**Civilizational Geopolitics:**

In the late eighteenth century a civilizational geopolitics emerged as part of the reaction to the struggle for stability in a Western Europe that had lost its cosmic centre based on a common Christianity at the time of the Wars of Religion. This was an element in what Toulmin (1990, 170) has termed the attempt at constructing ‘a more rational Cosmopolis, to replace the one lost around 1600’. This version of the modern geopolitical imagination peaked in influence in the first half of the nineteenth century. Before that time, its various principles were not engaged with one another in a common whole in the way they were to be after 1815. The international political economy from 1815

until 1875 was characterized by a European Concert in which no one state ‘laid down the law’ for the others within Europe, and by an emerging British economic dominance in much of the rest of the world. The Concert was designed to limit the revolutionary impulses emanating from the French Revolution of 1789 and its aftermath.

Wars to foment revolution or to acquire territory were seen as threats to the balance of power between the dominant states or Great Powers. At the same time, Britain’s head start in economic growth as a result of its Industrial Revolution produced a different interaction with the other continents as compared with that of the other European states (save for the Netherlands). The search for markets for manufactured goods and the availability of capital for overseas investment produced pressures for external expansion (both colonial and more generally) that set Britain apart. As the rest of Europe became caught up in national economy making, a process largely completed in Britain, British businesses and political leaders created a worldwide network of trade and financial flows.

At this stage in the growth of world capitalism, British centrality was widely seen by European political elites as serving not only a national interest but a global interest. The British national economy became the locomotive of the world economy. The recycling of capital from worldwide investments made London the world’s main financial centre. The main political interest of financial capital lay in preventing economic disruption in places where it had investments. Not surprisingly, British governments also came to value stability and often intervened militarily outside Europe when the status quo was under threat. With the increasing economic success of the German and US economies, however, the British economy, still largely committed to older technologies, was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, it was faced with increased competition in manufactured goods and, on the other, it had a relative advantage over the others in its access to the rest of the world. Consequently, after 1875 Britain turned away from Europe and the United States (where British capital had major investments) towards its empire and those world regions where its hegemony was apparently more secure. This gave impetus to the final collapse of the Concert of Europe, already threatened by the emergence of new states in Europe (such as Germany and Italy) without any commitment to it, and the emergence of a global system of competing empires as others, from Germany, France, the United States and Japan, attempted to follow in Britain’s footsteps. But it was within Europe that the most important challenge of the age arose. The political order of civilizational geopolitics was that defined by aristocratic and bourgeois elites.

In its main features it was designed to tame and repress the nationalism generated by the French Revolution. But as the nineteenth century wore on, a new conception of statehood based on the creation of nation-states came to the fore. These were states built upon cultural divisions and particularities. In the identity of state with nation, territorial sovereignty was fused with the fate of the nation. The interests of peoples were rigidly territorialized as the number of states in Europe tripled. This new system of states had no place for civilizational geopolitics.

It was in the political–economic context of 1815–75 that civilizational geopolitics was most fully established, even though the principles it drew on had older roots, as described in previous chapters. Its main elements were a commitment to European uniqueness as a civilization; a belief that the roots of European distinctiveness were found in its past; a sense that though other cultures might have noble pasts with high achievements, they had been eclipsed by Europe; and an increasing identification with a particular nationstate as representing the most perfected version of the European difference.

**Naturalized geopolitics**

In cultural anthropology the idea of *totemism* refers to the practice of interpreting nature in the vocabulary of human groups, such as kinship and genealogy, whereas *naturalization* does the opposite. It represents the human entirely in terms of natural processes and phenomena. This is what happened to geopolitics from the late nineteenth century down until the end of the Second World War, even though it had older roots (as indicated in previous chapters) and persisted in some respects thereafter (see the next section on ideological geopolitics). Rather than being a feature of civilization, geopolitics was now largely determined by the natural character of states that could be understood ‘scientifically’, akin to the new understanding of biological processes that also marked the period. The understanding of states and the geographical organization of the world economy that this gave rise to underpinned the inter-imperial rivalry of the geopolitical order from 1875 to 1945.

As the old Concert of Europe unravelled in the 1870s, two antagonistic groups of states emerged. One, led by Britain and France (with covert US support), stood for the coexistence of open trade and imperialism. The other, headed by Germany, was revisionist – concerned to build their own empires and challenge British financial dominance. By the 1890s this division had become the major feature of world politics. Its basis lay partly in the dramatic growth of the German economy but also partly in the intense nationalism of the period. National economy making through the extension of national railway systems and the reorganization of economic space to accord greater centrality to national markets and finance was combined with the spread of literacy in vernacular languages and universal elementary education to produce an enhanced sense of national difference and exclusivity on the part of mass publics. Nationalism was no longer just for elites. In imitation of one another and as an outlet for investment during the economic depression of 1883–96, a massive expansion of European empires brought much of the world that had remained outside the reach of European imperialism into a geographically specialized world economy. Different world regions took their place within a global division of labour, as plantation agriculture brought bananas to Central America, tea to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and rubber to Malaya (Plate 6.3). The main axis of capital accumulation lay in the home–colonies structure of the British Empire and the US–British relationship. The challenge for Germany and the other revisionists, such as Italy and Japan, was to build an alternative to this structure. Ultimately that proved impossible without taking on the British and their allies militarily.

The climax arrived in 1914 when the alliance systems on either side of the inter-imperial rivalries

set in motion in the 1870s came to life in response to the seemingly minor conflict over the political status of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The apparently inexorable and inevitable slide into war associated with the First World War was the outcome of a mindset on all sides that saw war as the only way out of the political–economic impasse into which they had all slipped. The conduct of the war itself was also the outcome of a mentality in which the individual person had to sacrifice for the good of the greater whole: the nation-state that defined the totality of one’s identity. Humanity had lost control of its destiny. Nature ruled in affairs of state. The naturalized geopolitics characteristic of this epoch had a number of telltale features: a world divided into imperial and colonized peoples, states with ‘biological needs’ for territory/resources and outlets for enterprise, a ‘closed’ world in which one state’s political–economic success was at another one’s expense (relative ascent and decline), and a world of fixed geographical attributes and environmental conditions that had predictable effects on a state’s global status.

Naturalization had a number of preconditions. One was the (apparent) separation of the scientific claim from the subject position of the particular writer or politician. Claims were made to universal knowledge that transcended any particular national, class, gender or ethnic standpoint. So, even as a particular national interest was self-evidently addressed, the act of doing so was framed by a perspective that put it into the realm of nature rather than that of politics. A vital aspect of this, and another precondition for naturalization, was the conviction that observation of the world’s political and economic divisions was a form of innocent perception from which generalizations about resources and power could be deduced. The pre-existing commitment to this view of perception and its associated mapping, naming, and citing of spaces as ‘colonial’, ‘European’, ‘powerful’ or ‘backward’ was not often acknowledged. ‘Scientifically’, in the empiricist sense of the term, the world beyond the immediately familiar was blank and empty but was then filled and labelled according to its varying natural attributes as they appeared from Europe. The world was then known and possessed not just politically but epistemologically. This was the great achievement of naturalization: to have depoliticized inter-imperial rivalry into a set of natural and determining geographical ‘facts of life’. The invention of political geography during this period is of a piece with this trend. On the one hand, the new field was openly touted by its advocates as a way of educating both elites and national populations in the ways in which physical geography constrained and directed state formation and empire building. On the other hand, it based its claims to seriousness on offering a perspective that was useful primarily for the nation-states from which its advocates came. Thus, Halford Mackinder provided a global geopolitical model (see Chapter 2) but was concerned primarily about the implications of this model for the future of the British Empire.

There were, of course, conservative, socialist and anarchist currents of thought that tended to decry the emerging dominion of naturalized modes of thought and action. But even they increasingly tended to flirt quite openly with claims to scientific status that would put them beyond politics and into nature, so to speak. The voluntarist understandings of nationhood and class that had emanated from the American and French Revolutions were increasingly marginalized. For example, the polemic of Ernest Renan (1882) against the German ‘blood and soil’ conception of nation on behalf of a voluntarist one (of choice or will) was rapidly eclipsed.

One of the most important elements in naturalized geopolitics was the distinction between imperial and colonized peoples. Citizenship laws, classifications of colonies (particularly between European settler colonies and others), religious missionary activities and even the emerging division of labour between university subjects (e.g. sociology versus anthropology) operated on this distinction. But this distinction was not merely a recognition of necessity – a pragmatic response to an obvious spatial division. Ironically, it rested on the view that (some) Europeans had become masters of nature as a result of superior ‘fitness’ in a natural process of evolution. Transforming or

displacing more primitive peoples was justified because, as Charles Darwin (1839, 520), one of the intellectual sources for this type of reasoning, had put it, ‘the varieties of man seem to act on each other in the same way as different species of animals – the stronger always extirpating the weak’.

In the United States in the 1880s, ‘scientific’ racial claims largely replaced providential/ civilizational ones as the basis for American destiny. Anglo-Saxons (and other ‘Teutons’) were identified as exemplars of superior evolutionary fitness. Their superior political principles, growth in numbers, and economic power were evidence enough(notwithstanding contradictory evidence in the census of the United States, which suggested the greater growth of other groups). One leading proponent of the fitness argument saw an Anglo-Saxon future. ‘The day is at hand’, he wrote, ‘when four-fifths of the human race will trace its pedigree to English forefathers, as four-fifths of the white people of the United States trace their pedigree today [1885]’ (quoted in Pratt 1935, 348).

Within Europe, Jews were especially vulnerable to the growth in ‘scientific’ racism. Religious anti-Semitism had deep roots in Europe going back to the Middle Ages. But not only did the nineteenth century bring rapid advancement to Jews as a group as they moved out of ghettos into the wider society, but some non-Jewish groups ‘experienced rootlessness, fragmentation, and estrangement from a once securely anchored, familiar world’ (Barnouw 1990, 79). As a result, Jews became objects of hatred and fear from those nostalgic for a world they had lost but without good prospects in the new national–industrial society. Demagogues readily portrayed Jews as rootless cosmopolitans or allied with the nation’s enemies in a European world dividing into parochial nation-states (Plate 6.4). There was no longer a space for ethnic and racial difference within the boundaries of states. Jews were dangerous polluters of national homogeneity and disrupted a presumed natural order in which racial groups and states are mutually dependent. Every ‘race’ was seen as requiring its proper place. Jews were increasingly portrayed in ‘racial’ terms. The Nazi geopoliticians of the 1930s came up with formalized schemes for combining imperial and colonized peoples within what they called ‘pan-regions’. However fanciful in terms of possibilities of overcoming the political–economic relationships of the time, such mappings did express in extreme form the common assumption that the world was

constituted by racial groupings that could be neatly divided into two ‘types’ of peoples.

The one essentially existed to serve the other. Dominant and subordinate races were joined together territorially in the pan-regions.

**Ideological geopolitics:**

By definition, the modern geopolitical imagination is ideological, if ideology is defined as an amalgam of ideas, symbols and strategies for promoting or changing a social and cultural order – or, as the anthropologist Paul Friedrich (1989, 301) puts it, ‘political ideas in action’. After the Second World War, however, the geopolitical imagination was centred much more explicitly around competing conceptions of how best to organize the international political economy. Cold War geopolitics was ‘linguacultural’ (Friedrich’s term) more than civilizational or naturalized. By this I mean that the values, myths and catchwords drawn from the experiences of the two victorious states, the United States and the Soviet Union, were to define and determine the terms of the geopolitical imagination of the period. One of these, the United States, was to prove the more effective in gaining widespread acceptance for its model of political–economic organization. But its success relied heavily on the active presence of the other as a point of comparison and threat.

The ideological character of the conflict defining the period needs emphasizing. The historian Anders Stephanson (1995, 123) has noted that this is largely why the Cold War remained *cold*. The spheres of influence established immediately after the Second World War proved rather long-lasting because, given each side’s possession of nuclear weapons that each could deliver to the homeland of the other, the party disturbing the status quo would face potentially devastating consequences. In response, the definition of ideologically opposite geopolitical zones put a premium on maintaining doctrinal purity on both sides of the ‘fence’ that divided the two worlds.

The recent invasion by Nazi Germany meant that a sense of threat was not difficult to sell to the Soviet population. Associated with this sense of external danger was an identification with regimes and revolutionary movements that were opposed to the US/Western model of economic development. On the US side the government set out from 1944–47 onwards to sponsor an international order of economic liberalism in which military expenditures would provide a protective apparatus for increased international trade. This would in turn redound to the advantage of American businesses and stabilize the American economy. The key institutions and rules spread rapidly in the immediate post-war period. All the major industrialized countries except the Soviet Union accepted the rules of the international economic game as written in Washington, DC, either through external inducement (as with the aid from the 1947 Marshall Plan) and coercion (as with the British dollar loan of 1946) or through direct intervention and reconstruction under US auspices (as in West Germany and Japan). Many of the elements of this system have lasted into the 1990s, although some faded away earlier. They are:

1 indirect stimulation of economic growth by means of fiscal and monetary policies;

2 commitment to a growing global marketplace based on a global division of labour;

3 accepting the dollar as the principal world currency;

4 hostility to Soviet-style economic planning;

5 assuming the burden of policing political changes that could be construed as damaging to the stability of the world economy.

In the end, domestic conditions in the two main states undermined the global status of each. By the 1980s the Soviet economy had failed to deliver both improved military equipment and improved living standards for the Soviet population as the Communist Party and its leadership sank into complacency. For the United States, internationalization was too successful. By the early 1970s the growth of other economies produced pressures on the dollar and the drain of policing proved increasingly expensive. Not simply international relations but also the economic and political arrangements of all of the world’s states beyond the Soviet sphere of influence (China for a few years

in the early 1950s, Eastern Europe until 1989) came under the spell of the US system. The vital glue for this system was provided by the political–military conflict with the Soviet Union. Even during times of coexistence or detente, the overarching Cold War conflict served both to tie such important states as Germany and Japan into the US system and to define two geopolitical spheres of influence in which each generally accepted the other’s dominance. This imposed a stability on world politics, since the United Sttes and the Soviet Union were the two principal holders of nuclear weapons and they could threaten to escalate conflicts if their ‘fundamental strategic interests’ were threatened, even as they promoted numerous ‘limited’ wars in the Third World of former colonies where each armed surrogates or intervened themselves to prevent the other from achieving a successful ‘conversion’. For all their political and economic weaknesses, however, many Third World countries had to be wooed and cajoled. Unlike in the previous period, the world map was no longer a vacuum waiting to be filled by a small number of competing Great Powers. The United States and the Soviet Union remained attached to anti-colonial philosophies even as they engaged in imperial competition.

They had to win friends and influence people to extend their spheres of influence; they could no longer simply impose external rule. In this setting, ideological geopolitics developed the following major characteristics: a central systemic–ideological conflict over political–economic organization; ‘three worlds’ of development in which US and Soviet spheres of influence vied for expansion into a ‘Third World’ of former colonies and ‘non-aligned’ states; a homogenization of global space into ‘friendly’ and ‘threatening’ blocs in which universal models of capitalism–liberal democracy and communism reigned free of geographical contingency; and the naturalization of the ideological conflict by such key concepts as containment, domino effects and hegemonic stability. Older themes from civilizational and naturalized discourses were worked into the new discursive space. The two most important have been the backward versus modern polarity and the idea of ‘national security’.

The arrival of nuclear weapons (and long-distance delivery systems) led to an American sense of connection to events elsewhere in the world, through the possibility of escalation of local conflicts into a global nuclear one, that previously had been missing. The long history of US territorial security has, however, perhaps left people without much of a basis for judgement about external ‘threats’, even as the Soviet experience of invasion and mass murder as recently as the Second World War provided a more obvious basis for collective paranoia.

One important consequence of this shared sense of vulnerability was an idealization by each of the other. Each became a super-potent adversary in the eyes of the other. This is particularly obvious in the US case, where there was systematic exaggeration of Soviet economic and military capabilities. For example, Holzman (1989) has shown systematic exaggeration in official US estimates of Soviet military spending from the 1960s to the 1980s. Gervasi (1988), in his annotated version of the Pentagon publication Soviet Military Power, finds evidence of massive overstatement of Soviet military capabilities – and we now know, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that he was absolutely correct. As late as 1988, US foreign policy was still based on the continuing existence of a singular Soviet threat to the US position in the international political economy. Even as the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1988–89, a group of leading US experts on military and foreign affairs produced a report that assumed an indefinite continuation of Cold War bipolarity. Though the economic problems of the United States – relating to huge trade and federal government deficits – were well known, it ignores them. Instead, it engages in statistical and cartographic legerdemain to demonstrate increased US vulnerability to the Soviet threat. It is no exaggeration to say that political

elites in each country became so obsessed with each other that, as one of their number put it, he hoped they would not appear to future historians as ‘two dinosaurs circling one another in the sands of nuclear confrontation’ (Gorbachev 1987–88, 494).

In the context of peculiar revolutionary states with quite different recipes for political–economic organization, abstract terms such as ‘communism’ and ‘capitalism’ took on culturally loaded meanings. As the United States came to personify capitalism, so did the Soviet Union represent communism. Each state became the geographical manifestation of an abstract political economy. Each was foreign and dangerous to the other.

The constitutive divide in world affairs after the Second World War thus had specific linguacultural roots that reduced communication to a repetition of buzzwords about the nature of the other party.

Joanne Sharp (2000) has shown that in the American case after the end of the US–Soviet wartime alliance a widely circulating magazine like the Reader’s Digest served up a steady diet of articles by ‘experts’ that created a ‘common-sense’ knowledge about the Soviet Union and the threat it posed to Americanness. Its readers were not unprepared. The Digest had been worried about the Soviet Union since the early 1920s. Now readers were bombarded with accounts of the total difference and opposing character of the Soviet Union as compared with the ‘actually existing’ United States, not simply differences in aspiration or historical experience. Each was masqueraded as the actual opposite of the other. Such representations had powerful effects in mobilizing public opinion into the Cold War consensus that progressively engulfed American politics from 1947 until the Vietnam War of the late 1960s.

Certain domestic interests were served by this geopolitical reductionism. Once under way, this reinforced its pervasiveness. In the Soviet Union it disciplined potential dissidents into support of a monolithic state apparatus. In the United States it produced a consensus around a ‘politics of growth’, an enlarged military economy, and opposition to any politics (usually construed as ‘socialist’ or leftist because of associations between socialism and the Soviet Union) that would subvert the country from within. In other words, it eroded the possibility of an open, competitive democratic politics. The very identity of being American became associated with a narrow political spectrum at home and a virulently anti-socialist/anti-Soviet position (they were rarely distinguished)

abroad. ‘The simple story of a great struggle between a democratic “West” against a formidable and expansionist “East”’ became ‘the most influential and durable geopolitical script of [the Cold War] period’ (O Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 190).