

# Plotting the Future of Popular Geopolitics: An Introduction

Written by Robert A. Saunders and Vlad Strukov

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS AND VLAD STRUKOV, SEP 16 2018

Earlier this year, Routledge inaugurated its new series in Geopolitics (edited by Klaus Dodds and Reece Jones) with our volume *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline*. In the book, we sought to bring together scholars from across a variety of academic disciplines (IR, geography, languages/literature, cultural studies, and film studies) to assess the current state of the subfield of popular geopolitics, while also – rather conspiratorially – ‘plotting’ its future trajectories. The project grew out of the seminar series ‘The Interdisciplinarity of Popular Geopolitics: Popular Culture and the Making of Place and Space’, hosted by the Leeds Russian Centre (Russia[n] in the Global Context), directed by Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith (autumn of 2014). This speakers’ series enabled us to identify most pertinent problems of popular geopolitics, which we aimed to resolve in the issue by specially commissioning research articles, interviews, and reports. We also asked our authors to present their ideas in the form of visualisations, thus probing popular geopolitics as a method, too. So, the book, on the one hand, provides an archaeology of field, mapping the flows of various frameworks of analysis into (and out of) popular geopolitics, and on the other, delineates the real-world implications of popular culture and manifested a variety of new forms of the ‘doing’ popular geopolitics.

We posited popular geopolitics as a form of post-language, or an occurrence that exceeds structuralist categories and yet makes creative use of them. At the same time, we argued that popular geopolitics invents and projects its own powers, symbols, and iterations about individual and collective entities. As we contend in the Introduction (2018, p. 1):

Although the relationships between artefacts of popular culture and items of political meaning in the arena of interstate relations is a long-standing one, the history of their academic investigation is quite short. The complexity of the issue is in that popular geopolitics simultaneously defines and produces what it studies. The most significant features of this dualistic relationship include: (a) the use of popular culture to construct and promote a specific worldview; (b) the dissolution of ‘real politics’ in favour of hyper-mediated, impression-based politics on the world stage; and (c) a disciplinary approach to the study of contemporary and historical phenomena.

As an ‘open’ field of study (much like cultural studies, gender studies, and even more recent areas of organized academic scholarship), popular geopolitics is very much an interdiscipline, and one that is weakened when structural barriers are used to hem it in. With that in mind, we sought (and were duly rewarded with) participation from across various disciplines and geographies (both in terms of scholars and research areas).

Our first chapter saw the ‘comic book guy’ of political geography, Jason Dittmer, sitting down for a wide-ranging interview with two of the founders of popular geopolitics, the aforementioned Klaus Dodds and Jo Sharp, whose work on *Reader's Digest and the Cold War* continues to serve a paragon in the field. Next out of the box came Kyle Grayson's erudite update of his co-authored (with fellow Newcastle University politics professors Simon Philpott and Matt Davies) 2009 piece ‘Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum’. The next two chapters, by Vlad Strukov and Federica Caso, elaborated on how other interdisciplines (specifically, cultural studies and gender studies) can help guide popular geopolitics into increasingly interesting and critical directions, focusing on resistance and the body, respectively. Robert A. Saunders then wrapped up the first section with a piece on what

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happens *when popular culture gets real*, building on his previous research into the Danish Cartoons Affair, Borat, and *The Interview*, while also expanding into new avenues of research such as the Russian 'hack' of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In the second section, the focus turned from theoretical, analytical, and methodological approaches to empirical studies. Maša Kolanović showed us how Yugoslavian popular culture managed the concept of 'Amerika' throughout second half of the twentieth century. Tackling the world's two largest nations, Ashvin Devasundaram investigated how India's post-Bollywood 'new cinema' is engaging with major political issues, while Chris Homewood analysed the roles that Chinese co-production and the country's massive marketplace are playing in the re-imagination of China and Chinese in big budget 'Hollywood' fare. Roxanne Chaitowitz and Shannon Brincat raised the dead – or more accurately, undead – as a means for understanding global political economy in a neoliberal world. Daniel Bos rounded out the section with an assessment of how military-themed videogames shape popular understandings of geopolitics and armed conflict. In lieu of a standard conclusion, we invited each contributor to source an image that visually conceptualised the main arguments of their chapter, resulting in what we hope serves as a poignant reflection of the DIY nature of popular geopolitics (i.e. writing is also doing).

This blog entry serves as the first in a series by our contributors. Over the next few weeks and months, the scholars listed above will be posting short, original interventions that build on their published chapters. As they say, 'Watch this space!'

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## About the author:

**Dr. Robert A. Saunders** is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY and a visiting researcher at the School of Communication and Culture – Media Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark, where he is working on a book about the politics of Nordic noir television series. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

**Vlad Strukov** is Associate Professor in Film and Digital Culture at the University of Leeds, specialising in world cinemas, visual culture, digital media, intermediality, and cultural theory. He explores theories of empire and nationhood, global journalism and grassroots media, and consumption and celebrity by considering the Russia Federation and the Russian-speaking world as his case study. He is the founding and principal editor of the journal *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. He is the author of *Contemporary Russian Cinema: Symbols of a New Era* (2016), and other publications on film.