

How does Human Geography Contribute to our Understanding of the Processes that have Shaped Australian Society?

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Human geography provides great insight into how historical and political events have affected Australian society. Historical geography provides a mechanism for modern human geographers to look back into the past and understand how events in time have affected place (Cloke et al, 2014: 476). Political geography also serves human geographers in that it illuminates how spatiality can affect the political climate and processes (Cloke et al, 2014: 528). By utilising historical and political geography, a greater understanding of the origins of the Australian Labor Party and its subsequent effect on Australian society both at the time and in contemporary Australia can be comprehended. The Australian Labor Party is the product of trade unions and working class Australians in the late nineteenth century who fought for political representation in the face of the Protectionist and Free Trade movements that dominated the colonial parliaments (*Australian Labor Party*, n.d.). The Australian Labor Party officially became a federal party after its first Caucus meeting on the 8 May 1901 (Martin, n.d.). By using historical geography, the origins of the Australian Labor Party in the late nineteenth century Australia can be examined. Furthermore, the use of political geography can provide insight into the landscapes of power at the time and how ideology affected these landscapes, as well as the challenge the Australian Labor Party provided to the hegemonic power of the capitalist class in Federation era Australian politics.

Before concepts relating to historical geography can be applied, an understanding of the social construction of class and its effect on space must first be realised. Social constructions are a set of characteristics or attributes that a society places on a people, object or place (Cloke et al, 2014: 10). During the late nineteenth century, the social construction of class was highly prevalent in Australian society. This concept of class was inherited from the British colonialists who arrived in Australia a century earlier (Van Krieken et al, 2014: 228). In turn, Australia at the time was mostly divided into two classes: the capitalists and pastoralists whose wealth provided them with status and power, and the working class who consisted of labourers such as shearers and miners and who generally did not own land or the means of production (*Australian History: Labor Party*, 2014). This class relationship provided a space in which conflict over political representation and power was inevitable, if Marxist theory is to be applied (Van Krieken et al, 2014: 228). It was through this social construction of class that late nineteenth century spatiality in Australia between the owning and working class developed. These two classes occupied two very different spheres of space. While the owning class enjoyed the perks of wealth, occupying spaces of power and status such as the colonial parliaments and the courts, the working class occupied spaces of hard labour and unsafe working conditions, such as rural sheep stations and mines (*Australian History: Labor Party*, 2014). Due to the marginalisation of the working class, power struggles between themselves and the capitalist class emerged. Initially these power struggles occurred in the form of workers' strikes on sheep stations and mines. The Eureka Stockade in 1854, where miners in Victorian goldfields near Ballarat rebelled against colonial rule and demanded the abolition of

mining licences and the right to vote for all males, became a symbol of democracy and freedom among working class Australians throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and is still a symbol of the working class in contemporary Australia (*Eureka Stockade*, 2014). The Eureka Stockade's significance as a symbol of resistance among the working class became a site of memory, providing a source of heritage in the popular imagination of the working class (*Eureka Stockade*, 2014). The early members of the Australian Labor Party considered themselves to be the spiritual successors of the miners at Eureka (Martin, n.d.). Therefore, it can be argued that by means of drawing on heritage and historical geography, the early Australian Labor Party received the conviction to challenge the power hierarchy and affect the political geography of the time, which has had resounding effects on modern Australian politics.

Historical geography provides an essential lens into viewing political geography in the past and how past geopolitical processes affect the current political climate. Political geographical concepts such as ideology provide a sense of logic when observing political struggles. Marxist theory describes ideology as “a meaning or set of meanings that serves to create and/or maintain relationships of domination and subordination, through symbolic forms such as texts, landscapes and spaces” (Cloke et. al. 2014: 929). Therefore, ideology plays a significant role in geopolitical struggles. In regards to the origins of the Australian Labor Party, ideology played an integral role in influencing the direction and motives of the party. After a sheep shearers' strike in the rural town of Barcaldine, Queensland in 1891, an assembly of shearers came together and resolved that the only way working class people would be represented in Australia would be through their own political movement designed to reform and challenge the right wing capitalist views of the Protectionists and the Free-Trade parties (Martin, n.d.). No doubt inspired by the events at Eureka a few decades earlier, the then-called 'Labor Electoral League' resolved that only by embracing unionism and democratic socialism dedicated to improving the lives of working class people could it truly challenge the capitalist hold on the colonial parliaments (*Australian Labor Party*, n.d.). The Labor Electoral League's effect on the geopolitical landscape in the 1890s across the Australian colonies was astounding. New South Wales' elections in 1891 saw the League win thirty-five out of one hundred and forty-one seats in the Assembly, an exceptional result for a party that had only been conceived a month prior (Martin, n.d.). Similar electoral results occurred across the colonies right up to Federation, indicating that the working class in late nineteenth century Australia were becoming more and more politically conscious and, more importantly, represented in the colonial legislatures. In December 1899, the Queensland Labor Party, led by former miner and journalist Anderson Dawson, became the first Labor party elected in the world, although power was only held for five days due to a lack of a majority (Martin, n.d.). Nevertheless, these victories challenged the dominant ideologies held by the major parties of the time, paving the way for workers' representation in politics and allowing working class people a chance to occupy landscapes of power that were once only occupied by the capitalist class.

Another concept provided by political geography is the idea of hegemony. Hegemony, as put forward by Gramsci, is the notion that the power of a dominant group can be used to coerce minority groups and that the dominant group's values, whether they be moral, political or

cultural, are superior or more natural than the values of the minority (Cloke et. al. 2014: 928). Before and directly after Federation, the capitalist political parties of the Protectionists and the Free Trade Party were the hegemonies of power in the Australian political landscape. The Labor movements prior to Federation posed a challenge to the capitalist hegemony, which only increased after the Labor movements united to form the federal Australian Labor Party on 8 May, 1901. The Federal Parliament faced the same issue as the colonial parliaments, in that no major party could form a majority, resulting in minority governments. The 1903 election resulted in neither the two fiscal parties, nor the Labor Party, receiving a majority of the vote (Martin, n.d.). The Protectionist Party, however, managed to form a minority government under Alfred Deakin with the support of Labor. What separated the Labor Party from their conservative counterparts was their different approaches to securing votes. For many years the two conservative parties' policies focused the political debate on fiscal issues, whereas the Labor Party campaigned on social reform including worker's rights, universal suffrage and improving living standards (*Australian History: Labor Party*, 2014). This shift in the political debate posed a massive threat to the capitalist hegemony, in that Australian society was becoming more aware of the social issues it was facing, as well as its fiscal situation. With the entrance of the Labor Party into the Federal Parliament, the landscapes of power were altered, in that the capitalist class could no longer guarantee itself to always be in control. In 1904, a vote of no confidence was motioned, removing Deakin from office and resulting in the first Labor national government, led by Chris Watson (Martin, n.d.). Despite the Watson Government only lasting four months before being defeated by a counter vote of no confidence, the Labor Party projected an image of "responsibility, pragmatism and responsiveness" (Martin, n.d.) that won favour with the voting public. Although Deakin, after resuming power, attempted to discredit Labor and their socialist agenda, the Australian Labor Party won the 1907 election, becoming the first majority federal government under Andrew Fisher (*Australian Labor Party*, n.d.). Labor's victory at this election was a sign that Australian society was heading towards a more progressive future where social issues were just as important to the political discourse as fiscal matters. Capitalist hegemony in Australia had been challenged successfully for the first time since colonisation, redefining Australian geopolitics with an impact that has lasted to the present day.

Human geography endows geographers with essential tools, which allow effective analysis of social issues and forces. Historical and political geography in this context provides unique perspectives when examining the origins of the early Australian Labor Party and their effect on Australian society. Historical geography and its concept of heritage provides a window into the social mind among the working class of the late nineteenth century and where they drew their inspiration for social change. Political geography also allows complex analysis of how ideology and hegemony affected Australian society at the time and its impacts on the landscapes of power. Australian society today has been immensely affected by the creation of the Australian Labor Party, with the movement being a major player in Australian politics since the birth of the nation until the present day, with all living Australian generations feeling the impact of their presence on the political spectrum and wider Australian society, for better or for worse.

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