

Stuart Elden

## *The Birth of Territory*

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Stuart Elden's new book *The Birth of Territory* is a magisterial and in parts almost encyclopedic work. The book covers a diverse and broad ground, starting from political theory and international relations through geography and law to theology and history. The book's basic presupposition is to present a genealogy of the concept of territory as we understand it today. Elden asserts that the concept of territory is taken for granted today. That is the case in political practice as well as in political theory and the social sciences more generally where territory has been under-examined. Thus, the author "seeks to offer an account of the emergence of the concept of territory in Western political thought. It does so primarily through a contextualized reading of the texts of that tradition with one key question: what is the relation between place and power?" (ibid: 10). He answers this question through a mesmerizing account divided in three parts spanning nine chapters and a coda which are supported by more than 2,700 endnotes. The book won the 2013 Association of American Geographers Meridian Book Award for "outstanding scholarly work in Geography".

Elden opens the book with a famous passage from *The Discourse on Inequality* by Rousseau. In it, Rousseau laments the fact that the first appropriation by one person of a part of the Earth, held in common by all of humanity, which was not prevented by his peers, is the act that created civilization but also led to all its miseries. Still, the challenge to that appropriation could only have been made at that point in time; today we live in the shadow of that division of the world as we are in large part a product of it. The classical account of the emergence of the modern state and the concept of territory is the one about the *Peace of Westphalia*. That account is known to any student of international relations and is challenged by Elden as just one of the blocks on which these concepts were built, and by no means a central one. Elden also challenges the claims that the concept of territory as known today

remained almost unchanged since antiquity, that it is basically an eternal category. The concept of territory is historically produced, the product of ideas and practices which Elden traces from the Greeks up to the 17th century. Elden also stresses the distinctions between concepts that are related to territory, that of terrain and land, distinctions we should keep in mind as well as the one between territory and territoriality. Therefore, for the most part of European history since the time of the Greeks the word territory meant a space surrounding the city on which the city had claims, or which belonged to it and its inhabitants. However, these questions of claim and belonging are not as straightforward as they seem to be.

The modern concept which presupposes an inseparable link of the concept of territory with the concept of the state was long in the making. Elden stresses that from the famous triad - state, territory and population - analyzed among others by Foucault in his lectures on the genealogy of power in the West, it is territory which has been under-examined. Although Elden's approach is much indebted to Foucault's genealogical approach, he dismisses what Foucault had to say about territory. Elden defines his own approach in the book as textual, contextual and political, and that it should be read alongside his earlier book *Terror and Territory*, both books being a part of a larger project (ibid: 8).

Part one of the book deals with classical antiquity of Greece and Rome where Elden finds the elements which will be formed into the concept of territory. In chapter one Elden guides us through the origin myths, Greek tragedy, the laws of Kleisthenes, and the political writings of Plato and Aristotle. Elden then leads us into the world of Greek poleis and colonies in search of the elements of the concept of territory. Through Sophocles' *Antigone* Elden shows the double meaning of the Polis; first as space, the *khora*, through the problem of the burial of Antigone's brother; and second as community, the intervening of the chorus on the orders of Creon.

The second chapter is dedicated to Rome and to the works of Caesar, Cicero and the imperial historians. It is in Cicero where the word territory (*territorium*) appears, which is very rare in classical Latin. The word was sparsely used in the Roman World, where it designates agricultural land surrounding the city, but Romans had frequently used other words for the same meaning and this is why Cicero is interesting. The chapter provides

an account of the transformation of Rome from a city into an Empire and the contradictions that that transformation entailed. One of the most interesting aspects of Elden's book is the story that traces the development of cartography that follows the main narrative about place and power, and in which cartography assembles itself into one of the techniques through which power is wielded over place. The Greeks and Romans, and the peoples of the Middle Ages, did not possess maps in our modern sense, so their idea of place and space, Elden claims, was substantially different than ours. Alexander's conquest of Persia and Caesar's conquest of Gaul were both made without maps, although surveying did exist and was very developed. This was especially the case in the Roman Empire, where in the work of Marcellinus the practice of surveying was of great importance. Elden gives clarification of the idea of *limes*, and also of probably one of the most important concepts deriving from the Roman Empire, that of *imperium*. The maps which today accompany every modern depiction or account of the Roman world and which to our eyes present essentially an empire whose borders seem threatened and surrounded by barbarians and basically indefensible, has almost nothing to do with how the Romans perceived it. How lands were conquered, defended and perceived by Caesar and his contemporaries is very different from our own concepts of terrain, territory and strategy. Still, they add to the historical making and assembling of our concepts. Today we cannot think of such ideas and not inscribe their origin, similarly as the concept of the state, although for the most part incorrectly, to the Roman World.

Part two, spanning chapters 3 to 6, covers the Middle Ages. In it, Elden paints a picture that is one more of continuity with the Roman Empire then in opposition to it. At center stage is the figure of Saint Augustine, but the lesser known authors such as Orosius, Boethius and Isidore are also present. Elden includes into the discussion a number of national historians of the "barbarian" tribes, finishing it off with one of the most poignant sections of the book in which he re-reads the poem Beowulf.

Chapters 4 through 6 are interconnected through the discussion of the relationship between the Pope and the Emperor, which bounds together politics and theology in the various interpretations of the so-called doctrine of the two swords. Starting from the importance of the *Donation of Constantine* and the crowning of Charlemagne by the Pope

there is an ongoing discussion of who has temporal power over the (re) established Empire of the Romans. It is this Empire that through ongoing transformations becomes the Holy Roman Empire of the German People. The main question is: what is the extent of spiritual and temporal power, that of the Pope and that of the Emperor? A diversity of authors offered replies, from John of Salisbury and Thomas Aquinas to Dante and Marsilius. This dispute is carried through medieval texts, as well as through real power struggles between various popes and rulers such as Friedrich II and Philip the Fair of France. To all this the important rediscovery of the political writings of Aristotle has to be added, which adds to the new categories that inform these ongoing disputes and struggles.

Part three of the book, spanning chapters 7 to 9, brings us from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance up to the end of the 17th century. As chapter 5 dealt with the important rediscovery of Aristotle's political thought, chapter 7 deals with the important rediscovery of Roman law. This rediscovery was made possible by the preservation of the compilation of Roman legal documents in the form of *Corpus Iuris Civilis* under the emperor Justinian. These were finally made available to the thinkers in the west in the 11th century by Iheronimus five hundred years after they were originally compiled. The importance of Iheronimus and the Glossators who worked on these Roman legal texts is stressed by Elden (the painting of Iheronimus also graces the book's cover). They, and even more the so called Post-Glossators, informed what were to become the practices and concepts that would lead to our modern notions of sovereignty and territory. Elden puts special emphasis on two of these thinkers and jurists, Bartolus of Sassoferrato and Baldus de Ubaldis. Bartolus developed the notion of territory "as the very object of political rule in itself, and as a consequence, that rule is over the things that take place within it" (ibid: 226). This then informs the discussion between the Emperor and the Pope, in which the Pope has universal spiritual power, but they both have temporal power bound by territory. The Pope only has temporal power in the areas he directly controls, and is elsewhere under the power of the Emperor. Baldus adds to this the population, but the object of the rule remains the territory. The work by these and other scholars before them, for example Marsilius, on the relationship of cities and kings, are of great importance to later thinkers and disputes between cities, princes and kings analyzed by Elden in the chapters that follow.

The Renaissance and the Reformation are covered in chapter 8. Here again like the surveying in Roman times, now mapping of the Americas informs the discussion in Europe. With Machiavelli the idea of the state comes into play but Elden claims he has little to say about territory. More important are the processes going on in the Holy Roman Empire that are affected by the Reformation, and that fracture the Empire through religious and political struggles arising from it. Here, Elden presents the writing of such authors as Luther and Tyndale but also dedicates a longer discussion to the works of Jean Bodin and Giovanni Botero. Elden ends the chapter with a rereading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

In chapter 9 Elden brings us to the more familiar territory of the 17th century and to the writings of the classics of political theory such as Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke, but also to lesser studied authors such as Althusius and Reinking. Yet, Elden asserts that it is Leibniz, generally overlooked as a political thinker, who gives the most modern definition of territory. By examining political struggles in the Holy Roman Empire between the Emperor and the princes, Leibniz and a few other scholars develop the concept of territory into its modern sense. These concepts, overshadowed today by the importance we lay on the Peace of Westphalia, give us a fuller picture of the emergence of the modern concept of territory as territorial sovereignty.

In the coda, Elden leaves us off with the thinker he started the book with, Rousseau, who already uses the concept in its modern form "where politics, state and space come together" (ibid: 329). For Rousseau, as for Leibniz before him and Weber (and us) after him, territory is already "the space within which sovereignty is exercised" (ibid: 329).

In conclusion, it can be said that Stuart Elden's book *The Birth of Territory* will be interesting to scholars in a wide range of disciplines, from political theory and international relations through geography, law and history, to theology. The assemblage that this study brings forward is a reminder about the diversity of sources that led to our modern understanding of the concept of territory.

For scholars of international relations and its practitioners the book is a valuable asset explaining the evolution of ideas and concepts we use

today and take for granted and as self-evident. To sum up, Elden also asserts that the concept of territory is far from being on the demise and this book, by exploring the past, is actually very timely. Territory is not simply an object, it is a process (ibid: 17). We only need to think of the ongoing struggle in Ukraine, on which Elden has recently also written, the brake-up of Yugoslavia or the expansion and transformation of the project that is the European Union to see why such studies, which on the surface might seem obscure, are relevant to a much broader audience than only scholars dealing with the history of ideas or the history of international relations.

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