

# Critical Geography: An Introduction

Written by Irena Leisbet Ceridwen Connon and Archie W. Simpson

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## Critical Geography: An Introduction

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IRENA LEISBET CERIDWEN CONNON AND ARCHIE W. SIMPSON, JAN 21 2018

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Critical geography is based upon the notion that humanity has the potential to transform the environment. It challenges the dominant ideologies that characterise international political structures, hence contesting traditional categories and units of analysis in IR such as anarchy, security and the concept of the state. Critical geography is based upon the principle that questions about spatial relations, which refer to how an object located within a particular space relates to another object, are important because political behaviour is embedded in socio-political structures based on ideas about space. Following from this, if scholarship and political behaviour are ingrained in socio-political structures, an objective analysis of international politics becomes impossible. IR theory cannot reflect the global situation from a neutral standpoint. Critical geographers suggest that alternative ways of thinking about space have the potential to change fundamental ideas, theories and approaches that dominate the study of international politics. In turn, they hope that this alternative scholarship will help to transform international politics and reduce human inequality.

### The basics of critical geography

Critical geography emerged in the 1970s as a critique of positivism, which is a form of scholarship based upon the idea that the world exists independently of observers. Critical geography is rooted in neo-Marxism and draws upon the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt school, who expanded upon ideas within classical Marxism by exploring how freedom from inequality could result from peaceful processes rather than revolutionary action. At this time, scholars began examining how dominant political structures and scholarship perpetuated existing political inequalities.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 saw new global economic developments, accompanied by changes in global demographics. In the early 1990s, the increasing importance of non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations accompanied by increasing ethno-nationalism – whereby nations are defined on the basis of ethnicity rather than civil state membership – fostered new ideas about security and the role of the state.

Critical IR scholarship began focusing on how dominant theories like realism reinforced unequal power relations by favouring the states that dominated international politics. Drawing on the ideas of Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones from the Welsh school, they argued that human insecurity was perpetuated by existing political structures (Booth 1991 and 1997). From this, scholars began looking towards critical geography and Lefebvre’s (1991) critical theory of space to examine how assumptions about space perpetuated these existing insecurities and inequalities. Two important scholars associated with this are David Harvey and John Agnew, who highlight how traditional conceptions of space decontextualise processes of state formation and cement traditional polarised conceptions of space between East and West, North and South, developing and developed countries in International Relations thinking (Agnew 1994; Harvey 2001 and 2006).

Critical geography offers a means of examining international political behaviour, including the relationship between

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governments and people, between states at regional and global levels, and between international organisations and states. There are a number of key ideas and concepts within critical geography that offer alternative analyses of international relations. One key idea relates to the notion of territorial space. Philosopher Henry Lefebvre (1991) argued that there are three ways to think about space: in *absolute*, *relative* and *relational* terms. From an absolute perspective, space is viewed as fixed and measurable. This fixed idea about territory underpins traditional theories of IR. But, if you assume that territory is fixed, it reinforces assumptions about relationships within and between particular territories.

For example, think about how the world is represented on a standard political map. A political map represents the world in terms of individual states separated from each other by territorial borders. An absolute view of global space takes this mode of representation as fixed, meaning it would not consider the possibility of alternative ways of mapping the world. This fixed view also ignores how international politics changed throughout history, altering the shape of the global space as new states and international institutions emerged.

The absolute view of space is not the only option that scholars have for thinking about the international global space. Lefebvre's concept of relative space challenges the absolute view of space. This concept involves thinking about space in a way that views the international space not 'as an "empty container" or fixed space, but one filled with objects and interconnecting relationships' (Meena 2013). Furthermore, a relative view of space views the existence of this space as a result of the relationships between the objects within this space. From this, the ways in which we understand space can be argued to be a product of a particular set of relationships.

For example, if we consider particular spaces in terms of how they relate to other spaces, we can see that when scholars talk about the 'Global South' they are referring to the south in relation to the 'Global North'. Ideas and representations of the 'Global North' and 'Global South', or of 'East' and 'West' are presented as resulting from the polarised relationships that characterised international politics until the end of the Cold War.

A relative view of space can be used to demonstrate the existence of multiple views and alternative ways of conceptualising space from the views of particular states and other international actors. For example, when IR scholars classify all states in the southern hemisphere as representing the Global South, this view fails to acknowledge the differences and complex relationships that exist between states. It leads us to assume that all states in the south are equal in terms of their political and economic power, when this is not the case as powerful states in the Global South like Brazil have far more political and economic power than poorer states like Malawi. It assumes that states in the South also see themselves as existing together on an equal basis with all the other states in the South, which is an oversimplification as it ignores the many economic and political rivalries that exist between different states in this region. It also fails to acknowledge how particular states within the Global South are politically and economically linked to states within the Global North through trade agreements.

A relational view of space suggests that space cannot exist without the perspective of an observer, as objects only exist in terms of their relations with other objects. For example, when we think about a place, we can only think about it in terms of what we know about it. What we know leads us to form opinions which influence the form and shape that the space takes and to the development of arguments that either support or reject pre-existing ideas and political developments. In turn, these opinions influence the political decisions taken by international state actors that shape the global international space. This can be seen, for example, in terms of approving state membership to regional organisations like the European Union. The way that most scholars think about and represent international political space in terms of sovereign states and their territorial borders can therefore be said to be a product of a perspective of space.

Developments in the literature examine how processes of global change and the growth of alternative political organisations, such as transnational environmental movements and indigenous government institutions, have contributed to shaping the contemporary global space (Harvey 2009). One such development looks at how the rise of indigenous government institutions in the Arctic offer alternative views of space that challenge traditional conceptions of international space and look at how Inuit approaches to governance emphasise collective responsibility for the environment beyond state borders (Zellen 2009). Another recent development examines how the expansion of

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neoliberal capitalism has resulted in rising socio-economic inequality on a global scale, marginalising the poor within and across nation states, with state-based representation in international political institutions contributing to these growing inequalities (Harvey 2009). In addition, as concerns about human security associated with the risks and impacts of global climate change increasingly come to the fore in IR, critical geography can show us how the mainstream ideas about space embedded in international politics and IR theory may serve to perpetuate human inequality and the marginalisation of those most directly at risk from global environmental change. Alternative ideas about space compel scholars to re-assess the global scale of the risks and impacts of climate change and lend support to arguments that call for representational reform in international politics to reduce inequality and to address the increased risks that climate change poses for traditionally marginalised groups, such as for indigenous people.

## Critical geography and Inuit views of space

The Inuit are a group of culturally similar indigenous people living in the Arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Denmark and Russia. Their view of territorial space is based upon cultural similarity and use of land for traditional hunting practices rather than nation-state boundaries. The spatial extent of Inuit occupancy of Arctic territory reaches across five states, illustrating their historic sovereignty over a large area. Yet political maps of the world do not represent this area as Inuit territory. Rather, the area that Inuit territory covers is broken down and subsumed within individual state boundaries. When Inuit territories were colonised by European, American and Russian powers, their territories became part of colonial nation-state territories and the Inuit became subject to the colonial state governments. Today, the legacy of colonialism can still be seen in representations of the international political space, as the majority of membership within international political institutions continues to be designated on the basis of sovereign states, resulting in the ongoing political marginalisation of the Inuit.

Without adequate representation at the international political level, Inuit concerns about security and environmental sustainability cannot influence international policy to the same extent that state governments can. Furthermore, the extent to which Inuit interests are represented in the decisions made at the international level is poor. This is especially so when Inuit interests conflict with the interests of governments, such as over pipeline constructions through Inuit territory to transport oil between states. However, by adopting an Inuit perspective of territory that rejects nation-state delineation of the global space, critical geographers can offer alternative definitions of territory and provide more accurate representations.

The Inuit represent only a small segment of the total population of residents within an individual state – for example, only 0.2% of the total Canadian population were registered as Inuit in the 2011 census. But, when thinking about how Arctic sea ice loss (due to climate change) affects the total numbers of Inuit across each of the five nation states by defining territory as consisting of cultural commonality rather than state boundaries, a much spatially larger picture emerges (Huntington 2013). The loss of ice endangers the economic and cultural livelihoods of the Inuit, as it affects hunting activities and puts coastal villages at risk of erosion and flooding.

When viewed from this perspective, the security risk to the wellbeing of people right across such a large area of the globe appears much more prominent than that afforded by most other IR theories. When scholars adopt traditional spatial definitions, they over-simplify the global space and, as we can see in this example, oversimplify the geographic extent of threats to human security. Furthermore, when scholars define space as existing solely of independent states, it limits the examination of the impacts of environmental disaster to simple comparisons between two or more nations, such as between Canada and United States. This undermines differences in the severity of impacts of natural disasters within particular regions of the world. Moreover, this traditional method of analysis also overlooks how the human security threats posed by environmental disasters are not evenly spread within individual state territories. For example, it downplays the fact that the Inuit living in Alaska are at risk of far greater disruption from the effects of melting sea ice than people living in other areas of the United States. It also downplays how coastal communities within Alaska are at a greater risk from the devastation caused by flooding and erosion than communities located within the interior of the state.

Inuit understandings of territorial space can also provide scholars with an alternative tool to make assessments of international political action taken to mitigate the impacts of global environmental change. Critical geographers

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contend that traditional analyses of patterns of international political activity are prone to focus on actions taken by formal institutions, like the United Nations, that use a nation-state means of political representation – but stress that this places limits on our appreciation of the wider forms of political action that have been taken to mitigate climate change.

For example, the majority of the scholarly analyses of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in Copenhagen in Denmark in 2009 described how opinions of state representatives regarding action on climate change and emission on greenhouse gases fell into three camps that consisted of: 1) North America and Europe, whose past industrial activities contributed to most of the problems of climate change, 2) industrialising countries such as the BRICS nations, which tended to see no alternative to carbon emissions as a means to fuel economic growth, and 3) poorer countries, which were more likely to disagree to changes on the basis that development and poverty alleviation represented more pressing goals (Meena 2013). However, this mode of analysis is based on divisions of territory defined by tiers of industrial development and ignores differences in influential capacities across and within nations grouped within each tier – for example, between Brazil and China, or between large segments of the South African population.

Over-simplistic ways of thinking about the international political space lead to a lack of consideration for alternative forms of political action, particularly action that takes place outside formal international political institutions including that taken by indigenous organisations, whose spheres of representation and governance transcend nation state boundaries. For example, the Inuit are members of the Arctic Council, which is an international governmental organisation that addresses issues faced by Arctic governments and indigenous people. The Inuit take prominent decision-making roles in the Council rather than having their participation restricted to mere observer status – as at the United Nations climate summits. The decisions the Inuit take are based upon their sense of commonality that transcends state boundaries. Because of their influence in the Arctic Council they have been able to achieve success in fostering a culture of collective governance on environmental management by seeking discussion and resolution of a matter of common concern to all Inuit.

However, despite the success of Inuit representation in the Arctic Council, the vast majority of indigenous governmental bodies continue to fall outside the formal political representational structure in larger international climate change negotiations. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is a United Nations- recognised non-governmental organisation that defines its constituency as Inuit populations in Greenland, Alaska, Canada and Russia. However, their participation is restricted at UN summits on climate change to that of ‘observer’ status as it is not a sovereign state – thereby constraining its voice. It is on this basis that the state system of representation within the United Nations climate summits can be argued to further marginalise indigenous groups like the Inuit. As representation is afforded on the basis of state territory rather than Inuit conceptions of territory it reinforces the decision-making power of the former colonial governments, enabling them to exercise greater control over international affairs, which hinders Inuit self-determination efforts.

The power of the Inuit to shape international political decision-making risks becoming further marginalised if IR scholarship does not critically question nation-state ideas about territory and representation. By bringing alternative conceptualisations of territory to the foreground, critical geography opens up a space for recognising and exploring alternative modes of representation that reduce inequality between indigenous people and state governments. If the Inuit are at greater direct risk from the impacts of global climate change, representational reform would enable them to have a greater voice in managing these risks.

## Conclusion

By drawing attention to alternative ways that space can be imagined, critical geographers have sought to transform international politics and the global space. Critical geography highlights how issues of economics and climate change impact upon people and shows that the spatial effects of these processes differ to how they are dealt with by states, international organisations and within academia. The unique vantage point of critical geography provides useful ways to rethink what we know about International Relations in both theoretical and empirical terms. It challenges assumptions about space and territory, offers new conceptual and analytical tools and encourages students to

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question mainstream thinking.

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### **About the author:**

**Irena Leisbet Ceridwen Connon** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Human Geography at the University of Dundee, UK.

**Archie W. Simpson** is a Teaching Fellow in Politics and International Relations at the University of Bath, UK.