

Stuart Elden, "From Hinterland to the Global", *Society and Space*, 2015

From Hinterland to the Global: New Books on Historical and Political Understandings of Territory

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Branch, Jordan (2014) *The Cartographic State: Maps, Territory, and the Origins of Sovereignty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xiv + 219 pages, £55, ISBN: 978-1-107-04096-0,

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/international-relations-and-international-organisations/cartographic-state-maps-territory-and-origins-sovereignty>

Sassen, Saskia (2014) *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 298 pages, £22.95, ISBN: 978-0-674-599,

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674599222>

Scott, Tom (2012) *The City-State in Europe, 1000-1600: Hinterland—Territory—Region*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, xi + 382 pages, £47.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-927460-4, £22.99 ISBN: 978-0-19-967539-5,

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199274604.do>

Vigneswaran, Darshan (2013) *Territory, Migration, and the Evolution of the International System*, Houndmills: Palgrave, xi + 158 pages, £58, ISBN: 978-0-230-39128-4, <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/territory-migration-and-the-evolution-of-the-international-system-darshan-vigneswaran/?K=9780230391284>

These four books all, in different ways, rely upon and contribute to understandings of territory. They move from the very historical to the resolutely contemporary, and in two cases combine the political-historical in important and insightful ways. The most fully historical is Tom Scott's *The City-State in Europe*, which takes a broad comparative approach to the formation and transformation of polities in Western Europe from the high Middle Ages to the beginning of the early Modern period. One of its key contributions is to offer analysis of city-states outside of the Italian peninsula. While it does discuss this area at some length, it also has insightful analysis of other parts of Europe, including the geographical region of Germany and some especially helpful discussion of Switzerland. The reading of Cologne, for example, notes how the extent of the city's power extended unevenly from its urban centre. The region must not, we are told, "be seen as uniform or integrated, a clearly delineated market area functioning as a *contado* by other means". Instead, different trade markets extend in uneven ways, creating what Scott calls a "variable geometry" which distinguishes the economic region of Cologne from a "territorial city-state" (p. 147).

This outlining of the multiple political-spatial forms which cities could take in relation to surrounding areas is one of the best aspects of the book. In this respect, the subtitle is revealing (see p. 236). The analysis does indeed provide some valuable insights into the shifting interrelation between hinterland,

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territory and region. One of the key developments in this period was from cities that had territories, in the classical Latin sense of surrounding lands, to territories within which there were cities: a more modern understanding that has become the dominant meaning. The older idea of a territory was indeed much closer to that of a hinterland, of areas outside an urban core. If the book lacks an explicit analysis of this transition in theoretical terms, it provides a great deal of historical-geographical detail that is very helpful in tracing those larger processes. The book as a whole tends to shy away from broad generalisations, but provides the kind of specificity that those kinds of analyses are often forced to neglect (see Elden 2013).

The book's strength then is in the historical evidence provided, in the documentary resources mobilized and the ability to work with sources in multiple languages. It is less secure conceptually, with occasional frustrating ambiguity. At one point Scott notes that "we are only tangentially concerned" with political theory (p. 51), and this shows in the imprecision with which key terms are used. Unfortunately one of these is the very idea of territory, which is often used to translate quite disparate terms. For example, with respect to Fribourg, the *Anciennes Terres/Alte Landschaft* are described as its 'core territory' (p. 187). A tracking of the distinctions and overlap between terms, especially in different languages, would have been helpful. The French *terre*, German *Landschaft*, and Latin *territorium* invoke subtly different things, and give rise to quite divergent literatures. It is only later that the distinctive terms become more closely related. There are some provocative openings towards these very issues in the conclusion, when Scott suggests that moving beyond the German distinction between *Landgebietspolitik* and *Territorialpolitik* would be productive. He suggests that Rolf Kießling's term *Umlandpolitik* would be more helpful. Rather than the other terms invoking land, region and territory, this captures a "hinterland policy which does not privilege one form of outreach over another and which acknowledges the importance of informal contacts through clientage, patronage, and kinship as well as bilateral economic agreements" (p. 218). It is a shame these aspects are not developed more. Equally, it would have been helpful to have spelled out more explicitly the sometimes-invoked notion of a *territorium clausum* – a homogeneous, enclave-free, 'closed' political space. Elsewhere the German feudal term *Herrschaft* is rendered as 'territory', a choice that perhaps masks the more limited, restrictive, and predominantly economic sense of the term, rather the more political-legal aspects of the broader concept. Fiefdom would perhaps be closer, and even though the political-economic is a crucial element of territorial relations, it does not exhaust its multiple aspects.

One of those aspects is the development of cartographic techniques, which are adumbrated in Jordan Branch's *The Cartographic State*. While historical in scope, this is very much a book framed within International Relations (IR), and reliant on that discipline's norms and methods, especially the constructivist approach. Branch largely relies on recent secondary literature to develop his argument, and the result is a useful synthetic study. His reading has ranged widely within IR, literature on cartography, and some work in Political Science more generally and Geography. It covers some similar ground to Christian Jacob's *The Sovereign Map*

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(2006, previously reviewed in [Society and Space](#) [requires subscription]), which is unfortunately absent from its discussions, as tracing the interconnected nature and divergent approach of the inquiries would have been helpful.

It is a largely European story, though some references are made to transitions in other areas of the world, part colonial, and part more broadly such as in China. While this is defensible in terms of scope, there are problems in terms of how linguistically limited the book is. It only makes use of English-language sources in the chapter on France, for example, and strangely makes no reference to Tom Conley's crucial analysis (1996). Its approach of using secondary literature to challenge dominant readings makes it more of an analysis of divergent interpretations than a genuine contribution in its own right. It is thus dependent on second-hand material, clearly presented, but reliant on the same information and interpretations and subject to the same limitations. More generally, the book can use its sources in a relatively uncritical way, and as others have noted is not a work that has made use of archival materials (Black 2014). Indeed, it is a book that has shied away from primary sources almost entirely. There is no discussion of political theory in the periods analysed, and the few quotes provided are largely cited from other sources. Things are rather better with the discussion of peace treaties, though even here the analysis might have been developed further.

Branch takes the revisionist line on the importance of the Westphalian treaties of 1648. He is undoubtedly correct that many of IR's claims about these treaties are erroneous and the 'Westphalian system' is certainly misnamed. He rightly emphasizes some of the continuities between medieval understandings of political space and early Modern ones. Some of these are provided in useful detail concerning the mode of transfer of areas to the French crown or Austria, listing both towns and areas in extensive lists, and the particular aspects these areas allowed (pp. 126-7). But his claim that these treaties "contained little if any change in the deep grammar of political authority" (p. 125) rather misses what they did achieve, and the impact they had on German debates at the time. The Westphalia treaties were a stage in ongoing discussions by jurists and political theorists trying to understand the complicated political geographies of the Holy Roman Empire, and much was written following the treaties to try to understand their implications. This is entirely missing from Branch's reading, as is the importance of the term *jus territorialis*, 'territorial right', in the treaties themselves. This lack of reference to political-theoretical debates, or the wider context of the time, leads to his suggestion that it is only really in the early nineteenth century that many of the aspects of the international system as we know it today were formed. While there is some basis for this claim in terms of the international and the system, it is harder to see that in terms of the key concepts of territory and sovereignty that the book seeks to trace. Indeed, with the second, the claim is made to trace its *origins*, and yet this is a term that has a longer history – as Branch sometimes admits – and has a provenance in earlier ideas of authority, supremacy and superiority that are barely discussed.

There are some good points made about how some early Modern atlases bore only limited relation to the situation on the ground, though the sources providing the basis for such claims are, by nature of the mode of inquiry employed here,

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contemporary secondary sources. It is never really clear how these things were understood in the time-periods discussed, except on the basis of what others have made of them. While there are some useful discussions of maps, there is relatively little on technologies of printing and the circulation of knowledge, and more crucially, only cursory discussion of the techniques of cartography itself. Perhaps as a result, it tends to see maps in a somewhat instrumentalist way, as tools of power. While they are this, as is familiar to arguments about cartography since at least the work of Brian Harley, there are other aspects at stake. Branch is undoubtedly correct that cartography is a crucial element in the story of the emergence of the modern state and sovereignty, and this he has outlined in useful and generous detail. But it is only one element among others in the transitions he is tracing, and other issues such as political-legal developments, the conflict between secular rule and the Church, and economic transformations are rather underplayed. He admits as much in the concluding paragraph: "The modern state was founded on a collection of narratives about and representations of the world, a major component of which was supplied (and continues to be supplied) by maps" (p. 185). In tracing that major component, through the synthetic presentation of the importance of cartography to modern politics, with some useful indications of its continuing importance, the book is a helpful resource.

Darshan Vigneswaran's *Territory, Migration, and the Evolution of the International System* is a short, somewhat episodic, study with broad ambitions. (It is a shame that the production values are limited. For a book of this brevity and price the copyediting is, at times, really poor.) Vigneswaran wants to try to show how the historical past may contain resources for a more nuanced, adaptive and multi-faceted understanding of territory. The traditional, unproblematic, understanding of territory, he suggests, remains one that is clung to by states and their critics. This is a project to which I have a great deal of sympathy. The standard approach might be characterised as one which thinks territory as a *concept* is uncomplicated, but that difficulties arise in all of its particular instantiations. This approach actually denies us the very tools we might use to work through some of those issues. Vigneswaran's specific lens for his inquiry is the question of migration, which undoubtedly complicates straightforward and simplistic determinations of territory. Vigneswaran tries to show how territory as exclusive is but a single, very particular model of political-spatial organization.

The book therefore takes a small number of discrete historical moments to analyse what might be called other territorial formations. These include centralizing tendencies in late Medieval and Renaissance Italy; the expansion of the British Empire in India; and the integration of the European Union project. These political-spatial terms – centralization, expansion, integration – sit alongside exclusivity as modes of territory. Vigneswaran's point is that even historical accounts tend to contribute to the story of an over-determined exclusivity at the expense of these other aspects. He wants to open up the possibility of a "genuinely *comparative* discussion of territorial strategies" (p. 104). This overall tendency leads him to a valuable tracking of some key

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additional criteria, although he acknowledges much more would need to be done. However the specificity of these terms in relation to a terminologically precise use of 'territory' also remains to be established. Indeed, Vigneswaran can be rather loose in his use of key terms generally, being more interested in taking broad criteria and establishing overall contours and directions than the precision of the historical and textual record. There are some generalisations about city-states for which Scott offers a valuable corrective; sovereignty is used without much sense of its own historical trajectory and other political-legal forms of power. What this means is that, like Branch, much of the work here is a kind of meta-historical critique – taking the work of previous historians and trying to render it otherwise. There is no real attempt at genuine historical-conceptual work.

The reading of Dante is a case in point. Taking him as an example is intriguing, as he is a crucial figure not only in literature and a national-linguistic project but also as a political theorist. Vigneswaran wants to use him to establish ideas of territory and exile in the Middle Ages. Yet what Dante says about these very issues is neglected – the only quotations from him are cited from other works, and therefore shorn of any context and specificity. One quotation requires three interpolations in fifteen words to make sense in the sentence. Dante's important work *Monarchia*, which aspired to a resurrection of an imperial Italy, is not even mentioned. It is not clear why this should be the case – the work in question exists in a very good modern English translation (1996). As a result, the reading proposed here is rather at odds with Dante's own work, and raises doubts about the veracity of other readings in this work. The same kinds of textual strategies are present in other parts of the book.

There are, fortunately, stronger parts of the book. I particularly liked the analysis of the buildings of railways in British India as a technology of territorial connection and shaping. Through this and other discussions Vigneswaran wants to demonstrate that not all territorial regimes and their accompanying 'mental maps' worked on a recognizably similar basis. In this he certainly opens up potential for broad analysis. It is not, he rightly suggests, simply a case of variations within a form – the ahistorical and ageographical 'container' model of territory that is so often used as the implicit definition. In this the book makes a valuable point, and does so in a way that is likely to speak to the IR debates it is largely framed within. While brief, there are some important indications of how this historical work might relate to the present moment – an absence he criticizes in other historical studies of these relations. If the book does not quite deliver on its own aspiration here (or, incidentally and more generally, of its marketing pitch) then it provides some helpful orientations for future work.

Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions* is a wide-ranging study of the global economy, taking into account economic inequality, environmental degradation, dispossession and displacement. Sassen rejects standard ways of understanding these, suggesting that 'expulsion' makes better sense of these potentially diverse phenomena. This is where "people, enterprises, and places" are increasingly "expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time" (p. 1). She shows how increasingly

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complex systems of knowledge, technology and practice produce fundamental brutality. Her task is to make sense of these various trends.

This is done through four chapters of variable length and a framing introduction and conclusion. There is much to think about here, and the confident and clear way in which economic, political, legal and technical complexities are discussed can only be admired. The analysis of territory itself is more muted than I expected, especially given the insights of her previous book *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2006), and her recent articles on land grabs and the 'unbundling' of the territory-sovereignty relation (2013a, 2013b). The most explicit analysis is found in Chapter Two, analysing 'The New Global Market for Land', but there are also important elements in the fourth, final chapter on environmental issues and the impact on land and water. The economic is similarly important, being the focus of Chapter One in relation to the impacts of macro-economic policies, the destruction of welfare and health support; while Chapter Three looks at the crises in the financial system, especially the case of subprime mortgages. There are some telling points about the difficulty of resistance when the figure of the oppressor is so vague, where it is "increasingly a complex system that combines persons, networks, and machines with no obvious center" (p. 10).

The strength of the book is in the impassioned prose, the balancing of the different sources of information, and the overall force of its purpose. At times the range of examples, figures and references can be overpowering, as if the mobilization of illustration makes an argument itself. Overall claims do come through of course, but the insights need to be gleaned carefully: they are not always telescoped in advance. The conclusion is the most useful here, with its suggestion that the overall focus of the inquiry is "the systematic edge". The edge is not a nation-state border, but a shift from a centralizing dynamic to an expelling one: "The key dynamic at this edge is expulsion from the diverse systems in play—economic, social, biospheric" (p. 211). The term *expulsion* is certainly intriguing, with its invocation of spatial dislocation as much as a social marginalisation, but the implications of this are not always developed in ways that balance its metaphorical force with its geographical resonances. The book closes with the crucial question of "what are the spaces of the expelled?" This sets out an inquiry worth undertaking, and an agenda to be followed.

In a previous review essay on territory I suggested that the books there, from within political science and philosophy, were "instances of a small but noticeable shift", where attention was "being paid to the notion of territory in a way that had become unusual" (2010, p. 238). While I found things to criticize in those books, and in those under review here, the general direction of inquiry is to be applauded. Here the multidisciplinary aspect is even more apparent – the authors here hold positions in history, sociology, political science and urban studies. The shift in emphasis is no longer so small, and the attention not so unusual: the politics, history and concept of territory has become an important topic in a range of disciplines.

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