



**POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY UNDER SCRUTINY: A RESPONSE
TO COMMENTS ON THE ESSAY "POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY:
WHAT IS IT, AFTER ALL, AND WHAT IS IT FOR?"**



CASTRO, I. E

Iná Elias de Castro¹.

¹ Department of Geography, UFRJ, Brazil.

DOI: 10.26512/2236-56562025e62388

First, I would like to thank and congratulate the editor of the *Espaço & Geografia* journal at the University of Brasília, Professor Daniel de Abreu Azevedo, for inviting me to write a text that would be submitted to the scrutiny of colleagues in political geography. This is not a common practice among us, and I consider it a privilege to have my text read, analyzed, and commented on by experienced geographers who have devoted their valuable time to this task. And here is a special thank you to Wanderley Messias da Costa, Aldomar Ruckert, Antonio Angelo Martins Fonseca, and Adilar Antonio Cegolini for their comments, critiques, and insights on issues that, in each of their views, deserve further discussion. Collectively, these readings bring the intellectual competence and generosity of my colleagues, as they offer their contributions on political geography, going far beyond what my text, given its objective, would be capable of offering. Political geography has, therefore, much to gain from the issues raised by the essay and the debate initiated by my colleagues' texts and by this text, which aims to clarify doubts, reduce controversies, and—why not—more clearly define the terms of the most pertinent ones.

Each of the texts expresses the line of work of its authors, who, although all from the field of political geography, differ from one another, which demonstrates the richness and possibilities of the field. In this sense, I propose a journey through the issues that most directly challenge the conceptual starting points assumed in my essay. I emphasize here that by agreeing to produce a text on political geography for debate, I set a goal—not an explicit one, but one that ran through the entire presentation: to develop arguments demonstrating that Brazilian political geography has more to gain by freeing itself from the conceptual prison of critical geography, which has become the consensus since the 1970s and which, like any environment of theoretical and conceptual consensus, silences debate. It is from this perspective that I seek to discuss the spectres subsumed within the concept of politics, which, within this theoretical framework, is subjected to the economic determinants of class struggle,

CASTRO, I. E

that is, which subordinates the distributive conflicts of the political sphere to those of the economic sphere, which are productive conflicts. Society as a whole and its territory are present in both, but the problem of distributive justice, so dear to the critical strand, lies in politics and not in the economy. The choice to define and understand politics through the theoretical frameworks of political science stems from the greater conceptual pluralism and debate within this discipline, as well as the strong spatial dimension of research in this field. The state as a problem fits into this same perspective; after all, the Marxist framework, more concerned with its disappearance in a classless society, strongly influenced political geography, which, fearing a return to the classical geography of the state and the General Staff, turned toward society and social movements. Not that both are unimportant, but understanding them without considering the institutional constraints imposed by the territorial model of the contemporary nation-state, with all its limitations, is incomplete.

Taking a position outside the consensus in a discipline is no trivial task, since adhering to consensus brings the comfort of belonging, of speaking the same intellectual language as others, and of sharing the same viewpoints on the various subjects that the world of research offers. In a consensus-driven academic environment, intellectual independence is a choice—not always an easy one, but a necessary one, as it helps open up new avenues of research. In the case of Brazilian political geography, I believe that the creation of Geopol¹ and the many dissertations and theses defended—with PhDs working at different universities and public agencies across the country who now have their own research groups and research directions—has created a multiplier effect of new themes and new questions. However, I must agree with Wanderley Messias da Costa when he draws attention to battles that are not worth fighting and for which reason he gave up on them long ago. I am grateful to him for alerting me to this point. There are very interesting paths in contemporary political geography—plural and complex in its multiple scales and institutional frameworks—that remain to be explored.

¹ Study and Research Group on Politics and Territory, created in 1994.

CASTRO, I. E

Having made these observations, I will now focus on the analyses of the essay. I have chosen to address each one individually, given the specificities they present. I begin with the work of Professor Wanderley Messias da ^{Costa}, who, with his elegance and generosity, recognized and alerted me to the lost epistemological battles in the academic world of critical geography—battles he abandoned long ago. My dear colleague not only drew my attention to the futility of this struggle but also showed the path forward by including in his text reflections on his intellectual work—consistent and always timely. I insist, however, that political geography must continue its course, critical of criticism, always opening itself to new perspectives that innovate and breathe fresh air into the field. The concrete problems of different political spaces are right there, before our eyes, flooding our territories at every level of politics and demanding from geography an attention that critical epistemologies fail to perceive. But he is right; we must set aside the battle—which is, after all, unproductive—and continue the task of bringing utility to political geography with themes such as political demonstrations in the streets and their ramifications in the different spheres of institutional political spaces, such as the ^{legislative branch}.³ But, even though I am determined to give up this endless struggle, Wanderley takes a different approach when he demonstrates the relevance of the conceptual framework of the classics of geopolitics, setting aside the inconsistencies of critical perspectives that claim geopolitics is a narrative, a discourse of power, and not a strategy of competition between states for zones of influence. In any case, convinced that this “insufficiency of a human science in its object and method is not perceived or acknowledged as such by our community—that is to say, whether we appreciate this fact or not—it has been proven that politics and the state are not part of the habitat in which thought originated and has evolved, and the

² Costa, W. M. Reflections on Current Trends in Political Geography and Geopolitics (in conversation with Iná Elias de Castro). *Espaço & Geografia Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2022

³ Sérgio Silva Borges. Political spaces and democracy: The streets during the June 2013 protests and their political-institutional impacts. 2020. Thesis (Geography) - UFRJ; Guilherme Felix Machado Filho. Spaces of politics: the relationship between the political space of assemblies and the political space of the streets in the context of contemporary Brazilian political demonstrations. 2017. Master's Thesis (Geography) - UFRJ; Rubens Buarque Gusmão. From territorial integration to the formation of political space: reflecting on democracy in pacified communities—the case of Morro Dona Marta. 2014. Master's Thesis (Geography) - UFRJ

CASTRO, I. E

“Given the prevailing discourses in geography as an academic discipline, it is not productive to dwell on this issue” (Costa, 2022, p.3)

He also agrees with me that sociology is not the best partner for political geography, much less economics, he notes. “But (yes) political science, for which politics is the central and constitutive category of institutions and organized forms of power struggles in modern society.” But it is regarding the Modern State—a crucial issue for this debate—that he points out that “geographers steer clear of any considerations regarding it, a serious problem highlighted in my 1992 book and a trend that has expanded with the advances of so-called critical theory since the 1980s...” (Costa, 2022, p.2). In fact, these are recurring issues also highlighted in my 2005 book *Geography and Politics: Territory, Scales of Action, and Institutions*, currently in its sixth edition.

Building on the discussions presented in my essay, Wanderley delves deeper and offers severe criticism of the “obvious contradiction for those in the field: even political geography and geopolitics have become targets of persistent offensives aimed at their depoliticization, de-statization, and deterritorialization” (Costa, op. cit., p. 3). He draws attention to the reason for his withdrawal from the epistemological struggle in political geography and geopolitics “in an academic community not in the least interested in it.” His text goes far beyond mine, with a deepening of the discussions in geopolitics, his field of expertise, which must be considered carefully.

I consider my colleague’s text a must-read for its critique of the epistemological deviations of a political geography that has come to ignore the territorial power of the state, whether based on Foucault’s elaborations or inspired by Wallerstein’s world-system theory. In both cases, the questions raised by Michel ^{Mann}⁴ regarding the foundation of the state’s territorial power are ignored in geography. Wanderley Messias da Costa’s contribution is also significant for its examination of the fundamental issues of contemporary geopolitics and the geographer’s role in addressing them. Especially the problem

⁴ Mann, Michael. *The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms, and Outcomes*. In: Hall, J. A. (Ed.) *States in History*. Imago Editora, Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

CASTRO, I. E

of wars—a question never resolved in human history—highlighting identity-based conflicts and the many episodes of violence triggered by any war. Wanderley concludes his remarks by drawing attention to the extensive body of Brazilian academic work in the fields of political geography, geopolitics, and territorial management. I have no doubts about this, although I consider that in the particular case of political geography, there are many works in which politics is subordinated to the economy. I have not addressed a state-of-the-art review of Brazilian political geography—something that deserves to be done—but my suspicion regarding this subordination is confirmed by the constant search for bibliography at every stage of the research and article production I have been conducting for many years.

The text by Professor Aldomar ^{Ruckert}, a colleague with significant experience in Brazilian political geography and in debates and contributions to territorial management, revisits the works of geographers Paul Claval and Yves Lacoste—essential references for the discipline—and traces their influence on geography curricula and research groups across the country. My colleague draws attention to the renewal of research in political geography stemming from the CONGEOs (Congress of Political Geography, Geopolitics, and Territorial Management). His text goes far beyond mine in exploring the developments in the field of political geography research, offering a contribution to those dedicated to the subject, both within and outside the discipline of geography. His observations make clear the importance and vitality of the discipline across its various branches and subfields and raise some points that I believe deserve to be discussed and, in some cases, clarified.

The first is his question: “Does Political Geography have something to gain from Political Science, but is the opposite true?” (Ruckert, 2022, p. 31). There is a certain unease here with the idea I advocate that the conceptual foundations of political science are more useful to geography than those of sociology, which are much more appropriate for the discipline. Perhaps this is a good moment to clarify that political science makes extensive use of concepts from geography and draws upon its

⁵ Ruckert, Aldomar Arnaldo. “Political Geography: What Is It, After All, and What Is It For?” by Iná E. de Castro. Comments and reflections. *Espaço & Geografia Journal*, v.25, no. 1, 2022

CASTRO, I. E

classics on different occasions. To cite a better-known example, the electoral geography proposed by geographer and political analyst André Siegfried is an important field of political science that geographers are very slowly reclaiming. In political analyses of relations between states, the classics of political geography and geopolitics are being revived. Let it be clear: there is no epistemological submission to political science, just as there is none regarding the many concepts from sociology appropriated by the discipline. However, I acknowledge the discomfort with epistemological plurality in a discipline that is heavily influenced by critical perspectives, as Wanderley Messias da Costa rightly pointed out in his article in this same journal, for whom there is little to discuss with an academic community not at all interested in this debate.

A second point to debate and clarify is your understanding that political space signifies “territory,” as in its original form in Ratzel, although this author does not explicitly use the term, as my colleague rightly clarifies. There is an interesting issue here, since the idea of conceptualizing political space and working with it empirically has opened up a broad field of research, as the theses, dissertations, and monographs from Geopol demonstrate. Sticking to the concept of territory is an option, especially for those dedicated to investigating issues of territorial management, but reducing the idea of political space to this concept is to set aside the broad possibilities of political action in space that are not covered by the more common aspects of the concept, which in many cases perceives territory as a force field of hegemonic economic agents, leaving no room for the surreptitious dynamics of political subjects. In contrast to the institutional rigidity of territory, political space is the realm of transgression, and that is why it is interesting.

The third point to clarify concerns my statement that our country’s social history is not a pretty one. It seems to me that there is a contradiction here in your statement regarding the country’s liberal democratic regime, but the reference to my colleague Diego Pautasso and his citation of historian Domênico Losurdo and his work, such as

CASTRO, I. E

“Counter-History of Liberalism” (Ruckert, 2022, p. 36) caused me some confusion, especially when the adversative conjunction “however” is placed before the citation of my statement.

I will try to clarify what I mean by saying that the country’s social history is not pretty. I have already stated in other texts that Brazil is a prime example of elitism, social inequalities, violence, poverty, and exclusion. I have also written about how Brazilian politics is dominated by a large number of groups with veto power, which makes any structural reforms in the fields of social or economic policy extremely slow and difficult. The perspective of democracy in the country is fundamental to bringing these difficulties to light, and this is what I have sought to focus on, from my doctoral thesis on the role of the Northeastern elite in *national politics*⁶ to my competitive examination lecture for a full professorship at UFRJ on democracy. However, for colleagues in the field of critical geography—and this has been the battle that my colleague Wanderley Messias da Costa subtly suggests I abandon—the diagnosis, which is indeed evident and repetitive, is considered more valuable than an understanding of the more subtle mechanisms for preserving the status quo. Hence my greater concern with understanding the country without the simplifications of the diatribes against capitalism, liberalism, democracy, and everything else that is not the great revolution—which, incidentally, is quite out of fashion in this 21st century after all the examples from 20th-century history.

The fourth point refers to my colleague’s confusion regarding a possible contradiction between the interface with political science and the importance of territory as a theme in geography. Understanding the history and genesis of the state as an object of investigation should be a basic agenda in geography. This agenda existed in the classics of political geography and was abandoned with Marxist-inspired critical geography and Leninist perspectives on the end of the state. In fact, it is impossible to understand this fundamental geographical object for the discipline without knowing the most important thinkers of modernity since the 16th century, such as Machiavelli, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville, who

⁶ Castro, I.E. *The Myth of Necessity: Discourse and Practice of Northeastern Regionalism*. Rio de Janeiro: 1st ed., Editora Bertrand, 1992; 2nd ed., Terra Escrita, 2021.

CASTRO, I. E

established their premises and influenced the course of European history and the world under their influence. And there is no contradiction with the notion of territory, given that there is no state without it. Machiavelli, at the end of his letter to The Prince and his advice for the creation of a lasting state, draws attention to the risks of a territorially fragmented Italy vulnerable to the greed of other European powers. There are many reflections on the territorial foundation of the modern state, although geography often ignores them, which is a pity since the classics were unaware of disciplinary divisions and shared their knowledge on the subject. In fact, just as the concept of territory does not have its origins in geography but was appropriated by it, the same is true of the idea of the state, conceived in philosophy and appropriated by different fields of knowledge. There is no reason why geography should not be one of them.

Finally, I turn to the concluding remarks in which my colleague notes that my text is dense and at times somewhat opaque; this is a comment I acknowledge and appreciate, although I have in my favor the difficulty of covering a subject as broad as political geography in just a few pages. Nevertheless, the wealth of information and digressions in my colleague's text indicate just how useful the essay was to the debate.

It is worth recalling here the issue of neo-institutionalism and the theoretical gap to which the author refers. This was a topic we explored at Geopol in the 2000s, and it yielded fruitful results. We produced doctoral dissertations, master's theses, monographs, and ^{articles} that may be useful to

⁷ Maria Monica Vieira Caetano O'Neill. Institutional Territorial Bases: New Configurations in the Northeast Region. 2004. Dissertation (Ph.D. in Geography) – UFRJ. Advisors: Iná Elias de Castro; Antonio Angelo Martins da Fonseca. Decentralization and Municipal Institutional Strategies for Resource Mobilization: A Comparative Study of Feira de Santana, Ilhéus, and Vitória da Conquista - BA (1997-2003). 2003. Thesis (Ph.D. in Geography) - UFRJ. Advisors: Iná Elias de Castro; Fabio de Oliveira Neves. Politics and its Institutions in Environmental Issues. 2004. Final Course Project. (Bachelor's Degree in Geography) – UFRJ, CNPq. Advisor: Iná Elias de Castro; Juliana Nunes Rodrigues. The Municipality as a Scale of Management in Contemporary Brazil. 2004. Final Course Project. (Bachelor's Degree in Geography) UFRJ, CNPq. Advisor: Iná Elias de Castro; [CASTRO, I. E.](#). Territoriality and institutionality of social inequalities in Brazil. Potentials for disruption and preservation of the local scale. *Geosp*, São Paulo, vol. 18, pp. 35–51, 2005; [CASTRO, I. E.](#); RODRIGUES, J. N. Territoriality of participatory institutions in Brazil. Location as a reason for difference. *IEEE Latin America Journal*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 10, pp. 1–20, 2004; [CASTRO, I. E.](#). Institutions and citizenship in the Northeast region. *MERCATOR - UFC Geography Journal*, Fortaleza, vol. 3, pp. 45–52, 2003; [CASTRO, I. E.](#). Institutions

CASTRO, I. E

my colleague's questions. In this, as in other areas, geography must look beyond its own field for conceptual debates and material useful for research in the discipline. There is a whole conceptual strand of institutionalist thought in economics, political science, and even geography that helps us reflect on the sphere of action of public and private actors.

Regarding the state as a problem in critical geography, I consider this debate exhausted for me, not least because when I see the arguments put forward by this field—such as those offered by Diego Pautasso, whom my colleague Aldomar cites as an interlocutor—regarding “extensive literature discussing the relative autonomy of the state,” I recall that a quick survey of this literature, which I know well, makes it evident just how relative this autonomy truly is and how its institutional framework is always seen as subject to the hegemonic interests of capital, rendering the State an epiphenomenon—which explains the scant interest it arouses. I must also confess that I am always astonished, especially when, in the midst of the 21st century, I witness revolutionary arguments in geography subsumed within anti-capitalist diatribes. Under the guise of the virtue of the good fight, there is a profound ignorance regarding the renewal of debates within the field of Marxism itself—especially in Italy since the 1970s—regarding the geography of the contemporary world, and regarding the vast literature that seeks to understand it through research in geography, geopolitics, history, politics, economics, and so on, which renders many of the arguments shouted by the ill-informed and, in some cases, naive critical wing obsolete.

My colleague Antonio Angelo Martins da Fonseca, since his doctoral dissertation, has been working with the institutional perspective in political geography, especially at the municipal level, which he identified as an institutional political territory. With his prudent distance from the more radical critical currents, he navigates the more applied strands of political geography without, however, losing sight of theoretical and conceptual rigor. I consider that this

and territories. Possibilities and limits to the exercise of citizenship in Brazil. *GEOSUL*, vol. 19, pp. 16–32, 2003; [CASTRO, I. E.](#). Territoriality of institutional resources in Brazil. *Communes, mobilization, and participation. Revista do IEEA América Latina*, Paris, vol. 1, pp. 1–20, 2003.

CASTRO, I. E

This journey has allowed him to offer a perspective that is at once astute, critical, and generous regarding the issues raised in my essay. His text, which begins in a light and objective manner right from the title, “The Ghost Hunt Is Coming,” has brought visibility to the ghosts and what he called “little ghosts” that geography and political geography have difficulty exorcising.

I appreciate the way my colleague, in his reflections, dissected my text, understood its objective, and made the debate clearer for those interested in it. His analysis clarifies the terms of the controversy I originally proposed, elucidates and refines the central issue of the debate—namely, the specter of politics’ subjugation to the economy and, by extension, of the State as a political-territorial institution. He draws attention to the choice of tools for hunting down these spectres, which “involve, on the one hand, a greater emphasis on dialogue with political science, and on the other, the importance of reflection on the Territorial State for understanding politics” (Fonseca, 2022, p. 59)⁸. And he aptly adds that despite all the global phenomena such as – climate change, the pandemic, economic globalization, drug trafficking, and new international social movements – which intensify the “force field” involving circulation and iconography, they do not signify a rupture with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which established the premises of the modern state system (op. cit., p. 59).

In a humorous vein, he draws attention to the “little ghosts,” such as the lack of clarity regarding the meaning of politics, and highlights the strong resistance of political geographers toward studies and research on spatial/territorial justice. He adds this resistance as yet another “ghost” to the list of those mentioned in my text, noting that, like the others, this one also needs to be exorcised. My colleague makes an important contribution to the debate when he emphasizes the need for new themes and approaches in the development of the discipline, but without excessive pluralism. For him, research involving governance, the spatial distribution of goods and services, territorial equity, inequality, etc., can be enriched by the inclusion of

⁸ A.A.M. Fonseca. The Ghost Hunt Is Coming! *Espaço & Geografia Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2022.

CASTRO, I. E

approach to justice. A field of reflection and analysis that enriches political geography.

The latest commentary on the issues raised in my essay on political geography comes from my colleague Adilar Antonio Cigolini, who focused his analysis on the very title of his remarks: “The Question of the State in Contemporary Political Geography.” It is from this unease provoked by the reflections in my text that my colleague examines research in Political Geography in the country and the place occupied, directly or indirectly, by the State. This concern is linked to his research trajectory focused on territorial division at the local scale, specifically the creation of municipalities. And he reports, something I know well, “the questioning gaze of many political geographers: but what about the State? With so many problems out there, are you still focused on the State?” (Cigolini, 2022, p. 64)⁹. This is certainly a fundamental problem in Brazilian political geography, also raised by Wanderley Messias da Costa, who imagines one could ignore the discipline’s central issue.

Cigolini makes an important contribution in his text by surveying the different thematic axes in the proceedings of CONGEO—the Brazilian Congress of Political Geography, Geopolitics, and Territorial Management—and investigating how the state is addressed in the papers presented. His intuition, confirmed after the surveys, is that the state has been much more present than it initially appears. Although exploratory in nature, his research indicated that the State, as a territorial institution, is present directly or indirectly in most of the papers presented at those Congresses. I do not reproduce the collected data here, but I consider his text required reading for anyone who wants to learn a little more about the evolution of political geography themes in recent decades in the country.

The first conclusion drawn from his survey is that the State remains a central object in Political Geography and that “directly, indirectly, or across the themes, it is present.” From there, he problematizes my

⁹ A.A., Cigolini. The Question of the State in Contemporary Political Geography. *Espaço & Geografia Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2022.

CASTRO, I. E

the question of how to practice political geography without understanding what this model is. As a geographer who researches precisely the territorial dimension of state structure, my colleague explores this theme with expertise and raises the necessary questions. He asserts that even if particular groups create spaces through their desires, values, and practices, the state, as a vector of power, interacts in some way with these desires, values, and practices, whether negatively or positively.

In his analysis, he observes the problem of the gap between what would be the ideal theoretical model of the rule of law and the daily reality of the many injustices in societies governed by it, and points to a gap in understanding this model of territorial political governance. Citing the Brazilian case as a challenge in the face of the country's historical social inequality, he points to the paradox between the institution's legitimate power and its co-optation by interest groups that are far from republican. And here, attention must be drawn to the fact implicit in his analysis—though apparently not clearly perceived—that the state is a social construct and, as such, will reflect the virtues and vices of society. It seems to me that this is an uncomfortable but necessary issue that often runs through research in geography and establishes the premise that society is the realm of virtue, while the state or politics is the realm of vice.

It is in this sense that my colleague concludes regarding the mediating role of institutions and the need to understand the state based on concrete realities, within the historical, sociological, and geographical contexts of a specific society. I fully agree with him and have been saying this for several decades. My question is whether this argument will be taken into account. For many colleagues, the abstract model of the Hobbesian state of nature is very distant, especially when compared to Rousseau's ideologically more generous model of the noble savage. To consider Hobbes's much more realistic model is to reflect that, as bad as it is, it is worse without it.

I conclude by thanking you once again for the opportunity to clarify doubts, highlight points of view, and identify issues and themes that deserve to be explored in greater depth. And I reaffirm my conviction regarding the

CASTRO, I. E

importance of politics and its role within the institutions that govern social life, including those that make up the structures of the state and the government. The current moment of such flagrant threats to the principles of Brazilian democracy—especially the basic principle that whoever loses an election must step down—is visible within a political landscape that seeks to be disruptive, with social actors occupying public spaces and, paradoxically, turning these spaces into non-political ones, that is, into spaces of violence against the very principles of politics—this deserves special attention from political geography.