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TERRITORY DELIMITED

Bartholomew Sparrow*

STUART ELDEN, *THE BIRTH OF TERRITORY* (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS 2013). PP. 493. HARDCOVER \$ 90.00. PAPERBACK \$ 30.00.

Stuart Elden's *The Birth of Territory* tackles no slight subject: the evolution of the concept of "territory" in Western political thought.¹ The author reminds us that territory not only constitutes the basis for contemporary nation-states, but that the concept remains highly relevant today amid the proliferation of political movements concerning national self-determination, conflicts over water, oil and gas deposits, arable land and mineral ores, and the many active border disputes around the world. Notwithstanding territory's centrality as a concept in international relations and law, Elden finds that the intellectual and political origins of territory—unlike, say, "place" or "landscape"—are understudied.²

Elden, who is a professor of political theory and geography, seeks to excavate the "specificity" of territory by determining the different meanings of the word, identifying the words or phrases that have been translated as territory,³ and finding out exactly how texts in philosophy, theology, political theory, and literature (e.g., *Beowulf*, *King Lear*) refer to land, terrain, geography, space, and related concepts.⁴ Because territory is at once a concept, a place, and a practice, the interrelationship among these dimensions can only be understood historically, *in situ*.⁵ Understanding territory therefore calls for intellectual and historical excavation, one that Elden identifies as a kind of "genealogy," to follow Michel Foucault.⁶ The technique of excavation "makes use of the kinds of textual and contextual accounts offered by *Begriffsgeschichte*" (i.e., cultural history, to follow Reinhard Koselleck) "or [by] the Cambridge school" (the foremost members of which were Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock), "but is critical of notions that the production of meaning is reliant on authorial intent."⁷ This last point bears reemphasis: territory matters insofar as the concept is appropriated, practiced, and policed, not according to the

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1. STUART ELDEN, *THE BIRTH OF TERRITORY* 10 (2013).
2. *Id.* at 6-7.
3. *Id.* at 10-11.
4. *Id.* at 16-18.
5. *Id.* at 7.
6. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 8.
7. *Id.* at 7-8.

author's precise intent.

Elden seeks to determine how ideas of territory, as articulated in influential texts and by important thinkers and political figures, relate to the particular expressions and realizations of these concepts as they evolved over the history of the West, from ancient Greece in the fourth century BCE, through the Roman Empire and Middle Ages, and up to the seventeenth century and early modern era.⁸ To this end, he employs “the full range of techniques” such as “etymology, semantics, philology, and hermeneutics.”⁹ Elden pairs this range of techniques with “an analysis of practices and the workings of power” with respect to land, terrain, space, and related concepts.¹⁰ He does this so as to determine how the interactions and challenges between elements of the concepts, texts, and politics of antiquity, medieval Europe, and the Renaissance bear on the concept of territory.

Yet as Elden emphasizes, *The Birth of Territory* is first and foremost a work of political theory. The author accordingly provides extended introductions to the most relevant thinkers on territory, identifying and describing the main moments in the development of Western thought with respect to territory. While some of the theorists Elden studies are familiar, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Machiavelli, others, such as Nicholas of Cusa, Bartolus of Sassaferrato, and Udalricus Zasius, are less well known. Whichever the case, Elden explains their ideas and the contexts in which they work as they affect thinking about territory, discusses the application of relevant language, reviews how new ideas about territory dovetail with previous ideas and practices, and studies how ideas of territory have been manifest politically—that is, how the words for, and concepts of, territory have been represented in actual political life and then interpreted by subsequent philosophers and political actors.

This purposeful attention to the linkage between the history of ideas and the thoughts and behaviors of political leaders, military commanders, and religious authorities—i.e., territory as historically determined—is one of *The Birth of Territory*'s particular strengths. Elden connects the political theorists and others who have articulated ideas about territory—which he carefully distinguishes from “territoriality”—with the workaday manifest practices of governing, war making, and other political actions. With this strategy, the author minimizes the prospect that the ideas of political theorists and rulers—whether as rendered by their scribes, explained by historians, or translated into other languages—were either unrepresentative of, or irrelevant to, how territory was evident in political life.

The first section of *The Birth of Territory* begins by matching what Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles (in *Antigone*), Plato (in *Laws*), and Aristotle (in *Politics*) write in their (rendered or reconstructed) texts about autochthony and the politics of space, more generally, with a study of Kleisthenes's Athenian urban reforms and other practices of Attic Greece. Elden explains how the *polis* can be understood at once as a site (consistent with the myth reiterated by Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles) and as a community.¹¹

8. *Id.* at 10-11.

9. *Id.* at 8.

10. *Id.*

11. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 49-50.

Interestingly, *polis* is not coterminous with “state” or “city-state” (contrary to how these terms are sometimes applied to Ancient Greece).¹²

Elden’s study of ancient Rome, beginning in the first century BCE, is as encompassing as his discussion of ancient Greece. He discusses Julius Caesar’s and Cicero’s conceptions of land and political community.¹³ He reports that ancient Rome had no exact translation of *territorium* as the word was later used in the Roman Empire (Caesar himself did not employ the term *territorium* and, remarkably, did not use maps).¹⁴ The Romans used several different words to refer to “land,” “boundaries,” and “limits,”¹⁵ and employed the word *pomerium* to refer to a strip of land around the city that, for all intents and purposes, denoted a city’s limits or the extent of its domain (approaching closer to what we currently mean by “territory”). When Rome became an empire in 27 BCE, Roman writers began to refer to the lands conquered by Rome as the *imperium* (conquests reflected in the carvings on the Boscarole cups).¹⁶

The Roman historians Tacitus and Marcellinus write about land in the context of the barbarian invasions of Rome and early Middle Ages—or the medieval period, which extended from the fifth century to Charlemagne and the fifteenth century. Elden proceeds to address the work of Saint Augustine, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, and other writers.¹⁷ Although the book’s examination of political thought, the law, language, and the importance of translation during this period, among other intellectual inquiries, makes “territory” and the discussion of place sometimes disappear,¹⁸ these discussions at once inform subsequent ideas about territory and reveal how territory operates as a political technology in the development of the West.¹⁹

The Birth of Territory then reviews how the Franks, Goths, Anglo-Saxons, and Danes after the Roman Empire, regarded land and related to spatial politics. Elden likewise covers the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Crusades, the division of the Holy Roman Empire into western and eastern halves, and feudalism. Of great significance, too, was the translation by Thomas Aquinas of Aristotle into Latin²⁰—thereby making Aristotle’s ideas about territory accessible to contemporaries. Also of great relevance to the reign of Charlemagne and later generations was the idea of the pope’s “two swords,” one temporal, the other spiritual.²¹ While Elden’s discussion of the pope’s two swords might seem remote from ideas about territory, the author’s attentions to these and other concepts constitute the ideational context by which territory could be understood, and from which the later conceptualization and manifestation of territory evolved.

Hobbes regards the pope’s two swords as an artificial distinction, however. For

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 11.

14. *Id.* at 55-56.

15. *Id.* at 70.

16. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 77-80. Unfortunately, many Roman texts have been lost, thereby obscuring the historical record. *See id.* at 67-68.

17. *Id.* at 12.

18. *Id.* at 17.

19. *Id.* at 16-17.

20. *Id.* at 171.

21. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 162-66.

Hobbes, civic authority is paramount and sovereignty undivided.²² Thus, the divine right of the monarch comes not from Rome, but rather inheres in “a plurality of Christian sovereigns.”²³ This notion of a plurality of sovereigns is manifest in the 1648 Westphalian treaties of Münster and Osnabrück, which bestowed the “free exercise of territorial right” on the member polities of the Holy Roman Empire. Yet, as Elden points out, the Holy Roman Empire endured, and its member polities often retained their fealty to the empire and the pope.

Elden also addresses the work of numerous thinkers, such as René Descartes, who are better known for their contributions less directly linked to territory or its antecedents.²⁴ Neither do we think of “territory” in connection to Shakespeare, but Elden explores Shakespeare’s use of the word in *King Lear*, where territory was a new word in the English language, and uncommonly used (*territorium* itself was used rarely for most of the Middle Ages).²⁵ The whole play is motivated by the King’s decision to divide his territory among his three daughters, of course, and Elden finds that in Shakespeare’s usage, territory “implies a range of political issues,”²⁶ given that it is “controlled, fought over, distributed, divided, gifted, and bought and sold.” As such, and as being “economically important, strategically crucial, and legally significant,” Shakespeare comes close to modern usage.²⁷

Leibnitz articulates and establishes the concept of territory in the sense we know it today, Elden finds. Leibnitz—a philosopher, historian, mathematician, political adviser, and one of the first students of probability—writes of territory as having both areal and political dimensions and of the connection of both of these dimensions to a legal regime.²⁸ Leibnitz recognizes that various levels of legal-political power apply to territory, from weaker forms of political authority, such as jurisdiction, to stronger forms, such as military coercion.²⁹ Of critical importance is the fact that he links sovereignty to territory, bringing the two together in “territory,” a term that combines the strands of empirical political authority, geographic area, and necessary legal structure.³⁰

“Territory is not simply land in the political-economic sense of rights of use, appropriation, and possession attached to a place,” Elden summarizes, “nor is it a narrowly political-strategic question that is closer to a notion of terrain.”³¹ Rather, it is best described as “a bundle of technologies;” territory applies to the location and object of violence, the site of politics, and the administration of institutions.³² Cartography necessarily becomes of principal importance then, since maps serve to demarcate sovereignty, allocate

22. *Id.* at 299-301.

23. *Id.* at 301.

24. *Id.* at 245-52, 291.

25. *Id.* at 275-78. The only other Shakespeare play that mentions territory is *Henry IV, Part 2*. *See id.* at 275.

26. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 278.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 315, 318.

29. *Id.* at 318-19. Leibnitz did not deny that there could be a universal, overarching sovereign; indeed, his own preference was for a single body of Christian states unified under the emperor as the temporal head and the pope as the spiritual head.

30. *Id.* at 320-21.

31. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 323.

32. *Id.* at 322-27.

institutional authority, and assign administrative tasks.³³ Then, too, the military uses maps (or nautical charts) to prepare for, and conduct, aggressive and defensive actions alike. Sovereignty is territory, then. And the existence of territory is to be subject to sovereignty.³⁴

This identity between territory and sovereignty characterizes Rousseau's thought and that of more recent political philosophers and political actors. After Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hume, Kant, and other theorists were all working "within the conceptual framework of state-territorial politics"—hence Elden's analysis ends with a discussion of Rousseau.³⁵ Elden's use of the word "birth" in the book's title implies exactly that: his purpose in the text is to explain the development of territory as an idea and to document the co-evolution of the concepts of "territory" and "state" over the many centuries before the establishment of the Westphalian system of states.

The above summary does not do justice to *The Birth of Territory*. Elden offers us a rich, thorough, and instructive account of the dozens of conceptualizations of territory, evident in written texts, art, and oral tradition (such as *Beowulf*). The author's close reading of the many philosophers, theologians, logicians, geographers, and other thinkers who articulate concepts of territory, but with whom many political theorists of the Western canon will be unfamiliar, is indicative of his ambition and erudition as a scholar, of the comprehensiveness of his research, and of the seriousness with which he conducted his study. Elden himself often translates the Greek, Latin, French, and German into English, for instance, rather than relying on others. He does not hesitate to take issue with another theorist's understanding and interpretation of territory as the concept and its manifestations have been articulated and understood. The 148 pages of endnotes themselves constitute a valuable resource insofar as many of them further explain the concepts and practices under study, and provide additional historical context.

Another laudable quality of *The Birth of Territory* is the precision of Elden's writing, notwithstanding the complexity of his subject, and the many evolving nuances—how two-plus millennia of philosophers, statesmen, and other figures conceptualized space, religion, and political power. Such clarity is by no means a given among political theorists or social scientists, and it is indicative of the thought and effort Elden has invested in the book.

The Birth of Territory is first and foremost a work of political theory, a study of texts and concepts. As Elden emphasizes, it is not a work of anthropology or archeology—for example, a rendering of how of political rule throughout much of what is now Europe was specifically produced and practiced in different settlements and cultures. All the same, this distinction between political thought and other ways of determining how and why territory was conceptualized, and how it related to the exercise of power and systems of beliefs, may be overdrawn. That is to say, it seems that the author cannot at once claim to be interested in territory in its specificity and to be engaged in a project of Foucault-inspired excavation, and, at the same time, slight the intersubjective factors that obtain in at least two other contexts.

33. *Id.* at 324-26.

34. *Id.* at 326-28.

35. *Id.* at 15, 328-30.

Specifically, *The Birth of Territory's* overwhelming focus on philosophers, historians, politicians, and others who write on territory comes at the cost of attending to peoples who left little written record. The Germanic tribes—the Huns, Goths, Franks, Anglo-Saxons, Swedes, and Danes³⁶—receive scant mention, and the Celts, Cossacks, and others receive none whatsoever. Yet we may wonder if these peoples had robust notions of *terra, imperium*, or other ways of conceiving the relationships among identity, political power, and geography. The epic of *Beowulf* was eventually transcribed, but what of other ideas or cosmologies relating to territory as understood in oral histories and political practices by other early European national groups? Who were their intellectual successors, and what were their conceptual legacies? Or were their ideas simply lost in time, subsumed by the notions of territory as promulgated by Roman or Medieval theorists, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Catholic Church?

As noted above, Elden does not suggest that he is writing a full history or providing a universal account of territory,³⁷ but he nonetheless implies that the conceptualization and realization of territory in the West was essentially self-contained. Just as the Roman empire interacted with early European societies—which he discusses—so, too, did the European states of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries interact with the peoples and governments—such as they were—on the fringes of Europe, whether the Egyptians, Assyrians, or Ottomans. Similarly, the Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish interacted with the peoples and political systems of the aboriginals of North and Meso-America and the southwestern Pacific. The author only touches on this interaction, though. Where are Columbus, Vespucci, Magellan, Drake, and other early explorers? How did their and others' discoveries, conquests, missions of religious conversion, and colonization efforts influence Western thinking on territory? How did the conquest of, extraction from, trade with, and settlement of, the Americas, Africa, East Asia, and Oceania inform the genealogy of territory as conceptualized by Western thinkers?³⁸

We may also wonder about the continued relevance of territory. The premise of *The Birth of Territory* is to investigate the taken-for-granted notion of “territory,” without specifically attending to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the growth of separatist movements, or the rise of international terrorism, climate change, and other transnational threats.³⁹ Where so many contemporary writers seek to explain the various threats to how we understand territory, Elden explains how the present-day concept of territory became so dominant in the West. That said, the reader would profited from an analysis of how the concept and use of territory in politics and by governments (or other institutions) has morphed into what we recognize of contemporary world politics. Elden cites John Agnew on the point that the spatiality of power is not the same as the territoriality of the state,⁴⁰ for instance, yet we might inquire about what issues or political domains intersect both

36. *Id.* at 117-22, 123, 126.

37. ELDEN, *supra* note 1, at 10-11.

38. Elden briefly discusses the Byzantine emperors, Crusades, and the Germanic invasion, and notes, following Pirenne, that with Islam, there would have been no need for the consolidation of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne (per the *Song of Roland*) and therefore a different course for Western theory and thinking about territory. *See id.* at 137-39; *see also id.* at 150-52.

39. *Id.* at 2.

40. *Id.* at 3.

territorial and extra-territorial domains and are subject to contestation and possibly (re)negotiation. What of political power remains ineluctably or principally territory-based? And what state-based authority has escaped the territorial controls of nation states?

Political authority in the early twenty-first century would, on the one hand, seem to have ever more extra-territorial and non-territorial dimension. Consider the great speed by which information and financial transfers are able to span distances. Consider the disembodied quality of the long-distance projection of force now possible with cruise missiles, drones, and satellite guidance systems. And consider the existence of a global computer network that facilitates the spread of viruses, hacking of databases and telephone accounts, and remote surveillance and interception of electronic and voice communications. On the other hand, territory remains a potent factor with respect to the determination of political representation, taxation, office holding, exercise of police powers, and scope of judiciary powers. So even as suffrage, tax collection, police authority, and judicial authority now extend beyond state boundaries, these topics are increasingly controversial precisely because of the assumed political preeminence of territory.

In other words, the book's progression from the study of the first recorded thinking about territory to its maturity in the seventeenth century begs further analysis of the concept's continued political prominence and intellectual weight. By investigating how the word "territory" has been used, referring to territory as a "political technology" and interrogating the boundaries, borders, and the geography of political power, *The Birth of Territory* shows how political authorities have harnessed geography instrumentally, for political ends. But with territory being less dispositive to the acquisition and control of economic, political, and military power in the twenty-first century—the blunting of this technology—the reader would have benefited from a brief chapter or an epilogue limning and analyzing the challenges to Western notions of territory.⁴¹

Yet the points above should be taken more as a wish list and as indicators of the interest, insights, and questions generated by *The Birth of Territory* rather than major reservations or serious criticisms of Elden's excavation of territory. Since it is not his intention to uncover all the ways political societies and their leaders considered and conceptualized space over the course of Western political societies, these comments should be regarded as observations as to how the author's analysis might have been extended. If such an extension might have produced a more comprehensive anthropology of geography and geopolitics, it would have also most likely detracted from the study of texts that constitute the core of *The Birth of Territory*, which firmly establish the genealogy of territory. It would have also lengthened what is already an extensive text.

What Stuart Elden has accomplished is more than enough. *The Birth of Territory* constitutes research of immense benefit to scholars of political theory, intellectual history, geography, and political sociology. It stands as a *tour de force* of conceptual history.

41. Which texts Elden or other theorist and geographer would choose as indicative or perhaps even representative of these developments may not be obvious.