

# MAKING THE STRANGE FAMILIAR: GEOGRAPHICAL ANALOGY IN GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In several publications in the 1950s, Donald Meinig raised two themes that are central to contemporary “critical geopolitics”: criticizing the idea of a determining global physical geography that directs global geopolitics, and suggesting that geographical labels and geopolitical concepts have political consequences. I take off from Meinig’s insight about geopolitics as an active process of naming and acting by discussing the broad power of analogy in world politics and by examining recent use of two geographical analogies—the Macedonian syndrome and balkanization—as symptomatic of a wider process of making the strange familiar by recycling geographical analogies. *Keywords:* balkanization, geopolitics, Macedonian syndrome, D. W. Meinig.

I tell you, captain, if you look in the maps of the world, I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon; and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth: it is call’d Wye at Monmouth; but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river; but ’tis all one, ’tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both.

—William Shakespeare, [1599] 1906

Early in his academic career, Donald Meinig published an article and several book reviews about global geopolitics (1953, 1956, 1957). Although I would not contend that these have a great deal to do directly with much of what he wrote later on the historical geography of North America, they do have some relevance to recent writing on global geopolitics; specifically, that which advertises itself as “critical.” They also speak more generally to Meinig’s critical intellect as a scholar whose early writing on geopolitics has never received the attention it deserves. From this viewpoint, Meinig’s writing on geopolitics from the mid-1950s offers an interesting starting point both for reevaluating that time as a uniformly “barren” period in the history of geopolitical thinking and for responding to contemporary anxieties about how global geopolitics is best construed (Agnew 2002, 85–135). In this article I am primarily concerned with the latter.

In the publications in question, Meinig displayed two characteristics that are fundamental to today’s “critical geopolitics” but that were entirely lacking in most conceptions of geopolitics during the period in which he was writing: exposing the fallacy of a timeless physical geography that directs world politics and arguing that the geographical labels often innocently introduced into geopolitical analysis

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have demonstrable political consequences. After picking out these attributes from Meinig's writing, I spend most of the article developing my own argument based on these premises. My main focus is on how political leaders, scholars, and the media recycle geographical terms or names in order to familiarize unfamiliar situations in vocabulary drawn from some seemingly salient prior geopolitical experience. This can be called "the discursive process of domesticating the exotic."

Given the relatively important roles of the European countries and the United States in recent world politics, it is no coincidence that many of the most popular geographical analogies in current circulation derive from the edges of Europe. This is the near-abroad where the Western powers focused much of their foreign policymaking during most of the twentieth century. As a result, terms such as "Finlandization" (neutralization in the face of a hostile and more powerful neighboring state), "beyond the pale" (referring initially to the area inhabited by the native Irish beyond a fenced district conquered by the English around Dublin—the Pale of Dublin—and later to the area within the Russian Empire to which most Jews were confined), "Dutch disease" (the macroeconomic consequences of a sudden resource bonanza), "the Switzerland of [this or that world region]" (a country whose once-severe internal ethnic conflicts have been resolved institutionally), "Macedonian syndrome" (the prospect of irredentism and subsequent unstable borders leading to intractable ethnic conflict), and "balkanization" (the fission of a multiethnic empire in southeastern Europe into successor national states) have come into a certain linguistic currency among politicians and scholars alike to refer to and putatively explain situations well beyond the original context of use. Their loaded meanings expose the specificity of their origins as political terms based on geopolitical stereotypes. To complicate matters, some of these—"beyond the pale," for example—are also used more abstractly or as turns of phrase to refer to mental states, modes of thought, or intellectual divisions of one sort or another.

In this article I focus on the latter two—the Macedonian syndrome and balkanization—as not only drawing from the same well of analogies but also profoundly illustrative of the process of geographical naming and political blaming. When they "travel" or are applied around the world, they conjure up a particular vision of conflict as akin to that associated with the region from which they are taken: atavistic and intractable ethnic conflict. The term "ethnic conflict" is itself often vague yet all-inclusive, covering everything from religious and linguistic to nationalist conflicts but equally often without reference to external sponsors and interventions whose roles are thus completely obscured by the analogies and research/policies that emanate from them (Wimmer and others 2004). If the first analogy has a largely academic application, the second has been applied more broadly and by a wider range of commentators and actors in Europe and North America.

This critical analysis of geographical naming reflects a recent trend toward understanding global geopolitics as an active process of naming, blaming, and acting on the basis of geographical labels and the meanings they encode (Ó Tuathail

and Agnew 1992; Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003; Bialasiewicz and Minca 2005). To tie this back to Meinig's writing in the 1950s, one general inspiration for the article is a critique of the "clean-break" hubris that finds nothing much of merit in the prior history of the field before "my" or "our" intellectual tribe came along; another is the more specific "critical attitude" that Meinig takes to the claims he examines. The 1950s were not quite so intellectually fallow after all.

#### MEINIG'S CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

The basic tenets of Meinig's conception of how "geography" enters into world history and politics can be found in one article and two book reviews he published in the 1950s, when he was employed at the University of Utah (1953, 1956, 1957). In the article, Meinig makes it clear from the outset that he is challenging the idea that "geography" is an inherently stable foundation for the assessment of the problems of mankind" (1956, 553). More specifically, he counters the notion that some timeless global physical geography governs world politics. The details of physical geography, the distribution of oceans and mountain chains, the dimensions of river basins, and the course of rivers matter only in the context of a given global political-strategic balance or epoch. Consequently, for example, the language of "heartland" and "rimland," drawn from the writings of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman and the primary focus of the article, must be used very carefully in order that "casual and simple assumptions as to the 'natural' orientations of peoples and nations be rooted out of our thinking" (Meinig 1956, 568). Meinig has in mind such ideas as the infamous Russian "urge to the sea."

But the point is more general. The danger to which Meinig is drawing attention is that of outdated geographical models guiding understanding and policy long past their due date. Though "exceedingly handy and attractive terms" that "have worked their way into the common vocabulary of both academic and journalistic circles," "heartland" and "rimland" have become "loosened from their original context" and can become "mere tools of the propagandist who seeks to delude the public" (Meinig 1956, 555). The bulk of the article is then taken up with developing appropriate usage of the terms in the geopolitical context of the mid-1950s, paying particular attention to the cultural and functional/economic orientations of places as plausibly classified at that time by the language of heartland and rimland. With all due deference to Mackinder's famous adage, it could be said that Meinig was advocating the view that "Whoever controls the means of geopolitical representation and its enforcement shapes the world to their desires."

This dual critique of conventional wisdom—that global geopolitics does not have a timeless guiding physical geography behind it and that geopolitical terminology is inherently problematic—also infuse the reviews. The earlier of the two is a review of a 1952 book—John Kieffer's *Realities of World Power*—that predicted an imminent World War III unless the United States organized the non-Communist world into a "cohesive force" against the Soviet Union (Meinig 1953). To do so would require "a geopolitical program" loosely based on militarization of the

Eurasian rim. While excoriating the author for his obsession with military force and lack of real geographical knowledge, Meinig scornfully observed: “It would seem that the only possible result of Dr. Kieffer’s program would be to offer the bulk of the world’s peoples the choice of absolute domination by either the United States or the USSR. Dr. Kieffer states that for us, ‘survival without self respect is intolerable,’ but he is unwilling to admit that might hold true for others as well” (1953, 160). The American nationalism of the author, who presented himself as an unbiased observer of global “realities,” was thus openly skewered.

The other review is of the French geographer Yves Goblet’s 1955 book, *Political Geography and the World Map* (Meinig 1957). Goblet was criticized for his political moralizing and slippage into environmental determinism even as he was praised for trying to develop a typology of states and nation-states. Most importantly, Meinig decried the idea that political geography could be turned into a predictive “science” based on ideas such as “optimum populations” and “optimum territory.” “Surely,” Meinig wrote, “political geography can make its contribution without aspiring to be some kind of omniscient science which will produce blueprints for national and global planning” (1957, 216).

Undoubtedly, the themes of these writings, particularly the derision of the determining role of the physical environment in human affairs, the attention given to geographical terminology, and the critique of technocratic scientism, do show up in Meinig’s later works. From this viewpoint, Graeme Wynn’s critical appraisal of Meinig’s historical geography of North America probably begins too late, with its overriding emphasis on the period after 1960 (Wynn 2005). But my purpose is not so much biographical as it is genealogical: to show how, at least in broad outline, a bright young geographer in the 1950s, living in Salt Lake City, raised pertinent questions about how to study global geopolitics that still have resonance today. Yet, as Timothy Brennan notes more generally about contemporary social thought, it has a tendency to see itself as not simply supplanting but actually erasing predecessors with “every current discovery as an utterly new departure, an absolute rupture with all that went before” (2006, 128). Critical geopolitics has followed this pattern (Ó Tuathail 1996; Painter 2005).

#### GEOGRAPHICAL ANALOGY AND FAMILIARIZATION

In laying out a geopolitical strategy for a post–George W. Bush U.S. foreign policy, Zbigniew Brzezinski makes extensive use of the idea of what he calls a “Global Balkans,” stretching from Turkey to the farthest reaches of Central Asia and down into South and Southeast Asia (2006). In this construction, a zone of political instability yet economic importance, not least because of its large deposits of fossil fuels, will be at the center of world politics for years to come. Previously, Brzezinski referred to a “Eurasian Balkans” that had a similar role but excluded South and Southeast Asia (1997). What Brzezinski has left unsaid is why he uses “Balkans” to describe the regions he defines as he does. His eminence within U.S. foreign-policy circles and the success of his books suggest, however, that something is self-evident

to some audiences about invoking the word “Balkans” at some considerable distance from its home location. Long associated in Western Europe with irrational ethnic hatreds among intermixed ethnic groups, the Balkans as a geographical analogy works to make a stranger world somehow more familiar and consequently both more understandable and manageable, for it conjures up the image of a place with a “known” past of internecine conflict and historical trauma that can be projected elsewhere. Needless to say, this vision is of a world lends itself neatly to a geopolitics in which the United States is largely benign, an exogenous actor rather than an active agent of conflict in the regions in question. The naming involved thus gives rise to a model both of the process that produces conflict, akin to the ethnic enmities of the Balkans, and of those who are to blame—the locals, not the distant and apparently disinterested and blameless outsiders.

Seemingly unbeknown to him, Brzezinski’s works appeared at a time of spreading interest in metaphor and analogy among students of world politics (Chilton and Lakoff 1995; Beer and Hariman 1996; Beer and de Landtsheer 2004). Some of this is motivated by the so-called literary turn in the social sciences that has drawn attention to how all thinking and practice is mediated by language—and reasoning with language—and by the need, felt equally by theorists, teachers, and politicians, to turn the unfamiliar into the seemingly familiar (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Drulák 2006). From this viewpoint, metaphor and, more particularly, analogy are not simply stylistic conventions or rhetorical devices. They are fundamental to all thought, to communication, and, because much political action is collective and thus relies on communication, to mobilization and behavior. Representation is not the dead letter that the rejuvenated empiricist materialism of much contemporary Anglo-American human geography alleges it to be. Because metaphor is fundamental to all thought, pretending that one can transcend it is dangerously misleading.

From one perspective, indeed, metaphor is the crucial human talent. Ignoring this fact may be one reason those who would reduce humans to just another set of “actants” need to ignore representation (Barnes 2005). Yet, in awe of metaphor’s power to frame thought, some other thinkers have come to believe that metaphors are all powerful (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). But, as Steven Pinker argues (2007), this is going too far. Metaphors are implicit generalizations whose implications can always be tested against both natural and social reality, even if, this is all too rarely the case with geopolitical metaphors. Nevertheless, some metaphors can be judged as more or less fruitful and helpful than others. Thus, for example, much of the recent explosion of writing about the United States as “empire” is based on the explicit invocation of historical analogy to this or that prior empire, with little—if any—attention to minimalist criteria for what makes an empire, the changed circumstances of the day, and whether other terms or concepts might not better capture the realities of the moment. A story of historic continuity or repetition through the use of a specific historical-geographical analogy thus trumps one of change or adaptation in the nature of political forms (Agnew 2005, 12–36;

Kennedy 2007). So, in much of contemporary international politics and in analysis of it, a seemingly dead metaphorical geography often trumps a living history.

Some of the recent interest in analogy is inspired not so much by the terms used in explicit theorizing—such as this or that state as an “empire,” or interstate relations as “anarchic”—as, more specifically, by the practical reason of politicians and intellectuals of statecraft, as the presumed experience of some times and places is projected onto the world in order to facilitate communication with or performance directed at target audiences (Shapiro 1989; Khong 1992). In this way sets of often “doubtful particularisms” are turned into universal truths to justify this or that action without much immediate connection to the time and place to which the particular metaphor or analogy is being applied. Analogies are metaphors that involve comparison with a supposedly exemplary, similar, or congruent situation elsewhere and/or at another time. For example, “apartheid” in South Africa before 1994 is employed in relation to Israel’s present-day behavior in Palestine, notwithstanding fundamental differences in the geopolitical context concerning how settlement and movement patterns and restrictions have occurred. The term thereby serves more as a political provocation than as an aid to analysis.

If metaphors are indirect descriptions, then analogies are indirect arguments. The precise nature of the comparison implied by an analogy is usually left obscure, because to make it more specific would be to betray its inevitable ambiguity in relation to the case at hand. Increased specificity about its appropriateness would point up its limitations. Some historical analogies from recent world politics are undoubtedly familiar: for example, to the G. W. Bush administration, in 2003 Saddam Hussein was a reincarnation on the Euphrates River of Hitler, and those who might question precipitate military action in relation to Iraq were equivalent to Neville Chamberlain and the appeasers of Hitler in the 1930s. Yet, implicit in the analogy is the problematic notion that Iraq somehow enjoyed a role in world politics and a capacity to change its course that was similar to that of prewar Germany. Of course, opponents of the Iraq War were similarly caught up in analogies to the Vietnam War and other “quagmires” of different vintage and location—Korea, Central America, the Philippines—whatever the significant differences with these other cases. Much of the political disputation in the United States and Europe about the Iraq War has been a verbal war between historical analogies. The geopolitical and intellectual uses of such historical and, more specifically, geographical analogies, not the unmasking of disciplinary metaphors—*anarchy*, *containers*, *empire*, and so forth—that guide thinking about world politics tout court, are what concern me here.

Indeed, one type of analogy that has received much less attention than the use of historical analogies is the recycling of geographical terms or names in order to familiarize unfamiliar situations in words drawn from some salient and presumably familiar prior geopolitical experience or situation. This could be called “domesticating the exotic.” Numerous such analogies have come into common linguistic currency to refer to and putatively explain situations well beyond the

original context of use, but they carry with them loaded meanings that expose the specificity of their origins as political terms based on geopolitical stereotypes. What is most important about them is that they project conceptions of the nature of a given place onto another place and thus implicitly identify parties from the original place as analogous to parties in the place of application. In this way, accounts of “what happened” in one place are projected as putative explanations onto another place. We thus come to “understand” one place in terms of a familiar—but not necessarily empirically accurate or even plausible—account of another.

Geopolitical reasoning that involves recycling geographical names in new contexts has a mock-geographical quality to it. One feature of so-called critical geopolitics is about drawing attention to how world politics is “spatialized” or rendered geographically meaningful by political leaders and through media representations but in so doing often devalues particular places and the people who inhabit them so much the better to commodify them economically or pacify them politically and militarily (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992). The use of geographical names from one place exported as geopolitical analogies elsewhere is obviously only one aspect of this process. But it is a largely unexplored one.

Here I wish to emphasize the important role of “familiarization” in the application of geographical names in new contexts. By this I mean to stress the communicative more than the constitutive function of analogy. Various factors may well be “driving” a particular policy or action, but they must be readily related to some prior meaningful collective group experience elsewhere that is memorable, commonplace, and seemingly familiar in order to better explain or justify them. What is most attractive from this viewpoint, then, is not some new poetic metaphor or novel analogy indicative of the newness of a situation but precisely the opposite. Rather, in this construction “dead” or familiar metaphors that have been repeated endlessly over time and that have acquired a taken-for-granted status as home truths are preferable. Finlandization (for enforced neutrality) and balkanization (for endemic primordial hatreds), for example, are both of this ilk. From this perspective, drawing attention to the geopolitical analogy in question involves a defamiliarization of commonsense understanding, designed to interrogate the origins and appropriateness of a specific geopolitical analogy and its applications. “Defamiliarization” is the act of reassessing our perceptions of analogies, stock phrases, and clichés that have become mundane and taken for granted as self-evident. The word “defamiliarization” seems to have originated with the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky, who argued in 1917 that a key purpose of art and literature was “making strange” what was familiar, in order to call into question the perception of everyday things and life that had become routinized (Hawkes 1977, 173–174). But Karl Marx, among others, would have readily understood the point in question. Unfortunately, much of Western social science has long turned something of a deaf ear to such concerns.

The two geographical analogies I have selected for illustrative purposes are the Macedonian syndrome and balkanization, both of which refer to Europe’s south-

eastern geographical margins. As has become well known since 1990, in general usage the two terms have come to refer, in the case of Macedonian syndrome, to “confused, mixed or impure”—in Italian and French, for example, mixed fruit or vegetable salad is invariably called a “Macedonian” salad—and, in the case of balkanization, spatial segmentation or partition along violent lines based on primordial hatreds. Both terms are applied, usually pejoratively even as they appear to be analytic, across a range of geographical scales, usually to signal immanent threat or warning of danger from ethnic or national “separatism” and division. Fear of contagion from faraway ethnic atavism may seem far-fetched, but everywhere in the world long histories of abuse of racial and ethnic categories for material and symbolic advantage raise the specter of an ethnic revanchism that is anything but faraway. To choose just two examples, recall the tortured history of race relations in the United States and the ethnic cleansing of the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth century. But my concern here is the usage at the level of world politics, not so much such applications as the “balkanization” of the Internet or the “balkanization” of the United States resulting from immigration by Spanish- and other non-English-speakers.

In a fascinating survey of the balkanization analogy as used in relation to U.S. immigration, Mark Ellis and Richard Wright did, however, note two features of its use that are fundamental to its wider geopolitical popularity (1998). One is the concreteness that is conveyed by its “spatiality.” Even though the application is often a geographical and cultural “stretch” from the original context, the abstraction involved is hidden by the apparent concreteness of the cross-reference to a real place. Another is the way in which it captures in a geographical name a process that, it is claimed, has long-standing roots of a primordial cast. A sense of dreadful fate is implied because the Balkans, the region from which the term derives, is said—problematically, I hasten to add—to be one of ancient and implacable hatreds. The past then becomes a sure guide to the present and future even when that past is of some place thousands of miles away. Consequently, once under way, as the geographical fate of the Balkans itself is held to testify, balkanization is not readily reversed. The term therefore also implies an air of futility: “These people” are just like that, and nothing much can be done to reverse their vendettas and blood lusts. As Albert Hirschman showed, this is an important strategy in the “rhetoric of reaction” by which the very possibility of really changing the world is put off limits: “any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the ‘deep’ structures of society remain wholly untouched. I shall call it the futility thesis” (1991, 43).

In the global context, balkanization and similar analogies also have several other political and communicative advantages. One, as noted previously, is that they privilege adjacency or endogeneity in the genesis of conflict, because Balkan conflicts presumably involve locals sparring with and then killing one another with little, if any, initial direct involvement by distant outsiders. Such analogies lead away from placing conflicts or wars within a wider geographical frame of

reference, particularly that of a global political hierarchy (Slater 1999). In addition to reducing geopolitical complexity to local animosities, they depoliticize conflicts. Use of the term “balkanization” substitutes a psychocultural account of conflict for a political account. Implicit in it is the idea of the Balkans as a region grappling with the cultural disruptions introduced into local “traditional” society by modernity—tribe versus state, patronage versus transparency, and so forth—rather than with the global realities of geographically defined economic, political, and social disadvantage and exploitation that then, in response, stimulate local political engagement (Robin 2004, 151). The net effect is that “blame” is localized. In this way, the analogies contribute to what has been called “a rhetoric of evasion” (Welch 2003).

Such analogies also tap into the tendency, particularly marked in U.S. politics but not absent elsewhere, to “dumb down” geopolitical complexity into easily communicated sound bites. Good examples of this in recent years are such phrases as “war on terror,” “axis of evil,” “clash of civilizations,” and “end of history.” During the cold war such vague ideas as “containment” and “domino effect” performed similar roles (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992). Such slogans reflect the need to explain and justify foreign policies to largely unsophisticated and often ignorant populations in simpleminded terms. More specifically, the around-the-clock news cycle of mass media catering to ephemeral and uninformed consumers lends itself to compression of complex issues into simple analogies. But such analogies also indicate the increasing importance of slogans in all aspects of life, reflecting the widespread penetration of advertising and marketing practices. As a result, superficial ideas are rewarded, and specialist analysis based on real local knowledge placed in a wider frame of reference is penalized (Halper and Clarke 2007).

Finally, the “strangely familiar” character of the analogies is crucial to their success. They involve a particular constellation of power, knowledge, and spatiality based not on outright opposition between a distant Them (over there) and Us (over here), as alleged in so much contemporary geographical philosophy as leading to the geographical imagination of Western imperialism and colonialism (Gregory 1994, 165–205), but on a contrast between Us and a more familiar Other. In a globalized territorialization of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, much writing about geopolitical stereotyping leaps too quickly from Great Britain to India or from France to the Middle East. Rather, the very liminality of the Balkans, Ireland, Finland, and so forth as places between the dominant states where the analogies originate and subordinated regions of the world gives analogies their power when applied to the latter. At one and the same time, the familiar places are ones that are different if seemingly known yet also redolent of faraway places yet unknown but made familiar when assimilated to the different but known. It is the half-barbarian and half-civilized nearby that brings the distant into focus, not a simple “Othering” through total opposition of a distant Them with nearby Us (Dainotto 2000, 2007).

## WHY BALKAN ANALOGIES?

There is a “Balkan discourse” involving the words and names used to describe the region and its constituent places and people in southeastern Europe (Garde 2004). Part of the discourse is about how the region became associated with a certain kind of political pathology in the early years of the twentieth century in the minds of Western European politicians and intellectuals and how this imagination underwent a revival, particularly among American and European pundits and politicians in the 1990s (Todorova 1997). The breakup of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had not been seen as the splitting up of “natural states” into “unnatural” statelets even as it was dubbed “balkanization.” Anything but: It was widely viewed as marking the beginning of the end for the Muslim Turks as overlords of a significant portion of Europe and the emergence of southeastern Europe into the modernity of nation-states. From the beginnings of Greek independence in the 1820s until the 1890s, Macedonia was in play as the border zone between the competing nationalisms of Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia (Agnew 2007). Mixed ethnically between Slav, Albanian, Vlach, Romani, and Greek groups without clear criteria for distinguishing one from the others, Macedonia was a paradigm for the larger region. With the first Balkan War of 1912, the Ottoman Empire was almost entirely removed from the map of Europe. But when the Balkan War of 1913 pitted the Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs in a conflict among themselves and the process of political dismemberment extended to the Austrian and Russian empires after World War I, “balkanization” took on a new, negative connotation that it has never lost (Todorova 1997, 32).

The precise boundaries of the Balkans, however, are not always clearly defined. Thus, if for some an Ottoman past is a necessary requirement for inclusion in “Balkan,” for others any political connection with that past, even if only because of membership in the former Yugoslavia—as for Croatia and Slovenia—extends potential membership. If many Slovenes and Austrians, for example, have tended to the former, seeing Slovenia as central European rather than Balkan, most Italian commentators have tended somewhat more to the latter viewpoint (Patterson 2003). In both cases, of course, “Balkan” still serves as a negative standard for what one either is or is not. More important, in the present context it is precisely the labile character of the boundaries of the region that helps to make the Balkans such a fruitful source of geopolitical analogies. The Balkans always threatens to escape neat containment in southeastern Europe.

The Ottoman and Austrian empires that long ruled in southeastern Europe never insisted on cultural and linguistic unification. Their rule also varied in its directness and effectiveness from place to place (Jesné 2004). If in Western Europe the quintessential states such as France and England preexisted their respective nations, in southeastern Europe “the idea of the national sovereign state was imported from the west by the growing middle classes born in the empires or on their periphery” (p. 166). The coming of the modern territorial state in this region—as in most of the world beyond Western Europe—therefore, has always involved draw-

ing borders across complex ethnic settlement patterns and sometimes using anachronistic arguments about the present-day national affiliations of long-gone polities, such as the ancient Macedonian Empire, an ancient Hindustan, or the ancient Israelites, to justify who should control a given territory and the naming rights to it. But a philosophical geography already posited such regions as lacking in the attributes needed for self-confident, locally generated statehood. These had little if anything to do with economic development per se but reflected the taint of despotism, imported from the Ottoman and Russian empires and, in the case of southern Europe, the need for a renewed reconquest for an idealized “Europe” of places that were clearly identified as the seats of that very European civilization, particularly Greece and Macedonia. In other words, in the “mind of the Enlightenment,” to use Larry Wolff’s apt turn of phrase (1994), and as expressed by such intellectual luminaries as Montesquieu and Hegel, “The South is what Europe, simply, was” (Dainotto 2000, 383).

If in one interpretation, in particular that of Montesquieu, a fallen south stood in need of rescue by a progressive north, in another, for example that of Rousseau, the south represented an “older” Europe that had to be reincorporated in order to fulfill a European identity grounded in “multiplicity” (pp. 385–387). In both cases, in order to complete Europe as a region defined as a multiplicity of states and as a balance of power, these southern places were to be the showcase in which the initial spread of the European model of statehood would take place. With the end of the cold war and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the Balkans has again been rediscovered as a missing part of the European “body politic”; only this time, it seems that the “malignant nationalism” of the region is seen as a barrier to integration into the contemporary project of European unification (Luoma-Aho 2002; Dérens 2008). The Balkans can never win.

The irony in all this, therefore, is that “Macedonia” and “balkanization” are both associated with a region in which Europe has long been in the process of being “completed” rather than being a region that was ever truly completely alien or foreign. Nevertheless, the negative connotations seem to follow from the way in which this completion of the nation-state model has always apparently been achieved through local internecine violence and ethnic cleansing. Of course, this requires simultaneously forgetting about all of the vicious ethnic cleansing and forced population removal that has also gone on elsewhere in Europe and in North America. The revival of such processes in the 1990s as the former Yugoslavia split apart, however, only seemed to confirm the atavistic basis to Balkan politics. “Balkan” and derivative words, then, have become shorthand in Western Europe and North America for ethnic violence, religious intolerance, and fixation on historical trauma, notwithstanding the nonethnic, contemporary, and external sources of much of the political violence. Crucially, external actors and the wider geopolitical situation are necessarily exempted from much of a—if any—role in the region’s political problems by this association of the Balkans with recurrent haunting from a primordial and fanatical set of ethnic identifications.

In a recent essay, the Slovene Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek makes clear that, in fact, many of the elements of the Balkan drama were introduced to the region from the West through the imitation of statehood mandated against the occupation of the region by the Turks (2005, 116). He notes, *inter alia*, in alluding to the former Ottoman masters in much of the Balkans, “Let us not forget that the two great ethnic crimes imputed to the Turks in the 20th century—the Armenian genocide and the persecution of the Kurds—were not committed by traditionalist Muslim political forces, but by the military modernizers who sought to cut Turkey loose from its old-world ballast and turn it into a European nation-state” (p. 116). The Balkans receives the blame for what outsiders had long desired for the region. Although it may be going too far to suggest, following Žižek’s citation of the reading of another Slovene philosopher, Mladen Dolar, of Freud’s references to the region: “that the European unconscious is structured like the Balkans, is thus literally true: in the guise of the Otherness of ‘Balkan,’ Europe takes cognizance of the ‘stranger in itself,’ of its own repressed” (2005, 116). Indeed, Freud’s contempt for Eastern Europe suggests that Freudian theory is a dubious source of insight about why the Balkans has become synonymous with “cesspool” in the European geopolitical imagination (Bjelić 2006). Undoubtedly, however, irrespective of the value of a Freudian interpretation, Western Europeans’—and Americans’—apparent familiarity with the Balkans and what they have taken as its main characteristic, primordial ethnic conflict, has bred a fateful contempt that travels with the term “the Balkans” and with the various geographical analogies that derive from it.

#### THE TWO EXAMPLES: MACEDONIAN SYNDROME AND BALKANIZATION

I choose two examples from an array of possible ones to show how by means of geographical analogy the presumed characteristics of one place come to inform geopolitical understanding of other places. “Macedonian syndrome” is a specific locution of relatively recent vintage and has an initial theoretical purpose behind it. The sentiment and understanding the term conveys about an ethnically mixed-up/confused place has much older usage that goes back at least to the Balkan Wars just before World War I. The locution itself was first coined by Myron Weiner in 1971 in an article that has since become widely cited with respect both to Macedonia and its neighboring countries and to places in all directions and at all distances from its original site of application. But Weiner intended that this be so. His entire purpose was to develop a theoretical model based on Macedonian experience that could be applied to what he called “the newly independent states of Asia and Africa” (Weiner 1971, 665).

Weiner was not a Macedonian or Balkan specialist but a student of India. He chose Macedonia, first and foremost, because it and its neighbors were the European countries most like the “new states” of Asia and Africa: former colonies, economically backward, and so forth. Most important, he drew attention to the *mélange* or *macedoine* aspect of religious and linguistic groups resident in the country. Though disavowing that he was engaged in drawing analogies that would

immediately call his “model” into question as to its presumed universality, he preferred to say he was building a “descriptive model.” Weiner was indeed using the Macedonian case, as he saw it, to describe a syndrome of characteristics, particularly the irredentist nature of local political disputes with ethnic groups distributed across existing state borders, to suggest the future course of conflict elsewhere around the world. Parenthetically, as is well known, the role of irredentism has in fact been relatively unimportant in many interstate conflicts and civil wars (Holsti 1991; Lake and O’Mahony 2006). Yet Weiner’s article had picked up many new citations as of March 2009—forty in Google Scholar—after a long latent period, suggesting that the analogy to Macedonia still has considerable geopolitical mileage notwithstanding its central focus on an issue of limited importance beyond Macedonia except, perhaps, in Kashmir.

A March 2009 Google search for “Macedonian syndrome,” for example, resulted in 722 hits for “Macedonian syndrome,” of which all but a few are geopolitical in nature; and in Google Scholar there were 74 hits, all of which are geopolitical. Although some of the latter are studies of the Balkans that use Weiner’s model (such as Larrabee 1990–1991), most are applications of the analogy to such disparate locations as the Baltic states, Afghanistan, Iraq, Southeast Asia, Kashmir, and India (and worldwide), as well as citations to course syllabi—at many prestigious institutions—that cite the Weiner article and others that use its title. In every one of the “applications” I examined, the Macedonian syndrome provided the template for assessing local conditions, notwithstanding Weiner’s own caveat about how “a given effect can have many causes” (1971, 683). Overwhelmingly, the items date from the mid-1990s through 2009, indicating that, more than fading away because of doubts about how well the syndrome might travel or the limits of any geopolitical analogy across time as well as space, such thinking has experienced a revival. For example, in the flagship journal of U.S. sociology, the *American Sociological Review*, Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min base their article explicitly around the logic of the “Macedonian syndrome” applied to wars around the world over a 175-year period (2006), but their analysis is missing any discussion of state hierarchy or imperialism as causes of wars. They deny any historical pattern to ethnic conflict, which may be connected to worldwide trends such as globalization, even though elsewhere one of the authors, Wimmer, claims a clear “rise and fall” of ethnic conflicts across the years 1945–2002 (2004, 2). The analogy has been revived, therefore, even as the empirical “reality” it purports to explain strongly suggests, at best, both its historicity and its increased redundancy.

The more venerable and more diffuse term “Balkanization” has been in use since the 1920s and with reference to a much wider range of phenomena (Earle 1926). With 225,000 hits on Google in March 2009, only about 20,000 of which qualify as geopolitical, and 15,500 hits on Google Scholar, where about 25 percent qualify, this term is less singularly geopolitical than is “Macedonian syndrome.” What is clear, however, is that the geopolitical usage has increased dramatically since 1990, with most applications to the United States since the late 1990s but with

many other places—in order, after Iraq and the United States, Pakistan, southeastern Europe, Africa, Indonesia, and Iran—not that far behind. A speech President Bill Clinton made on 24 March 1999, as North Atlantic Treaty Organization pilots began to bomb Serbia over the Serbian treatment of Kosovo’s Albanians, used some well-known tropes of Balkan representation, such as “a fault line” between civilizations and “small countries” wedged between larger ones without actually invoking “balkanization.” But the thought was there. More explicit usage is now fairly common.

The first geopolitical usage beyond Balkan shores I have found is in an article in *The Economist* warning that “African leaders . . . owe it to themselves. . . to grasp what there is in the majority report for them before they opt for balkanization” and in an essay by the political geographer Charles Fisher in which Southeast Asia is described as the “Balkans of the Orient” (*Economist* 1960, 216; Fisher 1962). Since the early 1960s, particularly since the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and in the face of the U.S. political debacle in Iraq, geopolitical usage has exploded. The arc of usage on Google suggests that conservative U.S. bloggers and politicians have been particularly drawn to the analogy. They worry, in particular, that immigration and local political control—as opposed to strong central government—will lead to, yes, balkanization. Of course, they trade in such “fear narratives” to recruit listeners/viewers and supporters (Glassner 2004). For example, such U.S. conservative and nationalist Web sites as those for the e-journal *Enter Stage Right* [[www.enterstageright.com](http://www.enterstageright.com)], for *No World System*, which offers “360° of Alternative Daily News” [[www.noworldsystem.com](http://www.noworldsystem.com)], and for the weekly newspaper *American Free Press* [[www.americanfreepress.net](http://www.americanfreepress.net)] are frequent users. Since 2000 much of the application has been to the dangers of balkanization in the United States and Iraq and the need for stern action to counteract them in both cases. But scholars also make considerable use of the term: Political Professor—[[www.politicalprofessor.com](http://www.politicalprofessor.com)], a Web site portraying political treaties and concepts—for example, defines “balkanization” as a “theory of the fragmentation of states”; others try to use the analogy in an analytic way (Roshwald 2007).

Some of this recent usage of “balkanization” probably reflects widespread speculative debate about globalization and its relationship to renewed instability of international political borders in the late twentieth century (Kahler and Walter 2006). In one account, widely diffused among geographers, Fredric Jameson, saw political fragmentation and nationalism as an emerging if baleful alternative to a globalizing “late capitalism” (1991, 50–54). He associated such postmodern capitalism with both the loss of centralized control and the emergence of a sense of a perpetual present in which space replaces time. In this account, then, the recycling of geographical analogies like balkanization, if not of directly historical ones like appeasement, could make sense, because of the spatial element in the comparison. In the intellectual world of a clean break between modern and postmodern capitalism only spatial analogies should have continuing currency. Temporality has ended.

Others, however, see evidence of increasing political fragmentation, not only as a direct result of a centralizing globalization more than an alternative to it but also as necessarily involving a fateful recycling of stories about the past—and stereotypes of other places associated with that past—analogously into the present (Agnew 2005). In this construction, geographical analogies are not simply spatial ones; as well as a spatial reference, all sorts of historical memories and stereotypes are embedded in them. It is but a small step to render stories about the explosion of ethnic enmities under postmodernity or the increased fungibility of borders with globalization, if ultimately mischievously and misleadingly, in the more colorful terms of “balkanization” or other analogies involving geographical naming and political blaming. Familiarizing of the unfamiliar thus becomes ever more insistent in a world of seeming escalating geopolitical instability.

The following are some typical Web-based stories from 2006–2007: comparing the prospects for a unified Iraq with the Balkans; raising the alarm among non-Iranians to the threat to Iranian territorial unity from U.S.-sponsored balkanization; the internal divisions in Pakistan; and warning of the dangers to this or that African country—the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan, or Somalia, for example—from balkanization. The term travels far and wide but seems to be particularly prevalent wherever “events” seems to be especially unstable and prone to resist outside control. Usage relative to the United States often also has geopolitical relevance. Thus immigration, particularly from Latin America, and affirmative-action programs to promote different racial and ethnic groups are seen not just as socially problematic but also as potentially territorially divisive in the United States, with subsequent effects on the nation’s global standing. President G. W. Bush made the point in his own inimitable manner when he stated that “however they delineate, quotas vulcanize society.” I think he meant to say “balkanize” or perhaps “volcanize” (the latter in relation to volcanoes). He must have misheard the pronunciation from whoever briefed him, hearing a “v” when a “b” was in fact spoken. Obviously, his use is not one of those on Google. I did not look up “vulcanize.”

#### WATCHING FOR GEOGRAPHICAL ANALOGY

“Macedonian syndrome” and “balkanization” have become popular geopolitical terms to signify, respectively, mixed/impure and marginal/fragmented/chaotic, often in far-distant contexts from the original places to which they refer but reflecting a specific understanding of distinctiveness from a European/American standard. The terms represent particular readings of the original places of reference without which they could not “travel” elsewhere. These typically involve emphasizing the local sources of conflict—typically ancient hatreds—to the occlusion of the larger geopolitical field of imperialism and diffusion of political models of nation-statehood that the Balkans can also be taken to represent (Agnew 2007). Such language, therefore, is not simply an innocent writing strategy that substitutes directly empirical terminology with more evocative phraseology. The Mace-

donian syndrome and balkanization analogies implicitly carry with them models of the Balkans that are imposed elsewhere. Crucially, in a geopolitical context this means identifying local actors as those entirely responsible for whatever conflict to which the actual usage is connected.

In an article and two book reviews published in the 1950s Donald Meinig suggested how important questions of language and a refined understanding of the effects of language could be for the development a sophisticated political geography. It has taken some time for the message he sent to have had much of an effect. Understanding the intellectual and political power of timeless geographical analogies was not directly at issue in Meinig's arguments. But the critical attitude he displayed there is important to recall. This is so partly because of the tendency to dismiss the time in which he wrote as one largely without much to say to us today but also because of the tendency of determinist conceptions of geopolitics such as those he criticized to keep reappearing.

The Balkans, of course, is the long-suffering source of the analogies in question. To the Balkans, then, we should return in questioning their efficacy. In a joke going the rounds in Belgrade around the time President Clinton made his speech on Kosovo in March 1999, the Serbs were held to complain they were under bombardment from a country that had no history, to which the U.S. president was said to have replied: "Soon, you'll have no geography [meaning physical destruction from U.S. air power]." There is perhaps more truth to that joke than to either of the analogies that helped to produce the political setting for it in the first place.

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