

Thinking Territory Historically

It is somewhat ironic, given the paucity of conceptual work on territory, that one of the key pieces that does theorise the term should so often be seen as warning us away from it.¹ It should, of course, go without saying that territory itself is not a trap. Rather, it is certain ways of thinking about territory, particularly those largely uncritical assumptions of International Relations and International Political Economy, that is the problem. Those assumptions, which Agnew skilfully unpicked, actually require *more*, not less, work on territory. We need to investigate not simply the implications of thinking within this trap—how it constrains our thinking, and hamstringing our potential for critique—but how it is produced. What we do when we accept the territorial trap is to buy-into a state-centred narrative that naturalises and normalises this way of thinking.²

What do we mean when we talk of territory? There seem to be two dominant definitions in the literature. One sees a territory as a bounded space, a container, under the control of a group of people, nowadays usually a state. The other sees a territory as an outcome of territoriality, a human behaviour or strategy. These two definitions are, of course, not mutually exclusive.³ Both are mentioned, *en passant*, in Agnew's article. Yet neither definition really addresses the kinds of questions that Agnew is asking us to consider. How did boundaries get drawn? Why should the space that they enclose be thought of as exclusive and limited? Why are boundaries seen as dividing one polity from another, and therefore domestic from foreign politics? Why do certain groups claim a monopoly of power within those lines, and how do they continue to hold this, and then later receive a legal basis for those claims? Why do those that wish to challenge this situation—self-determination movements, for instance—not want a different system but their own stake within it? Why, today, are boundaries largely seen as fixed? In the argument being made here, territory must be conceived as an historically and geographically specific form of political organization and political thought. It simply cannot be taken for granted, nor approached through the notion of territoriality, which lacks the historical and geographical specificity of territory, both as a practice and a form.

In a piece published the year after 'The Territorial Trap', but much less well-known, Agnew provided an interesting gloss on this argument.⁴ He was critical of two key assumptions that shaped debates in the mid 1990s: the idea that social science had neglected space; and that there was a 'geographical turn' taking place. Rather than being 'spaceless', he suggested, social science had long been filled with geographical terms and assumptions. One of these, of course, was the territorial trap. But, he argued, the reason that this thinking had become static and unable to cope with dynamics, change and transition was that "social science has been *too* geographical and not sufficiently historical, in the sense that geographical assumptions have trapped consideration of social and political-economic processes in geographical structures and containers that defy historical change".⁵

One way out of the territorial trap, then, is a historical investigation of how it came about. Agnew makes the importance of this clear in the piece, but it has tended to be underplayed in those analyses that have come in its wake.⁶ While such a historical investigation could be done by tracing the ways that IR and IPE scholars have assumed things about, rather than thought about, territory, the way I am trying to pursue it is to trace the emergence of the term within Western political thought. This is generally done within the early modern period—Hobbes, Locke, Westphalia, etc.—that is seen as the time of the birth of territorial states and the international system. As I have argued elsewhere, at this time, the linkage between territory and sovereignty can be found most clearly articulated in the work of Leibniz.⁷ But it is important to realise that the particular histories of specific territorial states postdates the articulation of the idea, which was worked through in inchoate form some time earlier.

Although the word 'territory' regularly appears in translations of Thucydides, Aristotle, Caesar and Tacitus, the Greek *khora* (in its unstressed sense of land, rather than the philosophical sense it has in Plato's *Timaeus*) or the Latin *terra* invoke a rather different set of possibilities. For those relatively rare invocations in classical Latin of the term *territorium*, in Cicero, for instance, this was the land belonging to a town or other community. It was understood as a possession, of relatively small scale, rather than as an object of political rule. It is only in the mid-fourteenth century, with the rediscovery of Roman law in the Italian city-states, that the notion of *territorium* became explicitly tied to that of jurisdiction. The actions of an individual merchant, for instance, were bound by the laws of the place he was in, rather than by who he

was. This was a crucial shift from the personality of law to the territoriality of law.⁸ This idea was of great benefit to the secular political theorists who were trying to articulate the scope of political rule in opposition to the universalising aspirations of the Pope. Ruling on his own involvement in internal French politics, Pope Innocent III in 1202 had declared that “the king recognised no superior in temporal matters”.⁹ While Innocent was trying to stress that he still had supremacy in spiritual matters, he was outlining a model that the secular theorists would soon adopt. Jurists on behalf of the King then articulated his power in terms parallel with that of the Holy Roman Emperor—within his kingdom, the King had the same powers as the Emperor in his Empire.¹⁰ Fusing these two ideas together meant that the king was claiming a supremacy of temporal power within his kingdom—a spatial extent of power, a power which would later become theorised as sovereignty. The Emperor, the King or later the city-state held supremacy within their borders. Theirs was a geographically restricted power, but within those areas they held the ultimate control.

As Agnew hints in ‘The Territorial Trap’, this is still some way from a modern state system of clearly demarcated territories. The production of that system was worked out, both in the Europe where these ideas emerged and in divisions of the colonised world, over the next several centuries. While the idea that the ruler had a monopoly of power within those boundaries became widely accepted, what those limits were was not yet fixed. Kingdoms, empires, and, later, states, could conquer land through war or acquire it through purchase, or be punished by its loss in punitive peace settlements. It was not until the early twentieth century that international conferences attempted to cement the territorial boundaries of states, beginning in Western Europe with the 1925 Locarno Treaties, and then codified in the United Nations Charter.¹¹ Thus the international legal notion of territorial integrity brings together two distinct ideas—territorial sovereignty and territorial preservation. These terms have separate histories and their fusion was an attempt to create a stability in the post-World War II world. Today, with notions of humanitarian intervention and contingent sovereignty, they are being separated again. Boundaries may remain fixed, and considerable efforts may be undertaken to preserve existing territorial settlements—witness the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan to prevent their breakup—yet the sovereignty within them is held to be dependent on following particular codes of behaviour.¹² If the latter explains the beginning of the wars launched by the USA and its allies; the former partially accounts for their continued presence in those states.

This kind of historical approach, of which these overview points merely hint at the complexity, would seem another way to approach the challenges Agnew laid down fifteen years ago. Territory, both as a concept and as a political reality, requires much more work and analysis if we are to understand its contemporary limits and its historical and geographical conditions of possibility and specificity. Territory needs to be seen in relation to, but also in distinction from, two other terms, which themselves deserve careful analysis: land and terrain.¹³ Territory as a political question is not simply political-economic or political-strategic, but relates to developments in the law and the history of techniques such as land-surveying and cartography. Territory is, to borrow Foucault’s term, a political technology. Territory also needs to be seen in relation to the category of ‘space’, the history of which is now, post-Lefebvre, widely accepted. Territory is, clearly, not the only form of state space, much less political space. But it remains an important one. It is precisely because territory is a limited, historically specific, and non-exclusive way of spatial ordering, that it needs to be interrogated more thoroughly. All too often, and clearly contrary to Agnew’s intent, the territorial trap has been avoided by being ignored, not by being critically interrogated. Rather we should ask how particular territorial settlements are produced, and how states operate in ways that normalise and perpetuate this spatial order of things. And, more generally, why have we become inured to this sense of territory as something politically fixed and conceptually static? This kind of historical conceptual examination of the state of territory might enable us to move beyond ‘the territorial trap’ rather than simply avoid it, because it may help us to see how that trap was produced.

Notes

- ¹ John Agnew, "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory", *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol 1, 1994, pp. 53-80.
- ² This is an argument that Neil Brenner and I have made at length in "Henri Lefebvre on State, Space and Territory", *International Political Sociology*, Vol 3, 2009, forthcoming.
- ³ The best work on territory, to my mind, remains Jean Gottmann, *The Significance of Territory*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973. I have also learned a great deal from two unfortunately untranslated books: Paul Allières, *L'invention du territoire*, Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1980; and Claude Raffestin, *Pour une géographie du pouvoir*, Paris: Libraires Techniques, 1980. The key work on territoriality is Robert D. Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- ⁴ John Agnew, "The Hidden Geographies of Social Science and the Myth of the 'Geographical Turn'", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol 13, 1995, pp. 379-80.
- ⁵ Agnew, "The Hidden Geographies of Social Science and the Myth of the 'Geographical Turn'", p. 379
- ⁶ See Agnew, "The Territorial Trap", p. 54. This is also highlighted in Reid-Henry's introduction to this section. Of recent studies, Rhys Jones, *Peoples/States/Territories: The Political Geographies of British State Transformation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007 is much more successful than, for example, Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. See also Agnew's own *Globalization and Sovereignty*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009; and Alexander B. Murphy, "The Sovereign State System as Political-Territorial Ideal: Historical and Contemporary Considerations", in Thomas Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as a Social Construct*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 81-120..
- ⁷ See Stuart Elden, "Missing the Point: Globalisation, Deterritorialisation and the Space of the World", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol 30, 2005, pp. 8-19.
- ⁸ 'Territoriality' here, of course, means a condition of territory, rather than the more active connotation that has increasingly replaced that older meaning. The key figure here is Bartolus of Saxoferrato. On his work see, particularly, Francesco Maiolo, *Medieval Sovereignty: Marsilius of Padua and Bartolus of Saxoferrato*, Delft: Eburon, 2007.
- ⁹ Innocent III, "Per Venerabilem", in D. Carl Mirbt (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des Römischen Katholizismus*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Vierte Auflage, 1924, pp. 175-7; translated in Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, pp. 136-8.
- ¹⁰ See, for instance the anonymous texts in R.W. Dyson (ed.), *Quaestio de Potestate Papae (Rex Pacificus)/An Enquiry into the Power of the Pope: A Critical Edition and Translation*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1999; and "A Dispute between a Priest and a Knight", Latin and English text, edited and translated by Norma N. Erickson, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol 111 No 5, 1967, pp. 288-309.
- ¹¹ Useful works on these changes include Sharon Korman, *The Right of Conquest: The Acquisition of Territory by Force in International Law and Practice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; and Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization* Vol 55, 2001, pp. 215-30. A terrific recent book on some of the issues that this creates is Linda M. Bishai, *Forgetting Ourselves: Secession and the (Im)possibility of Territorial Identity*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004.
- ¹² This argument is made at much greater length in Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- ¹³ See Stuart Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory", *Progress in Human Geography*, forthcoming. This is an article which develops a conceptual framework for the historical study I am currently undertaking.