

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #6

KLAUS DODDS ON JAMES BOND, THE FINAL ARGUMENT FOR A GEOPOLITICAL APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND A RUSSIAN FLAG ON THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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KLAUS DODDS ON JAMES BOND, THE FINAL ARGUMENT FOR A GEOPOLITICAL APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND A RUSSIAN FLAG ON THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN



Klaus Dodds is part of a new generation of critical ‘geopoliticians’ and focuses his work on, amongst others, the representation of space in visual media like internet, movies and pictures. He is also engaged in research about the geopolitics of the South Pole. In this comprehensive *Talk*, Dodds introduces us to, amongst others, the International Relations of James Bond, the South Pole and talks about the importance of the military in Latin American IR.

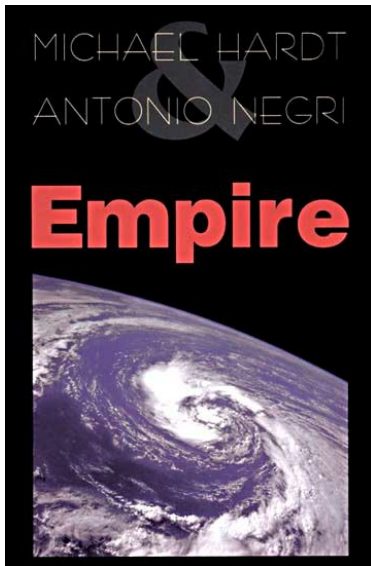
What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR, and what is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I discern more than one principal issue in International Relations, and for me, the challenge of global governance is most certainly one of them. First of all, I have to be clear on what I mean exactly by ‘governance’: contrary to, for example, what Timothy Sinclair asserts in [Theory Talk #5](#), I don’t see a distinction between ‘international institutions’ driven by state interests on one hand and global governance induced by private actors working very well, because the concept of governance is, if you like, too slippery for such a distinction: international institutions exist together with a whole range of other international structures and agents, and I think it to be very difficult to label some as serving exclusively state purposes and others exclusively private purposes.

For me, the main point about governance is that in our terribly unequal world, we should push for a significant deepening of institutions. Furthermore, any form of a more profound global governance should be based on rules, on law embedded in institutions. The ‘global’ side of ‘global governance’ is something social: it comes into being through the practices and discourses of human beings – as you can clearly see, for example, with the conception of the world in terms of the ‘War on Terror’, which denominates certain aspects of the world as dangerous based on a

specific set of ideas on how the world works. Institutions should constitute the limits of these practices so as to not exploit our world or, as is generally the case, some specific part of it.

Another big issue is the role of space in international relations. Things do not just take place; everything takes place *somewhere*. In the formulation of theories on how international politics work, scholars often try to abstract from that spatiality, to conceive of 'places' as random and little relevant factors – like all politics could take place anywhere.



One aspect of this spatiality which is so important to me, is the visual one: how does the global get represented in visual culture, like movies or on internet? And how do principally large countries use these images to construct a story about what they are doing? In a very direct sense, you can see what I mean if you look at, for example, the web sites of environmental movements, which as a rule incorporate an image of the earth in its totality. This clearly conveys the feeling that 'we are all living in this one earth'; since we share it, we also have to take care of it together. Another way of using the image of the world as a whole, is the cover of the book 'Empire' by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), which also displays the earth as a whole, but now conveying the strong message that it serves as the playground for empires. If one looks at the US and its strategy for their 'global war on terror', the authors might just have been right.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I interpret that question as asking about how I came to be so interested in the relationship between geopolitics and visual culture. Basically, I've studied a lot of IR that I found very dull. To be frank, I kept asking myself: 'why are there just three big debates in IR?' The mainstream IR is too insular for me, it excludes a lot of interesting and important issues. I am very fond of interdisciplinarity; using different approaches to answer questions and to understand what's going on. I also try to bring International Relations back to popular culture; not only by linking notions of power to images, but also by making it accessible to a broader public. The implications of geopolitics affect everyone, and through such powerful media as television and images. Take the symbolic power something as common as saluting the flag has. So why let IR reside in an ivory tower?

But if that question refers to what motivated me to do geopolitics, I would name two big reasons: first of all, the fundamental notion that there is a very intimate relationship between power and knowledge; and second of all, the fact that most IR scholars have actually forgotten about the world. International Relations need a map to the world. Scholars that for me are related to these issues, are for example Edward Said, whose notion of 'imaginative geographies' I find particularly useful, and Noam Chomsky, whom I respect most of all for being a publicly engaged scholar.

In terms of real-world events that profoundly influenced me, I was particularly stricken by the fact that during the Cold War, all main discourses and with that public attention was basically fixed on the tension between the United States and Russia and their nuclear arsenals, while the whole Cold War had a much more profound impact in the South.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

Apart from, of course, a PhD, I would advise students to read as widely as possible. One should not be constrained by specific debates or issues, and most certainly avoid to consciously dedicate a whole career to one debate; not even the big debates (between, for example, rationalists and constructivists; Marxism, liberalism or realism; or between structure and agency) are worth it. That's the reason why I publish in such different journals: it enables me to be involved in a lot of interesting issues and not to lose myself in one of them, so to speak.

As you've mentioned before, you constantly establish the connection between geopolitics and visual media. Can you give us an example?

I've just published an article titled '*Have you seen any good movies lately? Geopolitics, International Relations and Film*'. There, I try to show, amongst others, that at times of crisis, Hollywood has often been more than willing and able to produce and market films designed to 'raise' national morale and spirit. Just after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush's advisor Karl Rove met with Hollywood big shots to consider how the motion picture industry might contribute to the War on Terror. And in the following years, movies sympathetic to American military engagement have appeared while movies potentially critical about such issues, such as *Buffalo Soldiers* (2003), have been delayed and generally rejected by American audiences. Popular movies like *Independence Day* communicate and promote very specific views on how a nation should work and what the role of the United States is in regard to 'external threats'. I'm trying to convey a sense about the role of such geopolitical notions essentially in elite cultures.

But geopolitics is not limited to film in culture: in geographical education, very specific notions of spatiality are being transmitted to pupils, in order to educate nations that think alike – and approvingly – of the politics their states are engaged in. Here, the example of the way the Malvinas are treated throughout all sections of society in Great Britain and Argentina, who have been in conflict over those islands for decades.

You take an interest in the difference between Latin American, European and American geopolitics. What's the main difference between Latin American and, for example, the European strand of geopolitical thought, and what are the implications of this difference?

I was first of all surprised about the importance of military writers in the Latin American academia: they represent an authentic authority when it comes to geopolitics and everybody discussing it, is subsequently inclined to a realist conception of space: national security is seen as the main objective when discussing geography. That has much to do with the second big difference between Latin America and Europe in terms of their interpretation of geopolitics: in Latin America, borders matter. They are constantly being disputed, and the continent has a long history of conflicts over such issues as the exact denomination of borders (think about the conflict between Argentina and Chile over the Strait of Beard in the 90s) and the legitimate control over resources and territories. In Europe, this kind of issues has generally been settled a long time ago, which is why we engage in a different kind of geopolitical analysis.

You've published a lot on the Antarctic, like for example your 2002 book *Pink Ice: Britain and the South Atlantic Empire*. What's your interest in the Antarctic?

Apart from the fact that I've been there four times, I take an interest in the notion of 'global commons', or parts of the world that (should) belong to all of us. The Antarctic has been indicated as one of such places, but there are still a number of rival claims over who gets to govern or control the Antarctic. The conflict between Britain and Argentine over the Maldives fits into this broader interest I have for the region, and highlights – again – the importance of 'place' in International Relations.

To go from one side of the globe to another: we've recently heard that by 2015, the North Pole will be ice-free during the summer, a process that is irreversible. What are the implications hereof for the geopolitical imaginations of the poles?

I think this is very much related to something I wrote about recently: in 2007, a Russian submarine planted a flag on the bottom of the Arctic Basin, thus claiming a big stretch of that area. Many of its Arctic neighbors, and especially Canada, felt threatened, especially because there are vast amounts of oil estimated in the Arctic Basin. You would've expected the North Pole to become demilitarized after the Cold War, but now we're witnessing the opposite: it is increasingly being seen as one of the 'last regions to contest and divide'. If the North Pole is coming to be considered more and more as 'just another stretch of ocean', then the disputes over the legitimate exploitation of the resources in this region will increase – with all the consequences that implies: ecological problems, less space for the indigenous population, and so forth. Again, apart from these tacit practices, it all depends on how discourses of dominant actors about the North Pole will change and how those changes will be accepted by the public opinion. And again, we see what benefits global governance could reap.

We zoom in on a different part of the world: Africa. What would a 'geopolitician' say about our conceptions of the continent?

If you want to understand Sub-Sahara Africa, you have to start by taking into account the postcolonial geography of the (sub)continent. It sits very uneasy in the world, because of the sheer awkwardness of the application and occidental exigency of basically colonially determined conditions of statehood; that architecture not only doesn't work, but Africans are furthermore condemned for failing to adapt to our imaginations of how the world should be divided. The continent has to deal with an awful lot, and the way we treat it doesn't help in making things work.

You've published about James Bond. Can you explain us what his movies represent?

I use a lot of movies to make things clear to my students. James Bond movies are amongst my personal favorites, because they represent the inherent dynamics of geopolitical discourses and representations: if you compare the last James Bond, *Casino Royale*, to older ones such as *From Russia with Love*, you'll see the very distinctness of which regions, persons and situations pose threats. I especially like *Casino Royale* for being the first Bond-movie to come out after 9-11: it represents a very gentle tackle of the whole 'War on Terror'-issue: it treats it as global issue that 'naturally' requires a global response, but not as explicitly as could have been possible: it does not, for example, relate to religious fundamentalism. Also, this movie interesting enough uses Montenegro as the location for an illegal poker contest – which says a lot about the conception we have of Southeastern Europe.

Last question – geopolitics is not exactly (international) politics nor is it completely geography. Yet the first already incorporates notions of space and territory, as the latter incorporates notions of power. For the possible skeptics: what's the 'final argument' for geopolitics as an approach?

First of all, events in International Relations always occur in *places*, a fact that makes an important difference. Those places, furthermore, are not reducible to States and their boundaries: a lot of events are localized (and significant) either at a more local level or at a more global level. Secondly, the (critical) geopolitics I'm engaged in, enable to ask who is able to represent the world and what that implies: when President Bush gives a speech, the whole world tunes in, something we don't do for a president of what we consider to be 'some' Sub-Saharan country. And thirdly, the study of International Relations first and foremost has implications for global power relations, between people who are generally bound to specific and limited places. Critical Geopolitics enables us to study these relationships of power and place.

Klaus Dodds is professor of Geopolitics at the Department of Geography of the Royal Holloway University of London, director of the *Politics & Environment Research Group* (PERG), and published a number of books on geopolitics, amongst which *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Geopolitics in a Changing World* (1999).

Related links

- [Klaus Dodds Faculty Profile](#)
- Read Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2000 book *Empire* [here](#) for free (pdf)