

Critical Edges

Episode 1.1.

Margins of Diplomacy and the Edges of Geopolitics

VADIM ROMASHOV

Welcome to the “Critical Edges” podcast. In this podcast we explore critical edges that may seem distant and marginal at first glance, but which are in fact very much connected to, and even interdependent with our global society and politics. In our podcast we discuss with different scholars who have, one way or the other, addressed critical edges critically.

HANNA LAAKO

What are the edges of geopolitics, and how are peace and diplomacy related to these? In this first episode we have the honour of talking to the professor of political geography Fiona McConnell from the University of Oxford.

VADIM ROMASHOV

Fiona has extensively researched many different aspects related to diplomacy in the margins in geopolitics and political geography. For example, Fiona has been writing about Tibet as an example of quiet diplomacy, which is “*behind the scenes*” -case in the predominantly dramatic arena of geopolitics. She has also addressed the margins of professional diplomacy in the UN halls, the edges of formal state diplomacy, as well as diplomacy as a liminal space.

Without further ado, this is Hanna and Vadim in the studio, and we warmly welcome Fiona to this podcast episode on peace and diplomacy in the critical edges of geopolitics.

HANNA LAAKO

And if we dive into that field now, perhaps we could start if you want to reflect a little bit about your own field of geography, and what would be those margins of the field of geography? How have those margins been evolving, and, perhaps, become part of the field, or are there still some margins that are being silenced? And how have you addressed those kinds of critical edges?

FIONA MACCONNELL

Sure. I work in the fields of political geography and critical geopolitics, so those are kind of my disciplinary homes. But I suppose the first point really is that geography is an academic discipline, and it is by its nature quite an outward looking discipline. So certainly how we teach it here to our undergraduates is that geography itself doesn't have a set canon. We don't have set schools of thought within our discipline. And because of that, I think we are always looking outwards, right? So we are looking at other disciplines - what we can learn and what engagement we can have across theories and approaches, which is also the criticism that, you know, we kind of cherry pick and we don't have our own course. But I think it's productive, because it's those exchanges across the edges of disciplines that I think can be really productive, because it means you're always having to translate your ideas, to engage with other disciplinary audiences.

And I think it is bringing different theories and ideas into dialog. So I think that's the kind of more disciplinary, kind of more conceptual understanding. I think within political geography and critical geopolitics we've seen a shift in the last few decades, as the likes of feminist scholars within the fields and postcolonial scholars have critiqued some of the kind of core theories and ideas. And, you know, it's a critique of what's been neglected.

So, critical geopolitics as a field really was launched in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it was deconstructing the earlier geopolitical thoughts using poststructuralist theories to really interrogate the geographical assumptions that underpin geopolitical practice. It was fantastic, but as that field then has evolved, scholars have critiqued the absences, right? A big absence was women, because it was looking originally at statesmen, and then an absence of which parts of the world were in the spotlight with that scholarship. So it started very much focusing on Anglo-American politics, Western Europe and those fields, you know, there's large parts of the world that are actively engaging in geopolitics and constructing alternative narratives.

So feminist scholars really bring a lot to the table, and thinking about marginalized voices and obviously methods as well. So diversifying beyond what had been quite a textual focused discourse analysis in the earlier decade or so, to thinking about the role of ethnography and interviews. And then we've seen a kind of engagement with post-colonial theory, which I think has been really quite productive.

And where I've been engaging with this is the notion of subaltern geopolitics, so how geopolitics is viewed and produced from the margins. That's kind of, I think, where we are at. And then obviously pushing that further, and the big move within geography now is decolonizing. So going beyond postcolonialism to active decolonizing of epistemologies within our fields.

HANNA LAAKO

That's really interesting and obviously this kind of critical discussion and decolonizing science is something that is going on in different disciplines, which is really refreshing, obviously. We need that to renew science and to have these new perspectives as well. It would be nice to hear how you perceive the origins of critical geography and geography as a field? And what does this kind of decolonizing tendency entail? How do these decolonizing criticisms have kind of approached these origins of the field of geography?

FIONA MACCONNELL

I think it's still very much a work in progress. I think we're still finding our feet. Certainly scholarship in critical geopolitics was very effective at going back to some of the classical thinkers in geopolitics, whether it was Friedrich Ratzel or Halford Mackinder, and really interrogating particularly their links to imperialism, to state building projects in the turn of the 20th century. So a kind of critical rereading of some of that very earlier geopolitical thinking.

And since then there's been a move to diversify the voices and also the narratives. And thinking about how geopolitics is done and practiced and imagined in other parts of the world. So I can think of really innovative work looking at Pan-Africanism, particularly in the mid 20th century, as an alternative vision of what geopolitics could have been during the Cold War era. You know, a lot of engagement with indigenous ontologies and thinking about geopolitics from a range of different perspectives and from different language traditions as well.

From the position of the margins you can see and experience both the margins and the center. So it offers a vantage point that those in the center can not have because they will never fully understand the margins.

So we use this then to think about geopolitics, about concepts like the state and sovereignty and territory, and say, well, what does understanding those concepts from marginal positions allow us to see about the assumptions and norms that are at the center of geopolitics? This assumption that we've got this state system and that it's well established and that it has always been like this. So it's trying to again shift that vantage point.

But also thinking with bell hooks, thinking about the margins as a site of resistance, a radical possibility of experimentation - so what can happen in those marginal spaces? And, you know, to what extent can that prefigure what might change within politics to come as well?

HANNA LAAKO

That's really interesting and I would still like to ask, because, well, it's the field of geography, critical geography and geopolitics: what would be these margins in terms of space? Well, geography in its origins have been based on geography, mapping for many imperial uses. So how do you see it changing, and how do you see the challenges and changes in terms of how these other places, other geographies have been now explored?

FIONA MACCONNELL

I think really productive work brought in by feminist scholars has been thinking about different scales of politics, and, you know, thinking right down into the scale of the body. So thinking about those as kind of marginal sites, i'm thinking of Sara Smith's fantastic work in Ladakh around the body and territory. So thinking about that, thinking about what is that crosses borders, as well. And again, thinking about positionality and perspective on a number of these issues.

The other work that we engage with, and that has a kind of history within geography is area studies. We work with Willem van Schendel and James Scott's notion of *Zomia*, and this idea of shifting your perspective and thinking away from the world divided up, kind of post-Cold War era into particular regions. And the knowledge production that underpins that creation of areas and regions. And then thinking across that and thinking more expansively around this notion of *Zomia* as not only thinking beyond those set areas and regions, but about communities who actively reject the state in its ideological form.

So thinking with that idea. And, you know, geographers have then asked that question of are there other *Zomias* and can that concept travel and apply? And what if we use that as our starting point about communities' relationship with territory, relationship to the institutions of the state. And again, bringing in these questions of agency and resistance.

So it's those kinds of ways of turning kind of the practices of cartography, but flipping it as well. And you know, a growing body of work on a kind of counter mapping that's emerging in geography as well at the minute. So really kind of using the same tools, but for different ends, I suppose.

VADIM ROMASHOV

I know that in your work you have critically approached sovereignty, especially territorialized understanding of sovereignty. So, this kind of fundamental question from your perspective, or what your analytical and conceptual work would help you to argue - where does sovereignty then ultimately reside, if not in territory? And as also in your works you kind of approach this notion, as I said, critically, and you argue it this contested, fluid notion. So is there any need to use this notion of sovereignty? Especially given all these political or geopolitical transformations happening in the world, and the role of non-state actors as well.

FIONA MACCONNELL

Thanks. Yeah, big questions. Where does sovereignty reside? I think lots of scholars have different arguments around that. I mean, I think the classic formula is that we have sovereignty as the ultimate authority bound up with a notion of territory. And we've got this neat model of the state, which, of course, has been challenged and deconstructed by many critical scholars.

And I think, what I've tried to do in my earlier work on sovereignty, was to say that it's not that there isn't a connection between sovereignty and territory, and I think there is. It's just not this very neat understanding of a particular, all encompassing notion of power in a particular hermetically sealed notion of territory. And it's thinking critically about our definitions of both sovereignty and territory and the relationship between them.

So the work I did with the exiled Tibetan administration was thinking about how it exercises a degree of sovereignty. I'm thinking that first, sovereignty is relative. It's not a black and white "you have it or you don't". It's not a zero-sum game. There is ability to exercise a degree of sovereignty without jurisdiction over territory. So it's not that legal ownership of territory, which it doesn't have in any shape or form.

But that's not to say that some connection to an understanding of territory still is important. So the work I did there was looking at symbolic connections back to the traditional territory of Tibet. How that is written into, say, the election system for the exile Tibetan parliaments. So that's Tibetans in the diaspora when they're voting for the members of parliament and they're seeking the leader, they have in their minds which of the three traditional regions in Tibet they or their parents are from.

So this connection to the historical legacies of a former sovereignty are written into the contemporary practices associated with sovereignty. And then I also looked at where exile Tibetan sovereignty is perhaps most tangible, which is in the Tibetan settlements within India. So, again, there's no legal jurisdiction, this is land leased from the Indian state to the Tibetan administration. But it is seen within these spaces that there is a form of social contract between Tibetans living in those spaces and their exile government. So again, part of my work there was trying to tease apart legality from legitimacy. Right? So these are cases where there is no legality, there's no legal ownership of territory, it's not a legally recognized government, but at the same time there are practices which legitimize the administration.

So again, the overall argument then is: sovereignty is a useful concept still to work with, but we need to have a finer understanding of how it's enacted. And again, I think it's seeing it as a practice rather than a zero-sum game "you have it or you don't".

And, I think it maybe links to broader questions around methods as well. Because if we think, for example, an institution like the exile Tibetan government - on paper it doesn't exist, right? It's not recognized by any other state or government. It has kind of quite a tenuous status within India. So it's quite easy to dismiss it if you are doing a kind of armchair scholarship and you're looking at reports and documents about this institution. But then I think there's the importance of grounded research, right? So going interviewing people on the ground and talking about everyday experiences with these kinds of institutions, and you realize that it has material connections. And I think that's really the importance of taking these big abstract concepts within politics and international relations, and thinking about how people engage with those in their everyday lives.

VADIM ROMASHOV

I also have this question, kind of still in relation to sovereignty, and maybe even if we take the case of Tibet, and you yourself just mentioned this non-recognition of the exile government, and basically what these non-state actors, in fact, still try to resemble is this kind of state practices in a way.

I wonder, whether there is really this kind of need for state in every case? Or there is a possible way to kind of overcome this, and have a certain kind of possibility of stateless societies in a way that they exactly would, you know, govern the territory. Or not even govern the territory, but kind of have a political order which will be based not exactly on governing, but somehow like overcoming this kind of state practices, and produce different forms of power relations, which would be more equal at the everyday scale.

FIONA MACCONNELL

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's lots going on there. I think, on the one hand, the state is still a really powerful ideal, right? And I'm thinking of, you know, colleague Alec Murphy's really early work from the mid 1990s, saying, you know, that it is set up as the gold standard to aspire to. So I think there's power in the idea of the state.

Whether we're thinking back to Philip Abrams or Timothy Mitchell's work, then I think a lot of stateless communities still aspire to, even if the possibility of constructing their own state is so remote.

So what I've looked at in that regard is, notions of mimicry and these deliberate attempts to mimic state like institutions and practices, whether it's having a constitution, a particular form of democratic governance, and certainly in the field of diplomacy. And in many ways that's again part of the strategy to seek legitimacy, right? And seek legitimacy from certainly, you know, the western liberal world order, in which you mimic the kind of states that are seen to be most dominant.

But of course, there's plenty of examples of stateless communities that don't seek to mimic the states. I mean, I can think of, you know, the case of Rojava, the Kurdish community there, whereas it's a deliberate decision to form on the ground a very different deliberately non-state mode of governance. But of course, it's very hard then to sustain those kinds of practices in what is a world that is still dominated by a very particular configuration of politics in terms of the state.

But I think this is where colleagues and I have been increasingly turning or returning to the principle in the right of self-determination, because obviously it's such a fundamental right within international law and international politics. It's right there in article one of the UN charter and in those kinds of key covenants. And yet it's a principle and a right that's kind of, in part, dropped out of our lexicon, certainly in international politics, because, you know, "it's done and dusted, decolonization has essentially happened".

But also communities that do seek to claim self-determination usually have the door shut. It's seen as a taboo. So what I've been doing with colleagues then, is going back to this notion of self-determination and thinking of it not as an outcome, as it's quite often misinterpreted when self-determination equals a demand for secession and statehood and independence, which is a complete misunderstanding of what the the actual right is. And, I think, turning our attention to self-determination and rethinking how, or looking at examples where self-determination is being articulated by communities on the ground, can really then open up possibilities beyond the state. Because not every community will decide that the state structure is for them.

So this is where I think you open up the possibilities of thinking about other political configurations on the grounds.

HANNA LAAKO

You mentioned mimicking and shape shifting and what you have observed. What are these places where especially this kind of mimicking, where does it happen? How do you perceive where it aims at? I mean, is it a kind of a performance that is intended exactly to thrive towards statehood of some kind? Or how would you analyze that aspect

And in that sense, because we are already talking about diplomacy, perhaps if you could say how do you understand what diplomacy is or what the diplomacies are?

FIONA MACCONNELL

Yeah, I mean, this is where I've looked partly at mimicry, but also the notion of liminality in the field of diplomacy.

So my work in the last ten years or so, has been with an organization called the *Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization*. So a membership, grouping of stateless communities, exile governments, minority communities and indigenous peoples, who come together because they don't have a voice on the international stage. And the kind of common denominator across the members of this organization is a denial of the right to self-determination.

So I've been working in particular around how representatives from these communities seek to engage in diplomacy at the likes of the UN. So, again, on paper they are not diplomats, they don't have any diplomatic immunity under the Vienna Convention. So they turn up as representatives of their community and seek to speak at various forums where they're able to.

But in these moments when they represent their communities at the UN, they perform diplomacy, right? So you put on a smart suit, you speak in English or French, and you have to very much conform to the protocols of diplomacy. Your speech has to be no more than two minutes, it has to address international legal concepts in order to be heard. And I think here it's crucial having a voice but actually being heard. So here we're seeing the mimicry of official state diplomacy in its various guises. And I've written this in terms of performing diplomatic decorum, knowing what behavior is appropriate for particular places.

But if we think of, again, these individuals and their kind of liminal subjectivity in between being an activist and a diplomat, and that transition between different kinds of professional categories, in one sense, it troubles both of those categories. And this is again, thinking of, resonances with mimicry and notion of mimicry as almost the same, but not quite as the original. And in doing so, it troubles the boundaries of what, in this case, diplomacy is. But also again, with this kind of liminal subjectivity of being an activist in certain times and places and a diplomat in other times, in places. There's a creativity in entrepreneurship that's enabled by that.

So actually, in many cases, and what I've been documenting recently, these kind of unrepresented diplomats are actually quite often ahead of the game when it comes to digital technologies and diplomacy. Because they've had to. They represent transnational communities, but also they don't have the same formal restrictions that, say, a state diplomat has when using social media or engagement in that kind of way.

So there's creativity, I suppose, there, but also obviously an ambivalence as well, which comes both with liminality and with mimicry, right? There's an unsettlingness, and I think this is where it's conceptually useful to think with, because, again, thinking of these critical edges and the edges of "who is a diplomat? What is diplomacy?"

By looking at these critical edges we can unsettle what the norms are that underpin what we understand as these big concepts or practices within international relations.

HANNA LAAKO

And as a researcher, how do you engage in these kinds of processes and how is the process as a researcher, to explore these kinds of cases of diplomacy? And how do you see this connectivity? Because now there's an emerging field of science diplomacy, so we are, in a way...or it can be perceived as we are part of that as well. So how do you position and how do you work in these kind of contexts?

FIONA MACCONNELL

Yeah, so there's two things going on that I think it depends on your definition of diplomacy. And if we think of it in its broadest sense as the mediation of estrangement between different peoples, then, you know, there's an argument, you can push it, that everyone is a diplomat. Right?

And this idea of citizen diplomacy and all the rest of it. But I think the question around, as an academic and how we do this, I think, it's a kind of long term engagement with particular organizations and communities. I've done a lot of sitting and observing from the back rows of various forums, and a lot of interviewing individuals about their experiences and their kind of career trajectories as well.

VADIM ROMASHOV

You mentioned this kind of communities trying, or actually having to do this mimicry, or to resemble this kind of diplomatic protocol in certain spaces in which they have to advocate for their causes. So I wonder, how actually this mimicry is helpful to achieve the goals of this advocacy that they are trying to do, or if this is exactly just a formality.

Because we have observed a lot of this in the field of peacebuilding, the knowledge of which I have a little bit, at least in certain contexts, when, you know, the professionalization of peacebuilding actually creates a lot of problems. Especially when something which used to be a movement, social movement, like peace movement and peace activism, eventually becomes professionalized, NGO:ized. You know, the civil society creates a lot of organizations which are part of this exactly this state control, state institutions that actually force social movements to become this kind of institutionalized, which also creates a lot of restrictions to their activities as something which comes from *citizenship*, speaking on a very large scale.

So the same question about this mimicry - how much that actually is helpful to achieve the goals of advocacy? Or, on the contrary, it's restricting communities to freely work towards their course?

FIONA MACCONNELL

Yeah, I think it's a bit of a balancing act in many ways. I think, in some cases, knowing how to play the game gets you in the door or at least is a way to get in the door.

And I'm thinking particularly around engagements at the likes of the UN, where what you can say and how you can say it is so prescribed by states, to the extent that certain terms are just not allowed to be used. So I can think of an example, say, at the UN forum on Minority issues, where communities from, you know, from a minority population in a state will use their own term for their homelands within that state, but then be interrupted by that state, who will not let them use that particular term about that territory.

So partly it's having to conform to the very particular rules and protocols of that space in order to say anything. But again, what I've been trying to document with some of this work is thinking about, particularly around diplomatic decorum, which is the expected behavior in a particular time and place. So again, that will allow you to speak, but actually sometimes the most effective interventions are where you deliberately reach that decorum.

And, certainly in the field of diplomacy, a lot of that comes down to emotion. And some of the most effective interventions at some of these forums are the ones that are really heartfelt, right? And we can think of witness statements, issues around human rights, and again, it's about the kind of puncturing the diplomatic norms that can be most effective.

But again, it's a balancing act. And yes, absolutely, this idea that this kind of professionalization of NGOs within these forms is certainly a dominant theme in a lot of the literature. I'm thinking particularly about indigenous diplomacy as well.

HANNA LAAKO

Well if we move then, because you earlier were really involved exactly in Tibet, so I was wondering if we can address that shortly because you've got some really interesting writing on that topic. Especially kind of following this line of diplomacy, you referred to the case of Tibet as kind of a quiet diplomacy in the geopolitical arena?

FIONA MACCONNELL

Yeah, absolutely. I think it is that wider context of what gets attention. And certainly within geography, it's been a very long tradition in political geography to focus on war and conflict. And then, you know, we've tried to, and I will say this very specifically, "bring back a focus on peace", because, I mean, we can trace it back to the likes of Pyotr Kropotkin's work and writings of the early 20th century. It's been there, but it's been written out of our history. So I think it's going back to... I'm certainly within the disciplined thinking about geography not as a source of conflict and as a conflict over territory in those kinds of earlier writings, but as a source of cooperation and understanding. So this idea of spanning distances and bringing communities together can bring understanding.

So I suppose it's trying to bring some of those debates up to date. And again, focusing on what we were understanding as the geographies of peace. That peace looks different in different places, which sounds like a really obvious thing to say, but then trying to dig down deep and say, well, how is peace differently understood and articulated? Literally through what languages and terminology, but also through practices. So how does it play out in different places?

And I think certainly something like the case of Tibet, but also thinking colleagues work on the like of Western Sahara, these kinds of frozen or stalled political movements and conflicts that absolutely get dropped off the radar of international politics and media headlines, but are there.

And thinking about what questions, I suppose, slow violence in some of these cases. But the kind of everyday attempts to keep some of these struggles alive, and kind of the labor that goes into some of that, in these kinds of cases of, I suppose, prolonged stasis as well, in many ways.

So I suppose that's what I was interested in. Certainly the case of Tibet, within academic scholarship, is in a quite distinctive place. And if you think you can go back to questions of area studies, it's a classic case of a part of the world that falls between South Asian studies, where the diaspora mostly is, and China studies, which it doesn't usually come under that remit. So where does it fit?

So, you know, thinking about where do the scholars writing about Tibet in the contemporary periods, where do you publish, what conferences you go to? Where is the knowledge production of these kinds of cases? Where is that happening? That falls between the kinds of cracks of different disciplinary silos.

So, I suppose, coming back to, you know, your notion of critical edges, is thinking with cases that are at that edge of knowledge production, right? But also to think outside of some of the dominant discourses within these fields of study. So I think there's again, coming back to that notion of unsettlingness on the edge that forces you to start to think differently, to position some of your arguments differently

VADIM ROMASHOV

Since we are approaching this kind of "wrapping up discussion", what I think is very related, is the question of this, like you mentioned, critical edge as how you perceive it. And so what would be the future of those critical edges that you have engaged with in your research? Like all different kinds of... because, of course, as we observe, there are also big political transformations happening across the world order and everything so that somehow probably affects all those critical edges differently in different scales.

FIONA MACCONNELL

Absolutely. I think there's a slight flip in academic point, which is, and I'm thinking of work on subaltern studies and the subaltern, which is - as soon as you identify a margin, a critical edge, it's no longer marginal. Right? So I think there's a kind of an academic point there about always searching for the more marginal.

But coming back to contemporary geopolitics, I think absolutely. I think we're living in a period of acute and multiple crises, and certainly significant threats to the liberal world order. Geopolitical crises that we didn't think we would see again. And, I think, it's posing existential crises for many of these communities in the margins, but also potentially windows of opportunity. Because if everything is in flux and the established ways of doing

geopolitics are being thrown up in the air, then the questions we are asking with colleagues in the front line of some of these cases is that, well, is this, the opportunity then to start to reframe things.

And this is where that impetus to go back to something like the principle of self-determination comes from. And so, you know, can we start to put this back on the table?

HANNA LAAKO

Really, really interesting to hear your thoughts and about your research and all these many critical edges and margins that your research addresses and you have been engaged in. So that's been really enlightening and fruitful for us to also think and to rethink.

Thank you for listening to the Critical Edges -podcast. We are Hanna Laako, Vadim Romashov, Eleonoora Karttunen and Katherine Hall - researchers at the University of Eastern Finland, who explore and inhabit many critical Edges.

VADIM ROMASHOV

This podcast is made possible by the Kone Foundation and the *Borders, Mobilities and Cultural Encounters* research community of the University of Eastern Finland.