

Revisiting the territorial trap

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The territorial state has long been seen in the academic fields of international relations and political theory as not simply the primary but as the singular actor of modern world politics. In a 1994 article I outlined the ways in which this had become an intellectual “trap.” Three interlocking geographical assumptions reinforce one another in conventional theories: sovereignty as territorial, the domestic-foreign opposition, and the state-society match. The obsession with territory as the exclusive spatial modus operandi of world politics ignores the significance of other spatial modalities such as networks/flows and place making for understanding its organization. In practice some practitioners in such branches of international relations as international political economy (IPE) have long regarded the territorial assumption as limiting but have never adequately replaced it with a richer geographical analysis. Putting geography into international relations must necessarily address this assumption. It cannot simply take states as individual self-evident units and then engage in analysis of their relations by adding distance or proximity into existing non-spatial models.

Anssi Paasi has contributed significantly to the interrogation of territoriality in the broader social sciences (e.g. Paasi 2009). Crucially, Anssi has pointed to the fact

that while of long-term and continuing significance to politics, territories as “bounded spaces” should be understood as only one type of the spatiality of power (Paasi 2009: 214). In a volume such as this it thus seemed appropriate to highlight the “territorial question” in my contribution. I briefly revisit my argument about the territorial trap and related ones, particularly that of John Ruggie (1993) and a couple of others. I then review some arguments about the adequacy of these perspectives. Finally I suggest a richer threefold approach to the spatiality of power, involving territory, spatial interaction and place-making, before offering a conclusion concerning the need to stop associating “geography” with territory as the only modality for the spatial organization of politics.

The territorial trap

The field of international relations has been defined by the notion of a world divided up into mutually exclusive territorial states. The very term describing the field implies a focus on relations between states (albeit often confused with nations) in contradistinction to what happens within state territorial borders. To the extent that there has been *any* debate about this distinction it has been entirely in terms of the presence or absence

of the territorial state rather than whether any or all states are ever entirely territorial in their *modus operandi*. The irony in this, as Rob Walker (1993: 13) once pointed out, is that international relations theory “has been one of the most spatially oriented sites of modern social and political thought” in fixing an understanding of space as simply territorial that is held as trans-historical in its effects.

My 1994 paper argued that three distinctive geographical assumptions underpinned this theoretical perspective binding statehood to territory. The first and most important is the association between state sovereignty and the state’s territorial field as both limiting and legitimizing the state. The claim of all states is to represent the workings of an abstract or idealized sovereignty irrespective of the effectiveness with which that is administered or the degree to which it is devolved onto other authorities (including a wide range of private as well as public but non-state actors). But this more often than not is a fictive claim that cannot be backed up empirically. Consider the long history of imperialist interventions by more powerful states in less powerful ones and the longstanding ability of big businesses to manipulate government policies across borders to their satisfaction. A second is to see the territorial state as a singular actor struggling against others whereby other actors operating at other geographical scales (such as multinational businesses, for example) are squeezed into a territorialized model of interstate competition. As is well known, at least outside of international relations theory, mercantilism has never been the transcendental guiding ideology of economic policies across all countries even though it

has had episodic importance in some eras. Third, and finally, the territorial state is viewed as the strict container of society. Under certain historical circumstances it is clear that a social order can take a territorialized form under the influence of powerful state authority. But historically it is also clear that there is no rational unity between society, broadly construed, and a given territorial state. Consider those parts of the world with nominal states in which clan, ethnic or other ties extend well beyond state borders and undermine the achievement of an homogeneous social order within them. Even for seemingly well-established territorial states, local and regional socio-cultural differences have always challenged the idea of a simple parallelism between social boundaries and state borders.

In a 1993 article John Ruggie also pointed to the lack of attention that students of international relations had paid to their basic spatial assumptions, particularly that of territoriality or the implications of how territory is implicated in world politics. Unlike me, he does accept that the territorial state (and the ideological baggage surrounding it) does more-or-less match up to actual practice for a period lasting from the 16th century down to the recent past. But, as he concluded (Ruggie 1993: 174), “It is truly astonishing that the concept of territoriality has been so little studied by students of international politics; its neglect is akin to never looking at the ground that one is walking on.” So, although Ruggie does not question the historical relevance of the territorial state as a singular presence in modern world politics, he strongly suggests that its continuing status as such

is now in doubt in the face of what he calls the “unbundling” of sovereignty as a result of postmodern globalization. In this construction, just as territorial states emerged out of the hierarchical subordination that characterized the medieval period in European history, so today a reversal is under way with the emergence of systems of supranational authority (such as the European Union) and the increasing crisis of the “absolute individuation” – totally disjoint mutually exclusive and fixed territoriality -- upon which state territorial sovereignty has relied. The episteme of international relations is thus also in crisis because of its failure to engage with the emerging reality. It was designed for a world that has changed fundamentally. It now should change too.

My original argument has been subject to some criticism in its details if not more generally. For one thing, my argument has been assimilated to that of Ruggie and also to that of Peter Taylor (1994) about the containerization for society provided by states. My argument is actually much more radical than Ruggie’s in pointing to the longstanding failure of the territorial state to live up to its territorialized billing rather than simply being a “crisis” coming about because of globalization and more comprehensive than Taylor’s in not restricting itself to the economic and social mismatch between states and the workings of the world economy.

Turning to the criticism addressed more directly and specifically at the territorial trap article, it is useful to distinguish two aspects to the argument that I had made. This is done most clearly by Simon Reid-Henry (2010): its epistemological critique of the

reductive nature of thinking in IR that has made an eternal ontological form out of a historically contingent idea of how “best” to organize a polity and an ontological critique of the anchoring of states in the closed world of interstate relations in which the working of power at other scales and across networks is essentially ignored so as to define a field of study and better “model” so-called interstate relations. In regard to the first aspect, Stuart Elden (2010) argues that the history of the idea of territory in relation to statehood needs much more detailed investigation than it was given in the 1994 paper. The idea cannot be simply dismissed as misleading or mistaken because it has had a long history in relation to proposals for establishing jurisdictions with characteristics favoring, inter alia at different times, efficient political rule, opposition to the “universalising aspirations of the pope” (Elden 2010: 758), or supremacy of monarchical authority within a bounded space. In respect of the second aspect, a number of critics (such as Alec Murphy (2010) and David Newman (2010)) have suggested that the territorial trap thesis partakes of the end or decline of the nation-state thesis in its suggestion that states have become hollowed out or less sovereign in a globalizing world. This is perhaps a plausible reading of the paper, particularly if assimilated to those by Ruggie and Taylor, but both misses the paper’s insistence that the hollowness is nothing new (a point I have reiterated in *Globalization and Sovereignty* (2009)) and my primary target: the isolation of interstate relations (and “the international,” as we have come to define it) as politically trumping all other scales and ways in which politics operates.

It is to this exclusivity of the interstate scale and the understanding of geopolitics as thereby irretrievably territorial and not needing other geographical descriptors -- such as spatial interaction and place making -- that I now turn.

Space, place and territory in world politics

The use of territory as a means of organizing politics is historically specific and partial. The territorial state as known to contemporary political theory developed initially in early modern Europe with the retreat of dynastic and non-territorial systems of rule and with the transfer of sovereignty from the personhood of monarchs to discrete national populations present in a territory but also spread around in diasporas. Territorialization of political authority was enhanced by mercantilist economic policies and by industrial capitalism as it exploited national economies of scale in demand for its products. Struggles for political representation and rights to public goods have underpinned address within a given territory as signifying membership in “welfare states” that have come to seem the norm in the world of “states” across the world. Even though six or so “waves” of state formation have washed over the world since the early 19th century giving rise to what are frequently described as the “nation-states” that constitute the world political map (e.g. Wimmer and Feinstein 2010), many of these entities are neither nations nor states in the sense of representing either groups sharing common nationality or effective state apparatuses

of rule, respectively. Projecting from the historical experience of France, Sweden, or the USA onto all other states is to miss this obvious point.

Beyond the problematic claim about all states having an equally effective territorialized basis, however, lie two more crucial issues in the present context. The first is that the concept of territory has become fatefully tied to the modern state, when in fact territoriality (the uses of territory for organizational purposes) can be used by a range of other actors, particularly legal authorities of one sort or another, that then “hollow out” jurisdictionally the territory of given states (e.g. Sassen 2013). Territories are not necessarily state spaces at all. Indeed, in many languages other than English, territory often means much the same thing as place, simply a chunk of space in which people live and that has some sociological basis. I will say more on this possibility and its relevance for politics presently. What I am saying here is that other actors can also adopt territorial strategies that challenge those of states in the conventional story (Agnew 2009: 28). These can be other more powerful states claiming extra-territorial jurisdiction within the borders of other states as it is known to lawyers or supranational parties (e.g. the WTO or the ICC) also claiming jurisdiction. They can also be private and public actors of a regulatory cast licensed by states for certain purposes (for example credit-rating agencies and other transnational rule-setting organizations including churches).

The second is that although a state’s territory ties acts of other agents to state responsibility, in contradistinction to corporations that can always push responsibility onto states or

separate themselves from responsibility through territorial subsidiaries (e.g. Szigeti 2010), not all politics (or law) is exhausted by accepting the logic of territory as such. In much of the recent literature on territory and territoriality, no adequate distinction is drawn between space and territory (e.g. Brenner & Elden 2009; Sassen 2013). The epistemological monopoly of state territory in relation to politics has become taken-for-granted in political studies. But any socially constructed space is a place or territory. The state is not needed to define it. People do that. So that much politics, even when oriented to the state in elections and so, is mediated through places that the state may only have marginal influence over (as perhaps in drawing municipal boundaries, etc.) People are natural “place makers” the world over and much politics takes the form of initiatives and struggles directed towards defending, assisting, and developing such places rather than state territories per se (Agnew 1987; Jerram 2013).

Perhaps more radically, politics is not simply bottled up in territorial containers, state-based or place-based. It can operate in networked ways across space. Networks between agents need not conform at all to the territorial borders of states. Trying to understand the politics of the world economy, particularly its financialized form since the 1980s, by restricting attention solely to transactions and policy measures within those borders would obviously be deficient. Yet, that is exactly what much contemporary theorizing about statehood and territory in international relations and political theory tends to do. They are still mercantiled in their lack of attention to spatialities such as flows in networks that

offer a fundamentally different ontology from that of territory. World politics is increasingly but has also long been about flows of capital, people and things between cities and across jurisdictional boundaries that are regulated in ad hoc and patch worked ways rather than through the singular workings of absolute sovereignty over clearly bounded territorial spaces.

Conclusion

Nisha Shah (2012) has argued that the territorial trap remains an intractable problem because thinkers remain locked into the territorial state as an ideal that can be scaled up to the global scale rather than re-placed as an enterprise by something attuned to the truly global character of the contemporary world. The “trap” isn’t just about a physical space but the very areal basis on which political theory relies for its ideal conceptions of peoplehood, citizenship, and association. Be that as it may, it does suggest the difficulty of extricating ourselves from associating statehood and the political totally with the territorial.

But territory is not the only way in which geography enters into the constitution of world politics: spatial interaction across networks and place making are also at work actively in making and expressing political activities. Yet territory has been the singular spatial modality for much of what goes for international relations and political theories. I have made a case for the more pluralistic geographical conception of how world politics is made. Alongside a discussion of a paper I published in

1994 that provided an argument for why the territorial assumption had become an intellectual (and political) “trap” for students of politics, I considered some criticisms of my article and others. The message of this article is that the demise of the monopoly exercised intellectually by territory should not be read as the “end of geography” and when geographers (and others) say “but there’s more to geography than state territory” we should hopefully no longer be greeted with blank stares.

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