

The Political Geology of Area

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In her book *Faces of the State*, the anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) interrogates the cultural and political constitution of Anadolu [Anatolia] following the formation of the Turkish republic. As she reminds us, the republic's founder '[Kemal] Atatürk...began to cultivate the idea of Anadolu as the core of Turkey...and the habits of Anatolian villages were studied and interpreted to be representative of the survival of Turkish culture as distinct from the dynastic culture of the Ottoman elites in the former imperial city, Istanbul' (Navaro-Yashin, 2002, pp.47-48). In short, the imagined cultural unity of Anatolia provided the essence on which the idea of a Turkish nation could be grounded. In this way the constitution of Anatolia effaced both the violent legacy of the First World War and the continuing heterogeneity of the Turkish population in its aftermath.

Anatolia, I suggest, provides us with an instructive example for thinking about area in political geography. After all, it is a region that geographers and researchers in Area Studies have neglected, and arguably continue to neglect. It did not form part of the core of any of the great Areas (Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the former Soviet Union, South and East Asia) that dominated the study of geopolitics in the twentieth century. In this Anglo-American disciplinary context, Anatolia seems to be understood not so much as an area, but as a space left by the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of the first world war. Certainly Anatolia has acquired renewed geopolitical significance in recent years, given the growth of the Turkish economy and its proximity to war in Iraq and Syria, but it is nonetheless still positioned on the margins of 'area' (McConnell, this volume).

Here, however, I want to focus not on the shifting geopolitical significance of Anatolia, but the constitution of the region as an object of geological research. In doing so, I turn to reconsider the question, central to the work of many late nineteenth and early twentieth century geographers, of the relation between political and physical geography in what Herbertson termed 'definite areas of the Earth' (Herbertson, 1905, p.301, Powell, this volume). My contention is that if we are to rethink area in political geography, we have to rethink the political significance not just of physical geography but also of geology and the other geosciences.

While Navaro-Yashin provides a rare analysis of the political significance of post-Ottoman Anatolia, the region has also been an important focus for geological research. For geologists, Anatolia is said to be a particularly instructive setting for fieldwork because it provides an ‘excellent opportunity’ for the study of ‘rifting, seafloor spreading, ophiolite genesis and emplacement, collision, continental assembly and neotectonics’ (Robertson et al., 2013, p.1). Moreover, it is a region marked by a number of active areas of seismic activity, including along the length of the North Anatolian fault zone, which extends eastwards from Istanbul and the Marmara Sea, and the East Anatolian fault zone that runs close to the Turkey-Armenia border. Together these two fault systems ‘are responsible for the westward motion of Turkey relative to Eurasia, thus allowing some of the convergence between Arabia and Eurasia to be accommodated’ (Ambraseys, 2009, p.819). For the geologist, Anatolia turns out not to be unified region, but a complex space formed through the collision between tectonic plates that have created ‘a mosaic of several terranes, which were amalgamated [as Anatolia] during the Alpidic orogeny’ (Okay, 2008, p.37). However, although Anatolia is the object of extensive geological research, its geology remains both contested and ‘poorly understood’ (Okay, 2008, p.20).

While Anatolia has become an important focus for geological fieldwork, why should the geology of Anatolia be of any interest to those concerned with the study of political geography? One reason is suggested by the work of the seismologist and engineer Nicholas Ambraseys who, by drawing on a vast range of archival and literary sources, as well as the results of his own archeoseismological fieldwork, compiled a monumental catalogue, focusing on Anatolia, of earthquakes in the Mediterranean and Middle East up to 1900 (Ambraseys, 2009). Ambraseys’s project is intended to address the concerns of earth scientists, engineers and planners who would otherwise lack historical seismological data for the region, but his work also directs us to consider the consequences of earthquakes for social and political life.

Today, Anatolia’s geology continues to be of considerable political significance. The work of the anthropologist Marlene Schäfers (forthcoming), for example, directs us towards the contingent interferences between the 2011 earthquake in the eastern Anatolia city of Van and the lives of the predominantly Kurdish population of the city and their experience of the Turkish state. Rather than assume that the state is more political than the seismic activity of the earth, Schäfers takes seriously her informants’ insistence on the parallels and inter-relations between the disaster of the earthquake and what they experience as the disaster of the state. Indeed for them, the disaster of the

state appears to be inevitable and natural, while the consequences of an earthquake for the construction of the built environment are both unpredictable and simultaneously political and contested.

Likewise, the anthropologist Elizabeth Angell dwells on the interference of geology and politics in Turkey. She documents how the potential threat of an earthquake in the vicinity of Istanbul, caused by the progressive movement of the North Anatolian fault, has been used to justify the demolition of houses designated by the government to be located within 'risk zones'. In her account, the unstable geology of north-west Anatolia, which was most recently manifest in the Marmara earthquake of 1999, has become embroiled in the progressive transformation of Istanbul into 'a concrete megacity' (Angell, 2014, p.669), and the political conflicts to which this transformation contributed.

Neither Schäfers nor Angell are environmental determinists; they do not imagine that politics directly flows from the movements of the earth, or that political geography needs to be grounded in an understanding of the physical environment, as nineteenth-century geographers once argued. Yet they are nonetheless alert to the more-than-human quality of political life. In turn, their ethnographic accounts have resonances, I suggest, with the metaphysics of the philosopher William Connolly. For Connolly (2011, p.7), the world can be understood as a series of zones of temporality or force fields, 'with each temporal force-field periodically encountering others as outside forces': a world of becoming. In different ways, Schäfers and Angell ask us to consider the interference between what Connolly would term diverse force-fields including seismic activity, urban politics, and the history of conflict and violence. In this light, Anatolia is not a unified region at all, but a field marked by a series of interferences generating what Navaro-Yashin (2015) has aptly termed 'reverberations' across time and space.

In the dominant geopolitical imagination of the twentieth century, Anatolia became a border zone, apparently caught in the interstices between the great power blocs of the capitalist and communist world. But as geologists have long recognized, Anatolia might in practice be a particularly instructive region through which to address quite general questions in the discipline. Drawing inspiration from both recent ethnographic and geological studies of Anatolia, I suggest that areas might be understood not as unified or bounded, but as contested multiplicities, constituted by diverse force-fields; spaces that include diverse events and sites of interference and reverberation. In this light, the singularity of areas turns out to be an instructive theoretical problem (cf Jazeel, this

volume). Moreover, if geographers once wrongly imagined that it was possible to provide a holistic account of the geography of 'definite areas', it is nonetheless necessary to attend to the continuing importance of both physical geography and geology for the study of political geography.