Politics in the Landscape:
Reading Toponymy in Political Geography

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Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in geographical scholarship in the politics of geographical names and toponymy. Much of this recent work examines the contested politics surrounding place naming. This paper surveys recent trends in political geography research on place names and uses examples to illustrate five dominant threads in this work: 1) *Post-transition*, such as renaming of places in central and eastern Europe that twenty-five years ago transitioned from communism to market economies 2) *(Post)colonial naming and state formation,* such as the renaming of cities and provinces in India, 3) *Post-conflict/Reconciliation*, including discussions in the US South and South Africa about legacies of oppression and civil rights movements, 4) *Political economy and social justice*, including the role of capital and corporations in renaming streets and stadiums, and 5) *Power and Sovereignty in International Relations*, such disputes over cartographic representations of islands or landscape features along borders or in places of contested sovereignty. Examples in the paper are drawn globally from the extensive literature in place-name studies as well as from the author's work in Germany and the U.S.

1. Introduction

This paper provides a simple typology of recent scholarship in English-language geography, especially the subfield of political geography, on the politics of geographical names and toponymy. Once considered a rather moribund realm of taxonomies of where places derived their names, since the 1990s a critical turn in the field of place name studies has enlivened the field (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010, Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009, Rose-Redwood 2011) and stimulated renewed interest in the ways in which toponymy and conflicts over place names alternately reflect, obscure, and magnify underlying social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. It should be stated at

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the outset that this is a highly selective rendering of work on topics related to place names; indeed, informal toponymies a topic not addressed in this paper are arguably just as important in many geographical contexts as the formal ones that garner much more attention.

Given the theme of the conference and proceedings, we have approached the topic in the vein of how the field of place names studies might be approached in a university-level course in political geography. The paper therefore presents five categories that emerge in geographical scholarship on place names over the last twenty years or so. As with any typology, the categories are neither exhaustive nor fixed, and many examples could fit in multiple categories. The categories we identified are: 1) Post-transition, or the renaming of geographic features following a transition of government or from one political-economic order to another; 2) (Post)colonial naming and state formation, including both studies of colonial practices of place naming as well as postcolonial efforts to rename places; 3) Post-conflict/Reconciliation; 4) Political economy and social justice ; and 5) Power and Sovereignty in International Relations, or the controversies that emerge over the naming of places, often features in global commons such as seas or outer space, in the context of the modern sovereign states in an international system.

2. Post-transition

Much of the work on post-transition place names focuses on geographic features such as squares, parks, and especially streets. Street names undergird the hegemonic political order of a given time-space (Azaryahu 1997). In post-transition contexts, changing a street name sends a "small but highly symbolic statement with a high propagandist impact that history had changed course" (Light 2004). Much of this work has focused on areas of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union following the collapse of communism in the 1990s (see, e.g., Azaryahu 1997, Light 2004), but of course political transitions and subsequent efforts to reclaim space in history have been around for a long time. The current Place de la Concorde in Paris reflects the transitions from the monarchy (Place Louis XV) to revolution (Place de la Revolution, where the guillotine was set up) to reconciliation (Place de la Concorde) to restoration of the monarchy (Place Louis XV again, then Place Louis XVI) to restoration of the republic

(Place de la Concorde). In post-Saddam Baghdad, a spate of renaming was performed both by occupying forces as well as by the "liberated" locals (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010).

Germany in the 20th century witnessed several major upheavals in political systems and consequently also various well-documented place-naming efforts. Within months after the defeat of the Nazis in 1945, a local commission in Berlin was tasked with bringing the street names of the city in line with the ideals of a newly democratic Germany (Azaryahu 2011). This included not only renaming the obvious offenders, such as Adolf-Hitler-Platz and Horst-Wessel-Strasse, but also imperial-era names of generals, Junckers, and others that were associated with Prussian militarism. Only a fraction of the 10% of Berlin's place names deemed by the commission as in need of renaming were actually renamed (ibid.), and within a few years as Berlin found itself at the center of the Cold War, other political priorities occupied local officials and occupying forces.

The toponymy of post-1989 East Germany has been studied in depth as well, and the lack of a unified approach offers some revealing insights into the role of memory and politics in post-communist places. Some cities, such as Rostock, took a radical, or "maximalist," approach to renaming, viewing the communist era as a stain and its heroes as criminals, thus necessitating a wholesale renaming of streets and other places named after communists (Azaryahu 1997). Other cities, such as Leipzig (generally viewed as the home of the 1989 uprisings), were more moderate in their approach, keeping place names associated with certain aspects of revolutionary ideas (Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, all Germans), while purging Stalinist/Soviet names (ibid.). In Berlin, Wilhelmstrasse, which was the pre-war equivalent of Britain's Whitehall or France's Quai d'Orsay, had been renamed by GDR officials after its first prime minister Otto Grotewohl, then after 1989 "Tolerance Street" until its more recent re-incarnation as Wilhelmstrasse (ibid.).

3. (Post)colonial naming and state formation

This category includes a variety of examples from colonial and postcolonial eras, as well as in contexts where newly formed states seek to assert power through naming practices. Most cases in the literature focus on the cultural and class politics involved in processes to rename landscape features to purge legacies of colonialism and/or com-

memorate newfound independence, cultural heritage, or national self-awareness.

In the lead-up to Irish independence in the early 20th century, the Gaelic League published lists of the Gaelic names of places that had been anglicized by the British (Nash 1999). This included not only landscape features and towns, but in the urban landscape of Dublin, hundreds of street names that bore the names of kings, queens, nobles, and other famous English persons. More recently, India has embarked on efforts to rename cities and places in order to assert the national imaginary of India as a Hindu homeland; Bombay becoming Mumbai is not just about distancing the city from its British past, but also telegraphing Hindu nationalism to domestic constituencies, especially Muslims (Hansen 2002). Alice Springs in central Australia, a city that for much of the 20th century was off limits to Aborigines, has more recently been co-named Mparntwe to commemorate the legacy of Aborigines in the area as well as part of "new national imaginary of Australia as a postcolonial multicultural society" (Short 2011).

In some cases, colonial activities are still very much in the present (Gregory 2004), such as in the naming of West Bank Settlements and other features (Judea and Samaria, e.g.) in occupied territories (Cohen and Kliot 1992). While settlements are given names on maps and signs, graffiti and common usage may suggest the divergent opinion of local Arab residents.

4. Post-conflict / Reconciliation

Observing the toponymic landscape can provide insight into processes of reconciliation, revealing either the maturity of the reconciliation process or its inability to progress. Reconciliation involves the righting of past injustices, which requires first an acknowledgement of the injustices as such. On this front geographers have been very active (for an overview of this literature with reference to the US South, see Alderman 2000).

In the US South reconciliation requires measures that encourage inclusiveness because of its legacy of chattel slavery and the following century that were marred by institutionalized forms of exclusion for African Americans in social, political, and economic practices. Alderman (2000) and Dwyer and Alderman (2008) have noted that honors for people and events mediated through the landscape is indeed a social practice. Honoring people and events through toponymy is often more subtle than memorials

and monuments, as they do not demand space primarily purposed for commemoration, but nevertheless is still a form of commemoration. One of the many interpretations that can be drawn from these material processes are associated with qualification and legitimization. The practice of honoring through commemorative place naming attempts to suggest that the honorees, as well as their beliefs and actions, are socially endorsed and acceptable. It may also act as a means to legitimize one of many competing historical narrative. Guyot and Seethal (2007) discuss political toponymy in post-apartheid South Africa and suggest that though the use toponymy can serve to divide, it may also be used in pluralistic ways to unify the identity of citizens with different languages and cultures.

5. Political economy and social justice

The shrinking of public space by increased privatization has been noted by geographers (Mitchell 1995), activists (Davis 1990), and others (Vasagar 2012) who also suggest that processes of privatization diminishes democratic participation in place naming. Toponymy is part of the spatial reconfiguration that the public and private spheres are undergoing. Rose-Redwood (2011, 34) suggests that, "one of the major transformations that will likely reshape the toponymic landscape of the next century is the commercialization of public place-naming systems."

This phenomena is not exclusive to US sports venues and it does not always result in benign fan disappointment of stadiums "selling-out". Many soccer, cricket, and rugby fields across the world have adopted new corporate names. South Africa's (formerly) Newlands Stadium, the second oldest rugby pitch in the world was renamed DHL Newlands in 2010 after the German logistics company (Gibbs 2010). Protests against plans to rename stadiums have also materialized (Dennis 2011). Corporate branding of US sports stadiums can be traced back to August Busch II's attempt to rename Sportsman's Park, where the St. Louis Cardinals play, to Budweiser Stadium in 1953. The MLB did not allow it, though he was able to name it Busch Stadium after his family name. It was not until the 1990s that naming rights deal became increasing lucrative in the US. According to Kalb (2013) the steep escalation in prices for naming rights can be traced to 1999 when FedEx agree to purchase the naming rights of Washington Redskins' stadium for $205 million over 27 years. Recently more global companies like

airlines, banks, energy providers and technology companies have become the most willing to spend large amounts in order to reach fan-consumers (Schaul and Belson 2013).

Non-sports related place rebranding is also emerging which involve the fusing of private companies and purely public spaces. Rose-Redwood (2011) suggests that corporate branding on public infrastructure is an allusion to a potential process of corporate take-over of public namescapes. It is further suggested that this process, mediated through the financial acquisition of commodified naming rights, is an extension of corporate powers reshaping of the publically-sanctioned toponymic landscape. As an example of this process Rose-Redwood (2011) cites a private-public partnerships in the city of Dubai. In 2006 the growing UAE municipality began construction of a new metro rail system and in order to partially offset the construction and maintenance costs the Metro, the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) of the Government of Dubai planned to sell the naming rights to number of metro stations to corporate sponsors.

Places that are repurposed may retain their previous names in common usage, and thus their historically associated meanings, may also be used for misrepresentation. Toponymic strategies may be employed to covertly mask the reduction of public space. Take for example, Paternoster Square in London. Despite the fact that the term "square" usually connotes an open public space, and ". . .that every architectural statement, planning application, and press release, in the protracted redevelopment of Paternoster Square, described this 'private land' as 'public space (Moore 2011),'" during a 2011 Occupy protest activists targeting financial institutions were forced from the Square. The Square, which is the location of the London Stock Exchange, is owned by the Mitsubishi Estate Company. An injunction stated that, "The protestors [had] no right to conduct a demonstration or protest on the Square, which is entirely private property (Vasagar 2012)." Compare this to Trafalgar Square, the heart of London, which is maintained by directly elected city officials (london.gov.uk). The official websites of both squares note their large open spaces, and each square enjoys centerpiece decorative columns. Paternoster Square is an example of the production of "pseudo-public," or "publoid" spaces (Moore 2011).

6. Power and sovereignty in international relations

Controversies over naming conventions in this category are among the most heavily covered in global media, but curiously geographers have written less about this area. In fact, our research suggests that this series of workshops has produced the vast majority of scholarly interventions in the naming of seas and other global commons (e.g. Murphy 1999). Other controversies, such as those over the Falklands/Malvinas, Burma/Myanmar, or whether the British Isles should be referred to as the Islands of the North Atlantic (IONA), as was proposed during the Northern Ireland peace process, have received surprisingly little attention in scholarly venues, perhaps owing to the fact that these are both highly politicized and highly subjective disputes that allow little room for critical engagement.[1]

Two examples will suffice to illustrate how naming disputes offer insights into power relations in an international context (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009). One is the British decision to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II during her diamond jubilee year by renaming a portion of the Antarctic Peninsula "Queen Elizabeth Land" (Dodds 2014). The process of claiming by (re)naming in the supposedly de-politicized Antarctic region is provocative, since parts of the territory being given the Queen Elizabeth Land moniker are also claimed by Argentina and Chile. But it also offers some insights into what Dodds calls "embodied performance of polar statecraft" (ibid.). – in short, the United Kingdom is seeking to assert presence and authority in the South Atlantic region, where the UK maintains strategic interests as a global power. Within a week of the UK announcement, the government of Argentina rejected the renaming and the UK's "imperial ambitions" in Antarctica (ibid., 332).

While areas with unclear or contested sovereignty will continue to be a source of naming disputes, whether the South China Sea / Bien Dong, the Sea of Japan / East Sea, or elsewhere, an area that will likely see more intense interest will be beyond the earth's surface. Officially, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) is responsible for celestial nomenclature, including of planets, small celestial bodies, and landscape features on planets and moons. A recent controversy pitted the IAU against a commercial venture called Uwingu, which had purported to allow individuals to name craters on Mars for a fee (which many people did). The IAU maintains that it is technically not

[1] It should be noted that some of these conflicts have received sustained attention by political geographers and other scholars, but that attention has not been on the naming controversies themselves for the most part (e.g. Dodds 1998, Dodds 1993).

possible for individuals to buy feature names, or star names,[2] but of course the legitimacy of the IAU in an international system of rules and norms may be no match for the political economy of vanity. Crowdsourcing has recently been used to rename two of Pluto's moons, although to the chagrin of William Shatner and Star Trek fans, the most popular choice "Vulcan" was not chosen as one of the moons' new names (Showstack 2013).

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