

REVIEW

A Genealogy of Territory à la Foucault

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Territorial disputes exist in all international regions. In East Asia, for instance, territorial disputes function as an obstacle that slows down deeper regional integration and greater prosperity. Moreover, territorial disputes even survive economic integration and cooperation promoted by free trade agreements. There still are at least five unsolved territorial disputes between the United States and Canada, who arguably share the most peaceful, demilitarized boundary in the world.

Despite the continued relevance and urgency of territorial disputes, territory as a concept *per se* largely remains undisputed and unquestioned unlike other concepts of international relations, most notably the state and sovereignty. This is a puzzle considering that the state, sovereignty, and territory are a conceptual trinity: the state exercises sovereignty over territory.

Such observation is the motivation behind *The Birth of Territory*, which was awarded the Association of American Geographers Meridian Book Award for Outstanding Scholarly Work in Geography in March 2014. The author, Stuart Elden, is a Professor of Political Theory and Geography at the University of Warwick. However, the book, a remarkable feat of a transdisciplinary approach, defies the academic division of labor. Although politics and geography are central to the book's narrative, texts that are analyzed in their time and space contexts are drawn from philosophy, history, law, religion, and literature.

A Challenge to the Anomaly of Relative Inattention to Territory

The book cites the definition of the state by Max Weber (1864-1920) to support the argument that the neglect of territory is an anomaly: “The state is that human community, which within a certain area or territory has a monopoly of legitimate physical violence.” According to the author, eliminating the anomaly calls for a challenge to the view that a territory is “self-evident in meaning, and that its particular manifestations . . . can be studied without theoretical reflection on *territory* itself.” Thus, the book purports to make us realize that territory—commonly understood since the late 17th century as “a bounded space under the control of a group of people, with fixed boundaries, exclusive internal sovereignty, and equal external status”—should not be taken for granted. Readers may even conclude that the book calls for a transformation of territory into a contested concept that will trigger productive debates in relevant fields.

The book cites the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees between Spain and France as the origin of the “first official boundary in the modern sense.” A boundary is therefore relatively young; a territory is much older. The roots of what a territory is began to grow with the beginning of written history. Applying a method inspired by “genealogical account” developed by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the book makes a chronological, 10-chapter presentation on the evolution of the relationship between territory—and their cognates as well as related terms—and politics in the West from the Greco-Roman era to the 17th century.

A Conceptual History of the West with a Focus on Territory

The book serves as a useful compendium of individuals and ideas that have shaped the evolution of what a territory is. In the index, we find 366 proper nouns—mostly historians, poets, theologians, secular thinkers, and people of action—and 35 common nouns, which are close and distant relatives of territory.

It is with the common nouns (place, boundary, *polis*, *khora*, *imperium*, *territorium*, etc.) and the proper nouns (Homer, Shakespeare, Leibniz, the Donation of Constantine, etc.) that Elden writes *The Birth of Territory*, which can be described as “a conceptual history of the West with a focus on territory.” The logic of choosing history as the structure that binds texts from different disciplinary sources together is provided by the author as the following: “[T]erritory is a word, a concept, and a practice, and the relations between these can only be grasped historically.”

A remarkable contribution of the book consists in highlighting the importance of relatively unknown thinkers and periods. According to Elden, the Italian

jurists Bartolus of Sassoferrato (1313-1357) and Baldus of Ubaldis (1327-1400) played critical roles for the emergence of the modern understanding of territory as they “crucially made the argument that *territorium* and jurisdiction went together.” The book also relocates the Middle Ages to its proper status in the history of territory. An extensive treatment of the period is made in Chapters 3-6, which amounts to over half of the book.

Elden stuns the readers with interesting connections that he makes. Generally unsuspected but real linkages are uncovered. For instance, he argues that space as a three-dimensional way of making sense of the world is a product of the scientific revolution and that territory is its political counterpart. He also adroitly links Shakespeare’s plays with the question of territory. The author, however, refrains from making a sweeping generalization and readers of the book may at times feel that the pleasure of “connecting the dots” is theirs. “Connecting the dots,” however, may be a burden to a sizeable number of readers, who enjoy reacting to a book’s arguments rather than devising them themselves by processing a book’s contents.

The book’s genealogical account of the birth of territory ends rather abruptly with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). As a result, the narrative does not deal with new interactions between the state and territories that have evolved over three centuries. Some important newcomers to the scene can be mentioned. First, democratization of politics has reshuffled the relationship between the state, people and territories. Second, imperialism and post-imperialism have changed the meaning of territory in expansionist projects of states. Third, “spheres of influence” managed by superpowers and “mini-spheres of influence” sought by regional powers have reconfigured the territorial dimension of international politics. Fourth, territorial waters as defined by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea expanded our notion of territory.

The Question of Territory’s Death *via* Post-Maturity Phase

In the last chapter of the book—“CODA: Territory as a Political Technology”—the author reintroduces the distinction between territory, land, and terrain that he made in the introduction. In the CODA, he says the following:

Technology should be understood as a political technology, or perhaps better as a bundle of political technologies. Territory is not simply land, in the political-economic sense of rights of use, appropriation, and possession attached to a place; nor is it a narrowly political-strategic question that is closer

to a notion of terrain. Territory comprises techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain. Measure and control—the technical and the legal—need to be thought alongside land and terrain.

Of the three aspects of territory, territory as technology is probably the most stable. Territory as land and terrain are not. Including prospects of the future of territory—from its current maturity to obsolescence or renewal—may have added another insightful dimension to Elden's presentation.

Territory may have already entered a post-maturity phase. International relations as inter-state relations—centered on sovereignty and territory—is not *replaced*. The recent annexation of Crimea is a good example. Furthermore, space exploration will one day stimulate discussions on the territorial dimension of the extraterrestrial bodies. Indeed, international relations still largely remains a function of place and power. However, traditional international relations have been *supplemented* by an international politics of hegemony and hegemonic rivalry, which are markedly non-territorial in comparison with the politics of imperialism of the 19th century.

According to the author, “capitalism emerged in a territorially pre-figured states-system.” Capitalism, however, has outgrown its origin that was demarcated by territorial states-system. The coming of post-maturity in the evolution of territory under the impact of ever-changing capitalism is demonstrated by at least two examples. First, a large portion of the international political economy is operating outside of territorial boundaries. Second, non-sovereign and non-territorial international actors—international governmental organizations and transnational business organizations—are increasingly more prominent

The very title of the book, *The Birth of Territory*, sends the message that territory, which was “born,” cannot escape the fate of growth, maturity, and ultimate obsolescence. The shadow of the death of territory is apparent in the concluding remarks of the book: “[Territory] had reached maturity. Whether it is now into its old age is a topic for another place, but reports of its demise are likely to have been exaggerated.”

After all, the emergence of non-territorial politics is hinted by an observation that Elden makes in his book: “Despite how Machiavelli is often read, and translated, he did not have a concept of territory and did not see political power as preeminently related to land.” Did Machiavelli leave out something very important? The truth may be that neither the state, sovereignty, nor territory are perennially essential elements of politics.

Toward a Comparative History of Territory

Unfortunately, non-Western views of territory including those from China and India are excluded from the scope of this book. The global diffusion of the Western idea of territory and interactions between the West and the Rest amid the diffusion is probably the subject of another book by Elden. *The Birth of Territory* belongs to a wider project of Elden who has embarked on writing a “history of the present.” In the meanwhile, *The Birth of Territory* may turn out to be the second book of a trilogy or even quadrilogy produced by the author, who has already published another award-winning book—*Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press)—in 2009.

Meanwhile, *The Birth of Territory* can serve as the basis of a research agenda: a global and comparative history of territory. The book in fact provides a methodological model for writing *The Birth of Territory in China* and *The Birth of Territory in India*. The “genealogical account” could be applied to make a narrative about the evolution of territory in China from its rise in ancient China to its perfection in the form of “the-all-under-Heaven” concept before the impact of the West. Similarly, a historical review of the evolution of territory in India will yield interesting insights. For instance, the historical meaning of the ancient term *janapada*—a compound word composed of *janas* “people” or “subject” and *pada* “foot”—could be analyzed. *Janapada* is particularly intriguing as a concept because it has had a double meaning of “realm, territory” and “subject population.”

The three books—respectively on the rise of territory in the West, China, and India—will provide the building blocks necessarily for engaging in a comparative history of territory, which will reveal or highlight the idiosyncratic aspects of the Western-turned-contemporary understanding of territory including church-state relations and the re-reading of classical Roman law. If a new definition of territory is necessarily, conclusions from the comparative history of territory could serve as a reference storehouse in making the definition.

What would be the practical relevance of the comparative history of territory? The degree of relevance would depend on the nature of the restructured world. It would be safe to predict that a new great power relations, practiced in the context of a truly global multipolar system, may emerge whether China promotes it or not. Unlike in the European multipolar system in the 19th century, the coming multipolar system may not be blessed by a common understanding of territory. The most critical question to ask may be the following: Does the emergence of China and India mean that their non-Western concept of territory, would affect current understanding of territory? If the answer is an emphatic no, we may be tempted to conclude that territory would remain uncontested. It is because the

Western understanding is sufficiently embedded in the Chinese and Indian world views. Saying no to the question assumes that China and India are already too irreversibly westernized to attempt a revision of the territory concept.

Regardless of what happens in the real or academic world, *The Birth of Territory* is likely to remain a widely recognized foundational work for any discussion for past, present, and future transformation of territory.