

Territorial Absolutism and Its Evasions

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The linking of state and nation by territory has produced a modern politics that is fundamentally territorialized: politics has come to be defined by boundaries that delimit absolute spaces of power. But this politics is not trans-historical and investigation of the historical specificity of territorializing power shows it to be specifically modern. It is argued that boundaries may have once been reasonably functional but that they are now becoming broadly dysfunctional in nature. For the contemporary world the problems of territorial absolutism are rehearsed and a series of alternative non-territorial organizations of politics are explored.

Keywords: boundary, democracy, homeland, nation-state, non-territoriality, sovereignty, territory, war.

Social science has found it difficult to explain the frequency of wars in the modern world. Large-scale data analyses have been notable for the paucity of their findings. The major exception, the one variable that provides significant results, is whether two countries share a common border. Neighbors, it seems, have a greater propensity to go to war than non-neighbors. Eliminating boundaries should produce a more peaceful world, therefore. This simple idea lay behind the thinking of the 'founding fathers' of the European Union as they converted France and Germany from neighbors to partners in a new polity. The ultimate expression of such ideas is the idealist dream of perpetual peace in a world commonwealth. But such a boundary-less world remains a dream: striving for a universal peace is the modern world's political holy grail. President Bush found this out when his new world order soon turned out to be an old world disorder with boundary wars erupting across the world. Why?

Boundaries are not easy to get rid of. They are crucially implicated in the engagement of politics with culture in the modern world. Boundaries define territories and territory is the concrete link between state and nation to create the nation-state. National homeland and sovereign territory become one in modern politics. Indeed nationhood is considered not to be fully achieved until the nation possesses its own state and hence sovereign territory. The result is a world politi-

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cal image consisting of a mosaic of nation-states representing culturally homogeneous pockets of people. But the world is not like that. People sharing cultural attributes are not and never have been settled in neat separated patches of land. The geography of culture displays an immensely complex pattern and the selection of nations for building can never be a simple boundary exercise corralling the chosen people. The actual world political map of sovereign territories may look like the nationalist's image but we know better. The deceptive convention of coloring each state's piece of the mosaic in a single tint does no justice to the cultural variety in all territories.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the implications of this territorial political distortion of reality. The fact that the world political map is not commonly seen as a geographical lie means that there are powerful forces that have incorporated it into the realm of the taken-for-granted. This is reflected in academic studies that fail to problematize the territorial basis of modern politics. We begin our discussion by briefly reviewing three influential approaches to territory that create a trans-historical interpretation of politics. Fortunately territory and territoriality do not have to be considered trans-historical. We begin our counter arguments by focusing on the historical specificity of territorial absolutism as a particular condition of modern politics alone. This leads on to a discussion of territoriality's initial functionality being far out-weighted by a blighting of modern politics in the twentieth century. From this position, we go on to consider what Richard Falk (1992) has called 'evasions of sovereignty' in both territorial and non-territorial forms and conclude that it is with the latter that absolutism in modern politics can be eliminated.

A TRANS-HISTORICAL BLIGHT?

The political implications of using territory to link culture and politics is profound. A modern politics of absolute spaces has been the result. The political aspirations deriving from the complex cultural map have had to be accommodated within a framework that can ultimately only recognize winners and losers within sovereign territories. This very stark and simple organization of power is legitimated through treating state sovereignty as the fundamental building block of international law.

Not interfering in the internal affairs of a sovereign state means that modern politics is premised upon boundaries that produce the fundamental dualism, domestic politics and international politics. But this simple division in modern politics is anything but benign. For as well as generating the condition for innumerable boundary wars, modern politics has allowed states a free hand to terrorize their populations with little fear of external legal retribution. This is the blight of territorial absolutism at the heart of modern politics.

A blight of this magnitude relies on its essence being kept off the political agenda: it has to be part of our taken-for-granted world. It is for this reason that anarchists make perfect formal opponents of territorial absolutism—see how our language has made the idea of anarchy anything but benign. But there has also been positive promotion of the ‘naturalness’ of the territoriality in modern politics. Three approaches have been prominent in portraying boundary-obsessed politics unproblematically. The most basic is the argument that political territoriality has a biological origin. This thesis was popularized by Robert Ardrey (1970) and traces human political behavior to a species attribute, a natural propensity for territorial competition. Human beings are said to share this behavioral characteristic with other species and the lesson is that peoples had better apply their innate territoriality or suffer the consequences.

Without the biology but treating territory as just as basic, the dominant realist school of international relations (IR) prescribe states as unquestioned units of analysis so that it is assumed international politics is fundamentally about conflict between states for territory. This assumption, with its corollary of perpetual war preparedness, is deemed timeless: hence the ‘founding father’ of IR is Thucydides who lived two and a half millennia ago. The result is a neglect of critical concern for territoriality in IR which John Ruggie (1993, 174) finds ‘truly astonishing’.

In contrast Michael Mann’s social power analysis provides a most sophisticated treatment of the relationship between politics and territory. In his study of sources of social power, politics is one of four sources and is characterized by its centralism and boundedness. In an initial statement (1984) he develops a theory of the state through territoriality but this shifts to become a definition of politics in general slightly later (1986). Here we have, perhaps, a clue to Mann’s thought processes. It is in the boundary-obsessed modern world that the state has abrogated politics to itself and it seems that Mann has projected this for all political history. Hence for all its theoretical sophistication, Mann’s politics is hooked up to territory to limit imagination of what politics might be.

At their different levels these three rationalizations of the blight of territorial absolutism have been very influential. And they provide the same practical message: whatever the problems of linking politics to territory there is nothing we can do about it because they are insolubly connected. It is the purpose of the remainder of this paper to counter both the theory and its practice corollary.

THE HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY OF TERRITORIAL ABSOLUTISM

Territorial absolutism is unique to the modern world. It is a political construction resulting from a particular conjuncture of social forces consequent upon the demise of feudal Europe and its immediate aftermath. The crisis of feudalism was

a crisis simultaneously for the economic, political and cultural reproduction of this particular premodern world-system. The rise of trading cities and the development of new centralized state apparatuses contributed greatly to overcoming the first two symptoms of the crisis but in the cultural sphere the demise of the feudal order culminated in a deep fracture of Christendom. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation disrupted early modern Europe to create its own 'crisis of the seventeenth century'. The solution was territoriality. In the attempt to create order out of the religious turmoil of the period, the principle of *cujus regio e jus religio* was invented which committed the population of a territory to the creed of their Prince. This was first evoked at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 to cope with the spread of Protestantism in the Holy Roman Empire and became consolidated throughout Europe at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The result was that the traditional universalism of catholic Christendom was transformed into a Europe of absolute religious territories. For people who did not share their Prince's faith choices were stark: 'voice' was dangerous and to be avoided leaving either 'loyalty' through religious conversion or 'exit' as religious refugees. It is with the arrival of that very modern person the refugee finding asylum by crossing a critical boundary that we know we are in a world of territorial absolutism.

The transformation of the early modern state into nation-state did not challenge territorial absolutism, rather it gave it a new and even more politically divisive basis. Religious heretics were replaced by enemies of the people or national traitors and would share the same fate. Religious conversions were replaced by national minority assimilations where languages rather than sacraments were attacked. And instead of 'religious cleansing', refugees have become victims of ethnic cleansing as the means for generating homogeneous cultural spaces. The result is, as Billig (1995, 130) describes it: 'The world of nation-states, being constructed in the modernist mood, is a world of boundaries'. But, as we have shown, this particular attribute of modernism is much older than most writers assume.

The claim to uniqueness for territorial absolutism made at the outset of this section is important. Beyond Europe there have been many examples of competitive states systems, with warfare resulting in the winning and losing of territory. But nowhere was the concept of territorial sovereignty devised except in early modern Europe. Non-interference in the religious affairs of neighboring states as agreed at Augsburg presumes acceptance of domestic integrity or internal sovereignty. For Rosenberg (1990, 254) "Recognizing the historical novelty of this circumstance is crucial". In addition the Treaty of Westphalia provided the list of whose integrity was to be respected defining external sovereignty—who are members of the 'international club'—producing a multiple mutual recognition of political entities that is also historically novel (Taylor, 1995, 1996). Hence we

conclude that whereas states as violent institutions are as old as history, the modern state-form is the only one to have 'achieved or claimed, both an institutional and a practical, territorially ordered, monopoly of violence' (Rosenberg, 1990, 258).

THE BLIGHT OF TERRITORIAL ABSOLUTISM

Successful institutions are those that are functional to the major trends of social change. In their different times, early modern states and then nation-states were powerful political instruments for social groups trying to mould the modern world to their advantage (Taylor, 1994). There was nothing inevitable about the triumph of these institutions and they only came to dominate modern politics after much struggle. However, once institutions become established they develop interests of their own to create an inertia mitigating against their destruction. Contemporary nation-states benefit from such inertia as their instrumentalism declines. There are three very obvious areas of blight that can be identified: bounding coercions, bounding democracies and bounding development.

By the bounding of coercion I mean the way that in any modern war, states are divided into belligerents and non-belligerents so that the conflict is territorially demarcated. This is most obviously the case with civil wars and border wars between neighbors but it is also the case in wider conflicts; even in 'world war' neutral state territory is respected. Containment of war is commonly invoked as a fundamental reason for the initial rise of the territorial state (e.g. Gottmann, 1973; Herz, 1976) but there is a price to pay for bounding coercion which has far outweighed its advantages in the twentieth century. In modern warfare, those people unlucky enough to be inside the bounds of conflict are effectively abandoned. Bounding coercion facilitates human rights abuses as far as and including genocide as the tragedy of Rwanda has recently reminded the world.

By bounding democracies I mean the way in which the practice of democracy has become state-centric with 'national elections' at the heart of the claim to be 'democratic'. This generates two fundamental problems. First, democracy presupposes a 'demos' or people and in most states across the world definitions of peoples are what is being increasingly contested. As Walzer (1992, 164) points out, you cannot have democracy with more than one 'demos'. With a multicultural electorate, elections are reduced to little more than ethnic headcounts to legitimate the majority group's majority. Hence, for instance, the Serbian boycott of the first democratic referendum in Bosnia and Irish nationalist reluctance to enter elections for peace talks in Northern Ireland. In both cases boundaries separate them from their 'people' and they would be very willing participants in

an election in a wider (Yugoslavia, all-Ireland) territorial frame where they constitute the largest group. But that is the point: bounding democracies—narrow or wide—in such situations defines the result before a vote is cast. Second, and more generally, even where the state presides over a relatively homogeneous population, arguably a ‘people’, bounded democracy remains problematic producing a world of pockets of selfish voters who insist on what’s best for their country with minimal concern for the rest of humanity. It is hard to see how trans-state issues, such as environmental ones, can be addressed adequately through bounded democratic mandates. U.S. positions at the Rio ‘Earth summit’ illustrates this point.

By bounded development I mean the way that social progress has been equated with economic development at the scale of nation-states. States are widely viewed as the prime unit of development and are assessed in terms of their success in generating economic growth. Such bounded developments produce pockets of selfish consumers with little or no concern for others and with economic incentives to externalize resource and waste problems. Once again this omits concern for society as a whole—global society—as every country tries to maximize its economic growth. The result of such competition is increasing global polarization and the headlong rush into an environmental nightmare. With bounded democracies demanding ever-greater bounded developments, the victim can only be global society and ultimately the Earth itself. This is the greatest blight of territorial absolutism.

SPECULATIONS ON TERRITORIAL RELATIVISM

Territorial sovereignty has never been as absolute in practice as its theory implies. As well as refugees crossing boundaries to signal a new politics, the emergence of smugglers taking advantage of the economic opportunities the new boundaries created was another sign of the new modern era. But from the beginning, evasions of sovereignty did not always transgress the law. The classic example is the so-called ‘chapel question’. Initially absolute religious spaces caused problems for the development of diplomacy since diplomats from countries of another faith were unable to attend to their spiritual needs while on service. This was solved by designating the embassies of foreign countries to be outside the home country’s jurisdiction allowing alternative worship to take place without violating the home country’s sovereignty. Such a minor adjustment to territorial absolutism was deemed to be worth the gains that flowed from diplomatic contact and this convention of treating embassies as little ‘islands of sovereignty’ remains important to this day.

Evasions of sovereignty may take one of two forms. Given that the prime target is the absolutism in territorial absolutism, its undermining can be either a territorial or non-territorial in nature. With territorial relativism the key question is how far can the blight of territorial absolutism be assuaged through reforms that maintain political territoriality? Although we may argue that the contemporary map of absolute political spaces is dysfunctional, this does not necessarily mean that territoriality itself is the problem. It is the concentration of political power at a single geographical scale that creates the absolutism and therefore it follows that evidence of distributing that power beyond the state is an important evasion of sovereignty. Three identifications of such alternative territorial organization are reviewed in this light focusing both above and below the level of the contemporary state.

The most developed case of transferring sovereignty 'upwards' is the European Union. John Ruggie (1993) interprets this as the first multiperspective state of the modern era. Although maintaining firm boundaries, it is an alternative form of modern polity because it does not have a single dominant center. This is different from a federal state where the center, the federal government, has sole relations with the rest of the world. With the EU there are 15 sets of relations from the individual countries plus a center policy. This unique situation of many views of the world from within a single political entity destroys the absolutism of a single perspective per state. Hence the development of the European Union does not mark what Johan Galtung (1973) once called a 'European superstate', rather something new and importantly different is being created (Hirst and Thompson, 1996, 153).

The European Union may have been successful in eliminating war in western Europe but, in most of the rest of the world, wars remain a common experience. However the nature of those wars has changed. This is due to two novel features concerning armed conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century. First predatory behavior by states has been formally outlawed by membership of the United Nations (what used to be called war departments are now defense departments) so that no country can suffer defeat in war and as a consequence be wiped off the political map as in the past (Coplin, 1968): not only did Kuwait survive the Gulf War, so also did Iraq. Second, in civil wars it is becoming increasingly difficult for states to defeat rebel opponents who employ local guerrilla tactics and, sometimes, world-wide 'terrorist' actions: many such wars have continued for generations. But spatial absolutism is premised upon clear-cut military victory either home or away. If there are no winners, what sort of territoriality can be produced? In these new circumstances diplomats have been quite resourceful in attempts to cope with failures to create a 'normal' absolutism. The result has been territories that are 'half-sovereign': they have 'internal sovereign-

ty' but lack crucial 'external sovereignty'. For their external needs such 'entities' (they do not yet have a name) rely on outside sponsors. The search for a solution to the Bosnian civil war has led to a 'serbian state' within a state that is not a sovereign territory but most certainly is internally autonomous. This is as different from federalism as is the European Union but in this case it occurs 'below' the state-scale. Self-ruled Palestinian territory, Turkish Cyprus and Kurdish Iraq are other, very different, examples of such 'half sovereign' entities in which territorial absolutism is being violated.

Thomas Pogge (1992) has combined evasions of sovereignty from above and below in his suggestion for a multilayered organisation of politics in which sovereignty would be distributed 'vertically' (that is, by geographical scale) as well as 'horizontally' (that is, by geographical location). He argues for decentralisation of democracy to bring decision-making as close as possible to those it affects, in EU parlance subsidiarity, but for many crucial questions with widespread effects, such as the environment or economic justice, this will require vertically higher levels of democracy. Hence the multilayered nature directly undermines territorial absolutism as it currently exists. However in defining the basic political units through which his 'cosmopolitan ideal of democracy' will operate he reverts to a very simple territorial imperative. In his scheme any group can change their political allegiance by either joining another state or forming a new state as long as the democratic will of the people is received. This is the people defining their own 'demos' but there are territorial strings attached: this principle applies only to 'the inhabitants of any contiguous territory of reasonable shape'. If we set aside the geometric vagueness of this prescription and its ignorance of cultural geography, the proposal is deeply flawed because it abandons scattered cultural groups to their fate at the hands of concentrated groups who are allowed to control absolute spaces. In fact, we can interpret the recent Bosnian 'civil war' and its infamous 'ethnic cleansing' as following the prescription to create necessary 'reasonable shape' for viable autonomy. But probably the best example of political territoriality clashing with the complexity of cultural geographies in contemporary politics appears in the Afrikaner attempt to find a homeland or *volkstaat* within the new South Africa.¹ As a result of negotiations before the first democratic elections, it was agreed to set up a Volkstaat Council to explore the possibility of 'territorial self-determination' (Volkstaat Council, 1995, 8) for this particular ethnic group. In their interim report they delimit an Afrikaner majority area consisting of two zones to the east and west of Pretoria linked together by selected parts of the city (Volkstaat Council, 1995, 31–2). But even this careful gerrymandering of boundaries, using census enumerators areas and eschewing any pretensions to a 'reasonable shape', creates only a 60% Afrikaner majority while excluding nearly two thirds of all Afrikaners (Volkstaat Council, 1995, 35).

And such conditions of cultural diversity are becoming the norm not the exception in our rapidly changing world. Pogge's multilayered politics may be superficially attractive but its incorporation of territoriality makes it practically a non-starter.

I suspect that territoriality and absolutism are more closely connected than advocates of territorial relativism have realised.

SPECULATIONS ON NON-TERRITORIALITY

How can we devise a political structure that is not territorial in nature? The idealist vision of 'one world' is the opposite of a world of territories but do we really want a world government? Treating the world as a single territory does provide a solution to some of the problems highlighted above but would also maintain a single scale absolutism, albeit Earth-scale without boundaries. Such a monist absolutism is potentially more dangerous for human rights than contemporary multiple territorial absolutism: modernity's refugees are eliminated because they have no where to run to! But non-territoriality need not be global. Coakley (1994) reviews many examples of political power being exercised in a non-territorial manner. For instance, in the early modern period, the Jews had their own Diet in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and 'saxons' were similarly organised in Hungary (Coakley, 1994, 299). More recently, new states established as a result of World War I (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and Ireland) had minority protection provisions in their constitutions irrespective of where minority people lived: for instance Estonia instituted a Cultural Autonomy Law covering two non-territorial groups, Germans and Jews (Coakley, 1994, 307). However these, and other examples Coakley describes, all occur within existing state territories and certainly links across boundaries are not part of this politics. Although it may be relevant to some contemporary situations, Afrikaners in South Africa, for example, such state-sponsored non-territoriality is very limited in scope and ultimately cannot be an evasion of sovereignty. Nevertheless, it points to political possibilities beyond normal modern politics and its territorial absolutism (see also the discussions in Mlinar, 1992). We explore three possibilities that constitute our speculations on non-territoriality.

The movement of flow is the opposite of the fixity of territory. The sovereignty of flow is Ruggie's description for the organisation of nomadic herders with their traditional disdain for absolute spaces. He uses the same phrase to describe contemporary 'cyber-space' in which information flows around the world seemingly beyond the control of sovereign states. In his argument such transnational micro-economic links define 'a nonterritorial region'

thus undermining territorial absolutism. This is producing a world in which inside and outside has no clear boundaries. A recent debate on the world-systems network asked the question 'who are we?' and could not find a satisfactory answer. Entry is by access to the Internet from locations across the world but with obvious social and geographical biases (see discussion of 'political geography in the time of cyberspaces' by Sidaway (1994)).

This world of flows focuses upon cities rather than states. A world city hierarchy has developed with New York, London and Tokyo at its head (Knox and Taylor, 1995). In this framework other cities have the role of articulating their fragment of the world-economy to the whole. Hence as you move down the hierarchy, cities have smaller regions and, therefore, less individual power in the system as a whole. Clearly autonomy and power grows as you ascend the pyramid. But that is only the case if power is measured at the level of individual cities. Although cities down the hierarchy are smaller, there are many more of them. Furthermore cities at the same level in the hierarchy can be expected to share many common problems: Lyon and Marseilles negotiating a role to counter the dominance of Paris have a similar pattern of constraints and opportunities as Manchester and Birmingham with respect to London. One possible arrangement, therefore, would be to have political organisation that recognises leagues of cities at different levels of the hierarchy. Such a framework would cut across states and nations and provide the architecture for a relatively egalitarian, decentralised, non-territorial world.

But the most important flows are those of people. These make cities more cosmopolitan than states but the latter still controls political identity: all states attempt to assimilate immigrants to the state's nation. However some people manage to keep a dual citizenship which provides an interesting violation of territorial absolutism. The major recipient of migrants, the U.S.A, land of adjectival Americans, does not allow dual citizenship but this does not prevent many of their citizens keeping their old passports in violation of the spirit of their new country. In general, we may note that dual citizenship offers a conceptual opening for another, potentially most devastating, evasion of sovereignty. We are ascribed our political identity, both at birth by our state registration and culturally through our family. We may term this a process of 'national determinism', a negation of individual democratic rights. At the group level, national self-determination is the democratic rallying call to a non-sovereign people but what can this mean at the individual level? Presumably we should have the right to choose our national affinities, to decide for ourselves which 'demos' we want to be part of. Although, at first, an odd notion, this is, of course, what migrants who change their citizenship effectively do.

But why should we be forced to move in order to make this choice? Why not open this up to all? For instance, we could make it a feature of the crossing of a very different type of boundary, a rite of passage to adulthood: people keep their ascribed identity but at 18 have the right to choose a second and third identity. At the moment some states compete for the tax revenue of the seriously rich as 'part-citizens', this proposal would democratise this process. It really would open up the absolute spaces of our modern world. One set of arrangements might be for people to receive automatically citizenship in countries that border the one where they were born.

And to end where we began: the latter arrangements would mean that traditional border wars would no longer make any sense whatsoever since territorial absolutism would be critically evaded.

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