse as ever. Of those 114, the seven highest-scoring nominees were automatically included in the list. To pick the other eight articles,
we looked at the remaining 21 articles that received multiple nominations and chose eight that represented a diversity of research areas and authors. Finally, once the list was compiled we added a ‘bonus track’: the original introductory essay.

With this disclaimer that the list has already been manipulated to ensure a degree of diversity, we can still make some observations, several of which complement the findings of Andrew Kirby from his analysis of keywords for all 1,195 articles published to date in *Political Geography* (which also is included in the Virtual Special Issue). One is that even as we sought diversity in creating the list (and even as the editorial board increasingly is composed of political geographers from around the world), the 17 authors of the 15 articles were all, at the time they wrote their articles, based at British or North American universities. Eight were in the United States, six in the United Kingdom, and three in Canada. The other 14 articles that received more than one nomination were no more diverse, with all contributing authors, bar one from Germany, being based in the U.S. or U.K. Gender diversity among the authors is slightly better – of the 15 articles selected for open-access four have at least one female author – but this gender imbalance similarly reflects a disturbing imbalance in the subdiscipline. Female authors are even less represented in the other 14 multiple-nominated articles.

The publication dates of the articles selected also are interesting. After selecting the 15 articles for the Virtual Special Issue, we noticed that twelve of them were initially published between 1996 and 2005. There are a number of possible reasons why *Political Geography* articles from this decade might have attracted increased attention. A host of changes that occurred just prior to that decade – the eclipse of the Cold War, the deeper internationalization of capital and related techno-social shifts, the rise of post-structuralism in geography – may have made political geography particularly relevant. Or, it’s also possible that the concentration of articles from this decade is simply a reflection of the fact that in 2011, when the articles were selected, pre-1996 articles were “too old” (less remembered) and post-2005 articles were “too new” (they had not yet had time to become classics).

Finally, while it is not surprising that 14 of the 17 authors were associated with geography departments at the times that their articles were published, it is intriguing that the other three were all associated with departments other than political science (anthropology, sociology, and jurisprudence). Considering that a number of political scientists have published in the journal, one must wonder whether their absence from the selected articles reflects the failure of political scientists to truly embrace a geographic perspective or whether it reflects the insularity of an editorial board that is reluctant to admit political science perspectives (and political scientists) into the heart of the subdiscipline. Whichever is the case, it seems clear that the intention of the original editors to ‘promote more fruitful links with political science and political sociology’ remains relatively unfulfilled.
Of course, these 15 (or 16) articles are hardly the last word on political geography, or Political Geography. In his contribution to the Virtual Special Issue, Andrew Kirby, the journal’s first reviews editor, uses word-cloud visualizations of article content (as summarized in keywords) to tell a somewhat different story of continuity and change over the past thirty years. Yet another perspective can be found in the third component of the Virtual Special Issue, an interview with Political Geography’s founding editor, Peter Taylor, conducted in 2011 by associate editor James Sidaway. We expect that readers will have their own opinions, both about how Political Geography has grown (or not grown) and where it should be going. We invite your comments and look forward to publishing them.