Necessary, but not sufficient: Geography, territory and the history of ideas
Stuart Elden
Dialogues in Human Geography 2014 4: 320
DOI: 10.1177/2043820614544596

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://dhg.sagepub.com/content/4/3/320

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Dialogues in Human Geography can be found at:
Email Alerts: http://dhg.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://dhg.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://dhg.sagepub.com/content/4/3/320.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Oct 29, 2014
What is This?
Necessary, but not sufficient: Geography, territory and the history of ideas

Stuart Elden
University of Warwick, UK

Abstract
This response to John Agnew agrees that the history of ideas is never enough for the project of understanding the world but argues that it is a crucial part of that work. The commentary begins by contesting the claim that there is a turn towards this perspective in geography and suggests that much more needs to be done. I engage with Agnew’s article, especially with regard to the question of territory, by clarifying the project undertaken in The Birth of Territory. The inquiry there, I suggest, examined the complicated relation between words, concepts and practices; and many of the texts examined were not detached works of theory but practical texts – either written by or for political actors, or constitutions, treaties, papal bulls, handbooks of land surveying or law. This commentary closes by suggesting that the history of ideas, genealogy and conceptual history can, as part of what Foucault called ‘the history of the present’, offer valuable tools for critical geography. They are one element within such a project, necessary, but not sufficient.

Keywords
Conceptual history, genealogy, history of ideas, history of the present, territory

‘Is the history of ideas enough [emphasis added] to understand the world to which our concepts refer?’ No. On that, John Agnew and I agree. But beyond that claim, I find it had to agree with much in his analysis. I think he misrepresents the bias, misinterprets the work deemed to be problematic, misunderstands the approaches mobilized and misconstrues the politics at stake.

My first doubt is how much work in geography really does undertake the history of ideas? How common, genuinely, are attempts to do this? How many genealogies are actually conducted? It must mean more than papers where an author says, casually, that ‘in the first section of this paper I will provide a genealogy of the concept of security’ or similar. That happens a lot, but all-too-often it is merely a quick rehearsal of a history in order to set up a different, either theoretical or empirical, piece.

It is telling how few recent works are mentioned in the text and how many older ones were. Agnew suggests that this work is welcome, ‘a healthy development’, but becomes a problem if it goes ‘too much in the direction of thinking that excavating our intellectual past by looking deep into the history of ideas...’
to find the roots of our concepts is the key to what those concepts can do for us today’. Yet who is really suggesting that? If people really are suggesting that, then there is still a lot of work to be done, because there is little that is genuinely doing the history of geographical concepts out there.

One of the examples Agnew criticizes is my own recent book *The Birth of Territory* (2013). The book does intend to offer a history of the concept of territory, and there is a lot of attention to the use of words, but this seems to be necessary for at least two reasons. First, that there was lots of good work on specific territories, but less on the concept itself. The existing work is one reason why I think Agnew’s diagnosis of the ‘problem’ is flawed – my historical–conceptual work was intended to redress an imbalance, not to suggest that was the only thing that should be done. Indeed, my previous book *Terror and Territory* (2009) was explicitly written to show how a historical–conceptual understanding could shed light on contemporary territorial arrangements, practices and challenges. Taken together, this is not the word–concept relation alone.

Second, there was, to mind, a great deal of conceptual confusion about territory. If you read Plato’s *Laws*, Aristotle’s *Politics* or Caesar’s accounts of the war in Gaul or the civil war in modern translations, the word ‘territory’ is all over the place. But it’s not nearly as simple: there is no word in the Greek that straightforwardly translates into ‘territory’ – the most commonly used word is *khora*, which has philosophical resonances in Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s *Physics*, but in their political writings really means ‘land’. And Caesar, like the other Roman historians, does not use the word *territorium* when he is talking about the relation between place and power. *Territorium* is an extremely rare word in classical Latin. Reading ‘territory’ into these and other texts is to seriously misunderstand them. The point is thus the complete opposite of the accusation Agnew makes. The word alone misleads. Take two questions: what is the Latin word for ‘territory’? How should we translate *territorium*? *Neither* has a simple answer. Words are not the ‘sole signs of a concept or a theory’, but they are important, and in classical and medieval contexts, it is hard to know what other sources there are for the concepts or practices at stake.

Indeed, it is striking that, again, the historical record shows the exact opposite of Agnew’s claim that ‘one suspects that in certain eras “territory” had little or no significance for political life even though some intellectual figures were touching on its putative relevance in some sort of form’. It is not that territory was unimportant in times when theorists were discussing it. What is remarkable is that, for so long, territory was *not* the object of theory when there were very real practical political questions that revolved around the tensions between place and power. ‘Territory’ emerged at a certain point – in part as a resolution to a practical problem, but it is striking that territory is not the concept that is most commonly used in thinking about place and power. The relative absence of the etymological root word is an indication of this, but so too is the articulation of different questions and the surprising lack of interest in these questions. Other concerns dominated the political theory or theology of these times. I would therefore agree with the idea that it is only in the modern era ‘that what we understand today as state territory began to have any practical role in defining and limiting politics’. But how did that come to be the case? That is what I set out to examine. Yes, the birth of territory is modern, and it is not solely down to etymology. Etymology is one of the tools I use, but it is far from the only one – neither in this book nor in *Terror and Territory*, where I outline the etymological argument for the relation of the terms, only to say that we do *not* need to rely on this suspect etymological basis, because we can see the relation in practice.

Traces of modern understandings can be found in the reinterpretation of classical Roman law, in a 6th-century Byzantine compendium, by Italian lawyers of the 12th–14th century, whose work was picked up by 17th-century Germans trying to make sense of the fractured political geographies of the Holy Roman Empire. Or in the interest in the work of the Roman land surveyors, the renaissance of interest in the Greek geometricians, and their development in the scientific revolution into modern arts of cartography and land surveying. It is in the lineage of translations of Aristotle, unread for centuries, made available in Latin through translations from the Arabic, and only
later from the Greek direct – but their impact is in
terms of how politics was practiced, taught and
thought. Elements can be found in medieval hand-
books or ‘mirrors’ for princes, of which Machiavelli
is a late example. It is in the clash between Pope and
Kings – who had jurisdiction over a priest who com-
mitted a crime? Was the king able to tax the clergy
within his kingdom? The key issue is that these are
often resolutions to practical questions.

When territory does emerge as an explicit theme
in legal or political texts, it is not in canonical thin-
kers, but in ones that the tradition has tended to mar-
ginalize, or at least to marginalize this aspect of their
work. The early 13th-century debates about the
power of the pope, emperor, kings, princes and cit-
ties were fought through works by advisors and the
actors themselves. The work of John of Paris, Aegi-
dius Romanus and William of Ockham, for instance,
was never merely the reflections of theorists or phi-
losophers. In the 14th century, the relation of terri-
tory to jurisdiction was discussed in a way that
was eminently practical – Bartolus and Baldus were
jobbing lawyers, working on behalf of different liti-
gants, and the key sources of their ideas are not the
treatises they wrote in their leisure, but in their
consilia, legal opinions. In the 17th century, the
relation between supremacy, superiority, majesty
and sovereignty and territory is debated not by men
of letters but advocates on behalf of the interested
parties. Leibniz, for example, while better known
as a metaphysician and mathematician, wrote his
crucial political texts as part of his job for the Duke
of Hanover who asked him, in preparing for the
Peace of Nijmegen, what power did he actually have
in relation to the Emperor. This is practical theory.

I also do not concentrate exclusively on theorist’s
texts. Caesar is a good example – a military general
and a statesman; his books are extremely important
for understanding the practices at the time. Cicero
worked in the Senate as much as the library. And
in the classical Latin texts that do use the word
territorium, they are books of law or land surveying.
These are texts about practices, not abstract theoriz-
ing. I make use of constitutions, laws, papal bulls,
papers of the church or the Holy Roman Empire,
codes of practice and manuals. These are often are
the best source of information on how practices
worked at different times. It is extremely difficult
to understand how political–geographical relations
were thought and practiced otherwise. Archaeology
and artefacts can only tell us so much. Practices lead
to theories and not only the reverse.

For this, and other reasons, the crucial figures in
my story are quite some way from the established
‘canon’. In this story, figures like Machiavelli,
Hobbes and Locke are much less important than
many generally neglected thinkers and it is the ques-
tion of the traces, the lineage, the impact of these
arguments. There are some ‘reflections’ of the time,
certainly, but many of those had tangible impact on
the shaping of politics great and small. As I suggest,
Leibniz does not see sovereignty as absolute, no
more than he sees space as absolute. Indeed, his
relative view of sovereignty and space are much
closer to how politics and territory were actually
practiced – much more indicative than Hobbes and
Newton. If the ‘world we live in is not that of early
modern European political theorists’, it is an awful
lot closer to the ones I privilege than the canon.

Agnew charges: ‘Ideas, then, must have wider
significance beyond their presence in the texts of
theorists to matter with respect to practice. At min-
imum, they should show up in the rhetorical forms
and more extensively in the attitudes, opinion, and
behaviour of elites and/or populations’. This may
be true, but what are the sources we should be using?
Works of ‘theory’, especially when written by elites
or their (or wider populations’) representatives, are
one of those sources. These need to be supplemen-
ted by whatever other sources are available. But
how do you interrogate these sources in a way that
does not import contemporary understandings into
them, if not with attention to the words used, the
concepts invoked and the practices described? This
is not ‘static nominalism’; it is not ‘textual exegesis
[as] all about tracing the longevity of meanings and
ascribing to them a transcendental authority’. It is
contextual history.

Agnew’s raises the continual risk of the ‘territorial
trap’. It is partly in order to interrogate the conditions
of possibility for there to be this modern understand-
ing – what he thinks is a trap – that I wrote the book.
To trace the emergence of this is not to think that
this exhausts all possible meanings from that point
onwards. Out of a manifold set of relations between place and power, called different things, invoking different concepts and suggesting different practices, what we now, far-too-unproblematically, call ‘territory’ emerged. In the territorial trap argument, Agnew convincingly shows that this is not an ahistorical concept and quickly sketches the history of some of its key elements. My work was attempting, in part, to work that through in much more detail, with more precision, and depth.

To undertake a history of a concept is not to suggest that this exhausts all possible meanings in the present, but it can be, as it is for Foucault, a part of the history of the present. I’d suggest this is the case with work on territory. Yes, today, territory is not exclusively the domain of the state, and territory is far from the only political–geographical concept or practice. But it is a key term in thinking the relation of the state to geography, and it is still one of the key terms in thinking the relation of politics and geography, power and place, more generally. I am suggesting nothing more, but even that shows why this work seemed to me worthwhile.

To take an indication, the idea that a state is sovereign within its territory emerged much earlier than the idea that the borders of a state were fixed. Yet today, those two ideas are brought together quite frequently, and without much understanding of their historical lineages. Agnew suggests ‘many of the ideas whose genealogies we are most anxious to trace never simply sprang into being fully formed’. Yet this is precisely why genealogy is so useful. It is not concerned with a search for origins, but finding traces, tracking lineages and unpicking filigrees – the tangled relation between words, concepts and practices.

I don’t believe that ‘the field has become so obsessed with tracing the intellectual genealogies of its concepts (as singular words)’. I think we need more of it. But nor do I think that it would be sufficient. It is one element within the critical approach. Agnew begins with the Gospel of John – the relation of the word with God. But the word for ‘word’ here is crucial. In the New Testament Greek it is logos, which means many things. Word, language and speech are certainly some, but so too rationality, ratio and reasoning – a form of theoretical practice. This is significant, because the word is never singular, never merely a word, never a simple signifier of a concept or practice, but entwined with them. The word–concept–practice relation is what I tried to explain in the book. These questions show why conceptual history, the history of ideas, genealogy are crucial, necessary, elements of critical human geography. Necessary, but not sufficient; crucial but not enough. I’m unconvinced anyone really ever thought they were.

Reference

Agnew JA (2014) By words shall we know: is the history of ideas enough to understand the world to which our concepts relate? Dialogues in Human Geography 4(3): 311–319.
