

In Defense of ‘Geopolitical Remote Sensing’.

A Reply to Moisiso and Harle.

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First of all, let me express my contentment for having my paper pinpointed by Sami Moisiso and Vilho Harle as a “perfect” example of what they call “geopolitical remote sensing”. If nothing else, my contribution on Finnish geopolitical discourses will be at least briefly remembered for perfectly embodying such “a new critical [Anglo-Saxon] armchair geography” (Moisiso and Harle, 2006, p. 10). I think two major clarifications have here to be made. First, my whole education has been mainly within the Italian historical tradition and - despite almost three years of residency in Colorado - I still look at myself as Italian or, better yet, as European. Second, I think I should thank once again the Center for International Mobility (CIMO) of Finland which invited me to stand up from my ‘armchair’ and spend four months in Finland, working mainly at the University of Oulu.

Having thus briefly addressed the “Anglo-Saxon” and “armchair” criticisms, let me now comment more at length on the “critical” part of this so-called “new critical [Anglo-Saxon] armchair geography” and then focus more specifically on the five criticisms made by Moisiso and Harle on my paper. I will leave out a discussion of the “new” because of lack of space in this reply, but stated briefly, there is nothing new in this ‘armchair’ geographical approach, being in fact very typical of the Western geographical tradition (Quaini, 1975).

Moisiso and Harle blame the “critical or textual turn in geopolitics” for having led to “geopolitical remote sensing”. In other words, from a methodological perspective, they place in question the critical geopolitical project whenever this project heavily relies on textual deconstruction of geopolitical discourses. I cannot offer here a lengthy articulated

reply in defense of critical geopolitics, but let me spend few words in defense of the intellectual legitimacy of ‘geopolitical remote sensing’, which can also offer methodologically-sound suggestions and research paths to be used by on-the-ground or ‘in-place’ research.

Sticking with this metaphor of ‘remote sensing’, I would argue that most geographers know that their own research would be much poorer without the possibility of a ‘glance from the air’ which can detect some patterns or general trends that are much harder or even impossible to acquire by research on the ground. It is a matter of scales. By making explicit both the position from *where* we see and the discursive codes we use for signifying *what* we see, we can escape the trap of being caught into a reifying geopolitical gaze which legitimizes itself as the only true vision (Ó Tuathail, 1996).

The pretension that only ‘in-place’ research as opposed to ‘at distance’ research can bring the subject closer to the truth seems somewhat blind to this epistemological reasoning. Moreover, it has been dismantled by another ‘cultural turn’, the one which took place in the 1980s in anthropology (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford, 1988; Turner, 1989), a discipline evoked by Moisio and Harle in their commentary. Given the general ‘crisis of representation’ advanced by this perspective, it is logical to infer that the distance from the subject becomes irrelevant as far as our knowledge of the subject is concerned. On what epistemological basis can we affirm that a discourse about culture or identity grounded in the field offers a better representation than a discourse produced ‘at distance’? If we go even further along this line, we might also argue with Malesevic (2003) for the impossibility of any theoretical or conceptual attempt which aims at defining and understanding notions of identity.

Without going too far into cognitive relativism, let me just note that the idea of remote sensing, i.e. “studying discourses at a distance, operating on the basis of written texts, documents and other secondary sources” (Paasi, 2000, p. 283) is not methodologically flawed. Neither does it negate the possibility to both ground these discourses in the materiality of the societies from which discourses emanate and to conduct ‘in-place’ research through some form of ethnographic field work and/or analysis of primary sources. What matters and what defines the legitimacy of one method or another are the stated research goals. I will elaborate more on this point by using the

example of my own paper on Finnish geopolitical discourses, but before switching to that topic, I frankly think that this call also needs to be grounded in a similarly sounder theoretical framework – i.e. sounder than the one offered by the two authors and based on the linkage between language, ideas, and politics. Moisio and Harle aptly acknowledge, quoting Brubaker and Cooper (2000), that (national) identity is a problematic and slippery concept. This idea that identity, like culture, is not ontologically given, but can be better grasped as a process, is one of the main legacies of Raymond Williams and cultural studies' authors who have indirectly paved the way to the geographical 'cultural turn' (Jackson, 1989). It is exactly because of this slippery character and ongoing transformation of any identity that it is difficult to argue that one research methodology is better than another. When the very concept of our research remains a theoretically-blurred and contested concept, on what basis can we argue for a method as more legitimate or sounder than another? I am not discarding Moisio and Harle's call for an 'in-place' research methodology, one which closely links "politics, ideas, and language", but I am questioning the (lack of) theoretical authority over which they base their methodological argument, one that resonates with a very modern 'either/or' logic and as such de-legitimizes the validity of any other methodological approach.

Let me now turn to the specific criticism made by Moisio and Harle on my paper as a way to discuss further in depth the validity of a 'remote sensing geopolitics'. My point is that every method is dependent on stated research goals. In my case, the research goal was to understand how 'Finland', as a product of geopolitical discourses, was constructed in literary texts, written by different sectors of the Finnish society, focusing **in particular** on texts written by historians and other Finnish academics. To put Finland in quotations highlights the very purpose of my research, which was not about studying the material reality of a society (Finland), but its literary rendition ('Finland') as presented or 'scripted' by texts. The aim of these texts – either explicit or inferred from my own personal reading of them – was 'to put Finland on the map,' to make Finland visible to non-Finns. From this research perspective, it is clear that what Moisio and Harle call 'secondary sources' constitute in fact 'primary sources' for my research. It is true that my research targets only literary sources, but it does this consciously and leaves open the

possibility of undertaking further investigation aimed at exploring the linkages between these texts and the material conditions that produced them.

In their first critique, Moisio and Harle castigate the paper for its “random selection” of sources and for “a highly heterogeneous group of people quoted”. Actually the bibliographical search on which the paper is based was conducted systematically over a period of almost six years, in order to find all possible texts written in English which presented Finland’s history, identity, national characters, etc. I decided to stop the collection of reference materials when every new collected item failed to offer additional information in relation to the one gathered to that point. At the end of this search, 380 sources (books, book chapters, academic articles, magazine articles, and encyclopedic entries) were collected and served as a basis for writing over 250 pages of an unpublished manuscript from which the article published in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* was based.¹ Among these sources, Moisio and Harle will also find references to the speeches of Finnish Presidents Ahtisaari and Halonen. The fact that some of these authors have a foreign background (D. Kirby, W.R. Mead, F. Singleton, or W.A. Wilson) does not invalidate the consistency of the literature that I sampled because these authors are considered as ‘classic’ by Finnish authors themselves who refer to them often.

In relation to the accusation of heterogeneity of the materials collected, I personally see as a plus the fact that I searched a large spectrum of literary texts, without confining my findings to the production of one sector of the Finnish society.

In order to systematize all the literary texts collected, I then decided to adopt the distinction made by Moisio and Harle (2002) between ‘identity politics’ and ‘national identity’. Contrary to them, however, I did not use this distinction in methodological terms, but only in operational terms, as a way of distinguishing between discourses aimed at giving ‘Finland’ a role and an identity on the international stage (*identity politics*) and discourses aimed at structuring the internal domestic space as an integrated, organic, unitary identity (*national identity*). Although operatively separated, these two dimensions actually intertwine and influence each other in an ongoing process: it is precisely from this dynamic encounter that ‘Finland’ is discursively produced. This mutual link between

¹ The manuscript is available in digital format for anybody who will send a written request to the Author.

identity politics and national identity is particularly evident in the ‘between East and West’ discourse.

In their third criticism, Moisio and Harle accuse me of confusing identity politics and national identity and therefore of not having understood what actually is a well-known interpretation of Kekkonen’s foreign policy, namely its ‘liturgy’ (Immonen, 1989) of praising the East as a tactic for getting closer to the West. There is nothing in my paper that suggests such ignorance, which would be very blatant if it were true. On the contrary I attempted to show – as documented in historiographical terms (Nevakivi, 1999) - that in order to make such identity politics credible (to make it believable for the Soviet leadership), Finnish national identity had to resonate along the same lines. This explains the focus on the ‘Eastern’ (i.e. Karelian) elements of the Finnish culture, during the years of Kekkonen’s presidency (1956-81), as a way of balancing the dominant ‘Western’ elements.

Having so addressed Moisio and Harle’s first and third critiques, I will now focus on their other comments. In answering their second critique, I will omit a discussion of their argument about my treatment of ‘national identity’ and ‘identity politics’, having already offered above a reply to this point. I will focus instead on their critique of my rendition of the North(ern) geopolitical discourse. Like other cardinal markers used in Finnish geopolitical narratives, my treatment of the North also follows an accurate historical analysis, aimed at localizing when the cardinal marker enters the Finnish geopolitical discourse and what is the discursive content associated with it. As far as my treatment of the North is concerned, I have never affirmed that the North has appeared as “a central feature or platform of Finnish identity politics” (Moisio and Harle, 2006, p. 7). I understand that any communication process is based on the interplay between what Moisio and Harle define as “language as a formal category” and “language as a form of reasoning”, but to read something which does not exist in the “language as a formal category” (i.e. the English text which constitutes my paper) must have to do with something else other than just a short-circuit between these two forms of languages. What *is written* in my paper is that the North simply constitutes one geopolitical discourse among others and more precisely, a discourse which, among other expressions in Finland’s history, finds contemporary evidence in a *fact*: Lipponen’s Northern Dimension

initiative (1997). True, my reading of Finland's North(ern) geopolitical discourse has been influenced by Pertti Joenniemi – a scholar not particularly praised by Moisiso² - but I cannot see on what basis this can be used as a way to discard the existence of a North(ern) discourse among other Finnish geopolitical discourses.

In relation to Moisiso and Harle's fourth criticism, I have already discussed above their concern about the slippery character of (national) identity. I would like here only to add that the use of national identity as an analytical tool may perhaps be Moisiso and Harle's concern but it was certainly not mine when I wrote the paper on 'Finland'. With this paper, I simply wanted to map the narrative content that was given to Finnish national identity (and identity politics), not to use national identity as an analytical tool for understanding Finland (without quotations). More generally, let me also note what Moisiso and Harle - more prominent scholars than me - should know: scientific knowledge is built on the works of previous scholars who have scientifically investigated the same topic. "How do I know what I know?" – ask Moisiso and Harle - or, more precisely, how do I know that the Finns, among "thousands of reasons", had also economic and security reasons that I personally used to argue for the notion of a 'negative West'? Because the works published in academic journals by other scholars have investigated these reasons. To question the legitimacy of these findings would be the topic of another paper – and this was not my goal.

Finally, Moisiso and Harle accuse me of "de-politiciz[ing] heated political topics" and "list(ing) various discourses as equal". I have to admit frankly that I would feel very uncomfortable, given my 'remote' character, being an Italian, living in the United States, and not speaking Finnish, to decide to take a political stance on the rights or wrongs of Finnish geopolitical discourses. I respect and love the Finns too much to dare take a political position in their own affairs, since politics for me means something which truly has to do with everyday life. Yet, from my perspective, this does not prevent the possibility of listening and interpreting the voices of those who speak to us, unless Moisiso and Harle think, along with the 'cultural' or postmodern turn in geography, that a study which does not engage itself politically is not a methodologically sound study. Such an assertion would sound a bit inconsistent to me given their critique of the 'cultural

² Personal conversation with Sami Moisiso, Philadelphia, 14 March 2004.

turn' and the modernist-sounding character of their call for a better methodology in political geography.

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