Interview: Jason Dittmer

Interviewed by Steven M. Schnell, Editor, The Geographical Bulletin

Jason Dittmer is from Jacksonville, Florida, received his PhD from Florida State University in 2003, and has taught at University College London in the United Kingdom since 2007. He is the author of *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010) and the co-editor of *Mapping the End Times: American Evangelical Geopolitics and Apocalyptic Visions* (Ashgate, 2010). He is married to the lovely Stephanie and has two cats. They all live in southeast London.

**GB:** Tell us a little bit about yourself – your background, and how you got into the field of geography in the first place.

**JD:** Well, it seems like I was always taking geography classes without being an actual geographer. I went to a high school where world geography was taught in the 7th grade and I distinctly remember loving that class, but there wasn’t any obvious way to follow up with that interest until I went to college at Jacksonville University. I was an International Studies and Political Science double major, so there was plenty of opportunity to take geography classes (International Studies was an interdisciplinary program). I loved them all and probably would have had enough geography credits for a minor if I’d tried. My master’s degree at Florida State University was in International Affairs, another interdisciplinary program, so I kept on taking geography classes. Finally, it was time to get a PhD and there are no interdisciplinary PhD programs so I had to pick something. I thought, “hey, I’ve always loved geography classes, why don’t I do a PhD in that?” A really terrible way to choose a PhD program – I can’t recommend it to anyone. But it worked out incredibly well for me. Now I’m a complete convert but I feel slightly guilty that I only have the one degree in geography.

**GB:** You’ve got an extensive record of publication, and a lot of it is based on source
Steven M. Schnell

materials that one wouldn't immediately think of as geographical – comic books, end-of-days Christian novels, James Bond, vampires – to examine weighty issues such as national identity and geopolitics. What drew you as a geographer to study these sorts of things?

JD: Well, my PhD dissertation was on newspapers – considering the ways that newspaper coverage of EU and NATO expansion in the 1990s and early 2000s contributed to the re-shaping of Europe’s perceived external and internal borders. Once you accept that our geographical imaginations are linked to the media we consume, it’s a short leap to realize that news media are only one of those avenues. As for why I followed up with it, there are a couple of reasons. One is that in research it pays off to maintain on a research ‘track’. In other words, once you’ve learned a literature that is out there (such as the literature on cultural studies and media) it’s more economical to apply that knowledge in an array of related, but slightly different, cases rather than to switch over to something else entirely and have to read and learn a whole new literature. So pushing the boundaries of what is considered ‘geopolitical’ to include the media you mention in the question was in some ways entirely self-interested on my part.

However, there is certainly a pleasure I take in dealing with popular culture; it’s fun to work with, fun to talk about, and audiences can easily relate to your material. My move into evangelical fiction came about as a dare – a friend of mine handed me a cartoon Bible tract (the kind you find in a phone booth or toilet stall) and proposed that I wrote a paper on it (I had been working on superhero comics for a while). I of course accepted the dare, and as a result immersed myself in a whole new geopolitical culture that was just coming into view within the discipline of geography (prophecy-watching evangelicals). So sometimes these things happen in strange, unexpected ways.

GB: Do you ever get resistance from your colleagues that these materials are not “serious” subjects of study?

JD: I did at first. I remember the first time I gave a presentation on Captain America a number of the old-timers sitting in the front row chuckling away. And that’s fine – it is funny sometimes. I got lucky though, and my first paper on superheroes got published in the Annals of the Association of American Geographers, which is a pretty prominent journal. Once I had that, it opened a lot of doors for my work. But I should say that I didn’t invent the study of popular culture in geography, or even geopolitics; Klaus Dodds was writing about James Bond years before I started doing this my superheroes stuff. Maybe I push the boundaries in different ways but I couldn’t (or maybe wouldn’t) have done so without people like Klaus showing me it could be done.

GB: Given that you’re from the United States and are currently living in the U.K., and have examined national identities in both countries through the lens of their superheroes, what would you say are the broad differences in national identity between the
two? Or do you think it even makes sense to talk about a single national identity, given the cultural diversity in both countries?

JD: I see my work as trying to deconstruct the idea of national identities and show how they are produced through popular culture (and other avenues as well). So I generally don’t see identity has something that is out there to be revealed. Rather, we can witness the process by which identities are argued over, shaped, contested, and so on by various people and institutions. So, to give an example from the comics - Captain Britain is a superhero created by an American publishing house (Marvel Comics) for the British market. Therefore, the (American) writer of Captain Britain’s first title had to come up with an origin story for the superhero that resonated with the audience's understanding of what makes Britain distinctive as a country. He struggled to do this and the readers wrote in with their complaints. Some of them thought that Captain Britain’s first origin, which stemmed from Arthurian legend, didn’t make Britain seem modern enough; one wrote in saying something like “we have freak radioactive explosions here too, you know?” As a result Captain Britain’s origins have whipsawed back and forth over his 35 years of publication as different writers tried to make the hero appealing to his readers: sometimes he’s linked to King Arthur and Merlin, sometimes he’s the son of a space alien, and so on. I think what this shows us is that identities aren’t something we have that can be uncovered, they are stories that change over time and over which people debate. You can see this in the United States as different political factions ground their ideas of what American politics ought to be like in different narratives of American history. For the Tea Party the key, defining moment in American identity is the Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution. For many other Republicans World War 2 is the central moment in which their ‘America’ is born, with Eisenhower’s and Reagan’s administrations
emblematic of American in its ‘natural’ state. For many Democrats, the New Deal and the Civil Rights struggle are emblematic of what is great about America. Now, that’s a massive simplification but I think if you look at the rhetoric of these groups you can see how they contest what America ‘is’ not just as a means of arguing for their political goals but because these narratives of American identity helped shape those goals in the first place. It may seem like a vastly different process than contesting whether or not Captain Britain should have a ‘modern’ basis for his superpowers but it’s really the same thing.

**GB:** You seem to have a genuine affection for the subjects of your study, even when you are criticizing them, which is something that seems to be missing from much critical geography. Were you a fan of comics as a kid?

**JD:** I read superhero comics when I was between 13-15 years old, and my parents still laugh when I tell them I am researching this stuff. “At least all those trips to Dragon’s Tale [the comic book store where I grew up] weren’t wasted.” I gave up on them in high school as I got into other things, and then remembered Captain America as I was finishing up my PhD and reading all this stuff on banal nationalism, etc. Something clicked and I thought “I could write a paper on that.” Little did I know that I wouldn’t finish that project for eight years or so! So my affection, and my critique, come from the same place. I feel the attractive power of superhero stories. And even as I can see lots of problems with Captain America I still recognize him as the kind of America in which I want to believe.

Experiencing the fundamental pull of popular culture like that, and recognizing that nobody was talking about it in the geography literature, was very motivating. Of course, having read all the Captain Americas that have been published since 1940, I can tell you that they weren’t all as good as I remembered from my youth, and sheer quantity can quickly overwhelm adolescent nostalgia. But it’s still more fun than most research.

**GB:** Some have argued that, in the face of increasing globalization, the state is decreasing in importance. Do you buy this argument, and do you see national identities either declining in importance, or changing altogether, in the face of economic and cultural interaction that stems from globalization?

**JD:** I don’t really buy the argument that states are becoming less important because of globalization. For the most part I think this is the mythology of neo-liberalism: that the world is evolving in a way that means we don’t need the state, and therefore we should deregulate everything and make the myth come true. In practice though, capitalism (global or otherwise) is utterly dependent on the state to provide a context in which difference is exploited for profit. Now, it is certainly true that the role of the state seems to be changing, and perhaps state functions are being taken up by other kinds of institutions at a variety of scales (global governance regimes, devolution, etc.) but I think that just means that we have to broaden the notion of what we mean when we say ‘state’. As for national identities, I don’t think we are seeing much moderation in their importance to people. There is something suspect in this dimension of postmodernism: that in an era in which formal colonial empires have (mostly) ended (and we might think of the Cold War as an extension of the colonial era), academia has become increasingly convinced that states and nationalism don’t matter. Seems a bit like moving the goalposts: just as the nationalisms of various developing (newly) formed states come into being, we tell them that states are no longer important and nationalism is a sign of your backwardness.

**GB:** Who have been the most influential geographers in your development as both a researcher and a teacher?

**JD:** Hands down the most significant geographer in my development as a teacher was my geography professor at Jacksonville.
University, Ray Oldakowski. Ray taught all the human geography classes at JU and so he had to be knowledgeable on virtually every topic under the sun. He was a great ambassador for geography – he pulled in all kinds of non-geographers to his classes through his way of relating to students. It was impressive to watch. His classes weren’t easy but people signed up for them anyway. As for influences in my development as a researcher; there are so many! I already mentioned Klaus Dodds – he was instrumental in my decision to study popular culture and geopolitics. I also had the pleasure of working with Soren Larsen (now at the University of Missouri) at my first job (at Georgia Southern University). I had decided to become an academic quite late – about halfway through my PhD. So I hadn’t really been trying to model myself after anyone in regards to research and writing. Soren was only a year ahead of me (in terms of graduation and in terms of starting at Georgia Southern) but he was light years ahead of me in terms of work ethic, discipline, and skills. I watched him succeed and I learned a lot by watching how he worked.

**GB:** What articles or books would you recommend that all young geographers entering the discipline should read (and why)?

**JD:** This is a hard question to answer. Geography is deliciously broad and wide-ranging, and people come to it with different interests. And certainly students at different levels (e.g., freshman vis-à-vis graduate) are ready for different kinds of books. A seminal book in my development was David Campbell’s *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity.* It’s a classic for people interested in critical geopolitics, in my opinion. Campbell introduces the idea of foreign policy as being an extension of national identity. Less specific to my research, but a book that I think is great for breaking out of old ideas about what geography ‘is’, is Martin Lewis and Karen Wigan’s *The Myth of Continents.* It’s about from where we get the idea of the seven-continent system and the way that system became ‘natural’. I love that book and it rocked my world when I read it in graduate school. There’s probably more recent stuff that would do the same thing for current students but I think it’s like pop music – everyone thinks that what was popular when they were in high school was the pinnacle of pop music for all time.

**GB:** Which, of course, it was! So what was the pinnacle of pop music for all time, to your ears?

**JD:** Ha! The pinnacle of pop music in all times and places was clearly the grunge movement (and related post-punk alternative rock) of the early 1990s. It shook my bones and made me sure I had an axe to grind with society. And isn’t that really what adolescence is about?
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