
In his 26 March 2014 address to EU and NATO allies in Brussels, President Obama justified a stand against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Noting that international law depends on “people and nations of goodwill” to affirm and execute it, he stated, “Russia’s violation of international law—its assault on Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity—must be met with condemnation. Not because we’re trying to keep Russia down, but because the principles that have meant so much to Europe and the world must be lifted up”\(^1\). Inadvertently, Obama casts sovereignty and territorial integrity in a contingent and moral light that contests the cloak of universality with which these terms are typically shrouded. In the midst of the unfolding geopolitical drama in the Crimea, we find ourselves urgently asking what sovereignty and territory are, how they function, how they relate, and how they have come to define, literally, the political landscape. More, how do they constitute a European and moral problem? In a drama such as this, Stuart Elden’s new book, *The Birth of Territory*, enters the scene like a Classical Greek messenger, providing the critical history that enables us to comprehend the ongoing plot.

In Elden’s own words, *The Birth of Territory* “seeks to offer an account of the emergence of the concept of territory in Western political thought” (p.10). Elden aims to counter the imprecise usage of “territory” and the general assumption that it is “self-evident in meaning, and that its particular manifestations … can be studied without theoretical reflection on territory itself” (p.10). His first step is to delineate the concept from other key spatial-political terms, namely “land” and “terrain”. In brief, he argues that land is the domain of political economy, terrain that of the political-strategic or military, and territory that of the legal and technical.

\(^1\) See http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/26/remarks-president-address-european-youth
Territory regards measure and control, administration and governance. “Of course it would be unusual or reductive”, notes Elden, to see any of the models “in strict isolation”, but he argues persuasively that, when it comes to territory, “the case can be made for the term in itself” (p.11). This does not mean that Elden seeks to pin down the term’s meaning once and for all. “Territory is a word, concept, and practice, and the complicated relation between these three terms can only be grasped with historical, geographical, and conceptual specificity” (p.328). As he says in the essay ‘Land, Terrain, Territory’, an earlier version of the book’s introduction, his aim “is not to define territory, in the sense of a single meaning; but rather to indicate the issues at stake in grasping how it has been understood in different historical and geographical contexts” (2010: 799). “Historical and geographical context” is a kind of mantra for Elden. “Territory is a historical question: produced, mutable, and fluid. It is geographical, not simply because it is one of the ways of ordering the world, but also because it is profoundly uneven in its development” (2010: 812). Further, territory is “a distinctive mode of social/spatial organization, one that is historically and geographically limited and dependent, rather than a biological drive or social need. ‘Territory’ needs to be thought of in its specificity” (p.10). Elden relentlessly pursues the immanent development of the concept by determining its historical and geographical context in order to dissociate territory from the confused and transcendental realm of social and/or biological necessity. He severs any compulsion toward universal or teleological narratives. In terms of time, the concept is contingent and aleatory, but the true object of historical analysis here is clearly space: “The book’s aim is to reinscribe the history of space both in the history of political theory and the history of the state. In this respect, this book is both a history of space and a spatial history, in which questions of space function as both an object and tool of analysis”
From the perspective of territory, Elden retells the history of the emergence of the Western political form.

The contemporary idea of territory in the West, “as a bounded space under the control of a group of people, with fixed boundaries, exclusive internal sovereignty, and equal external status” (p.18) finds its closest relative in late 17th century thought, and Elden traces the lineage as far as he can: to the Greek polis. “The polis”, insists Elden, “must be understood in a dual sense—as the site where the action takes place and as the people who live there” (p.29). This dual where/who character also surfaces in the notion of the demos, which “sometimes means people, sometimes land” (p.31). Not only do they share “a meaning of both a particular place and the community within it”, but Elden demonstrates that these terms may also be related to contemporaneous mathematical ideas and that land was actually meted out, in political practice, along these conceptual lines (p.37). In these three conceptual characteristics—dual where/who meaning, mathematical basis, and political application—Elden finds early stirrings of what we now mean by “territory”. As for the Romans—constantly in need of ways to control and incorporate newly conquered lands—their “political and military practices have less of a legacy in terms of the question of territory, than [in] legal and surveying technologies” (p.93). The Romans did use the word territorium, but it mostly indicated the possessions of a city—“that is, lands outside it, surrounding it, belonging to it—and not a larger area that includes the city itself” (p.140). Elden traces what seems like every mention of a spatial category in the entire Roman period—from Augustine and Boethius, through Beowulf, Papal disputes, Aquinas, Dante, Ockham, and beyond. Each discussion puts us in pursuit of our object, but, naturally, each blazes a path designed to answer questions of its own historical and geographical moment, often pertaining to the power struggle between divine and temporal authorities. It is not until the 6th
century Justinian rediscovery of Roman law—then a millennium old—and its later interpretations by the post-glossators that power and place are finally unified under the concept “territory”. This happens at the behest of two unsuspecting heroes: the Italian legal theorists Bartolus and Baldus. Finally, in the mid 14th century, Bartolus deems *territorium* “the very thing over which political power is exercised; [the *territorium*] becomes the object of rule itself … the thing to which jurisdiction applied, thus providing the extent of rule” (p.220). Baldus claims that territory and jurisdiction go together “as mist to a swamp” (p.231); jurisdiction and territory cohere, *iurisdiction coheret territorio*. Further, Baldus makes the “crucial step” of taking “the *populous* itself [as] a territorial entity … Territory is thus not just the limit of the jurisdiction but its very definition” (p.232). Here, “[t]emporal power”, Elden notes, “becomes territorial” (p.235), such that territory can finally be linked to sovereignty. This decisive pairing is finally expressed in modern form by another unlikely name, 17th century German jurist and Calvinist thinker, Johannes Althusius. According to Elden, his definition of territory “as the area included within the ‘limits and boundaries’, and over which the laws are executed, is fundamental” (p.284). Still, controversy remained over who, exactly, executed: was the Pope sovereign, or the regional administrator? Perhaps surprisingly, Elden finds that none other than Leibniz makes the final determining distinction. Leibniz attacks Hobbes’s view of absolute sovereignty when he separates majesty (*majestas*), or supremacy, from sovereignty. Leibniz’s sovereign is relative, secular, political; he does not reign supreme but is “master of a territory” (p.320). This distinction Elden calls “a fundamental moment in the development of Western political thought” (p.321). Enter “territory” as we know it.

Despite what this simple summary suggests, the metaphor of the “birth” of territory seems wholly inappropriate to this text, unless, perhaps, one also speaks of an excessive
gestation, abortions, and miscarriages. “Birth” suggests natural progressive development, finality of process, and wonder, characteristics that this book shuns entirely. *The Birth of Territory* is not magisterial, sweeping, or synthetic. Instead, it is careful and technical, even painstaking, as evidenced by the fact that the text to endnotes ratio is an overbearing 2:1. Elden stays very close to original sources: there is exegesis but precious little interpretation and even less by way of style. It is a wholly unsexy book. The narrative is piecemeal and fragmented, more constellation than walking path, which yields both fascinating and frustrating moments. The book reads almost like an extended OED entry or a series of vignettes. It is practically montage in places, as Elden examines the contribution of this or that thinker then moves on with barely a hint of how it connects to the book’s broader arch. This is not a criticism but a natural outcome of Elden’s historiographical method.

Elden is enemy of anachronism, so perhaps he came upon this form as a result of his extreme care not to draw false lines of influence or to speak of anything outside of its historical and geographical specificity. As a reader, his convictions are both admirable and tedious, but the text is methodologically driven and sound. Primarily, Elden wants to provide a genealogical account, which is to be “understood as a historical interrogation of the conditions of possibility of things being as they are” (2010: 800). But while genealogy guides the broader political aim of the book, the text itself is far more wrought by German conceptual history, *Begriffsgeschichte*, and the Cambridge style contextualism of Skinner and Pocock (see p.7). Unless we read *The Birth of Territory* as part of Elden’s larger project on territory and as a prequel to his 2009 book *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty*, the politics implied by genealogy are slow to surface in this book. He traces the conceptual history of territory “precisely in order to disrupt [the inevitable] and eternal nature [it is often granted]”, but unless we do like Elden and
put his text in historical and geographical context, we will miss the potential force it contains. For this is ultimately a book of conceptual history—a wonderful tool, but a mere tool. While we can certainly use it as a hammer to smash the flimsy rhetorical attempts of heads of state—such as Obama’s above—to moralize territorial integrity, the true craftspeople will look to fasten Elden’s conceptual history to the blood and fire that constitute the annals of history. To specific historical and geographical moments of primitive accumulation, dispossession, genocide, and the like, the concept of territory can now be rigorously applied. Without this application, the project will disrupt nothing but the pages of journals to come.

References


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April 2014