

Review Essay: Thinking Territory Politically

Stacie E. Goddard (2010). *Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy: Jerusalem and Northern Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Avery Kolers (2009). *Land, Conflict and Justice: A Political Theory of Territory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jeremy Larkins (2010). *From Hierarchy to Anarchy: Territory and Politics before Westphalia*. London: Palgrave.

For a long time territory was the dead, the fixed, the immobile, the under-examined. At least, so the books under review here argue in different ways, within political science, political philosophy and international relations. Political geography has, of course, long seen territory as one of its key concepts. Yet if political geographers have offered a range of excellent, detailed accounts of *territories*, there has been less examination of 'territory'. As I and others have suggested, territory is all too often seen by geographers as a relatively straight-forward concept, something that can be understood as a bounded space under the control of a group, perhaps a state, or an outcome of territoriality (Elden forthcoming, and the references therein). The complications come, so it is assumed, from particular instances of territorial configurations or disputes, not from the notion itself. These three books appear to be instances of a small but noticeable shift. Attention is being paid to the notion of territory in a way that had become unusual (see also Sassen 2006; Cowen & Gilbert eds. 2007, Jones 2007, Elden 2009). None of the three writers discussed here is a geographer: Kolers teaches in a philosophy programme, while Goddard and Larkins are in political science. Yet in terms of approach, Kolers and Goddard are the closest, working within a particular type of political theory or philosophy, while Larkins is engaging with these issues from the perspective of international relations and history.

Goddard's work provides a powerful analysis of two seemingly intractable territorial disputes: Northern Ireland and Jerusalem (see also Goddard 2006; Hassner 2006/07; Goddard et. al. 2007/08). Both of these seem, Goddard suggests, to be indivisible solutions, where one side's gain would be the others loss, where what would be acceptable to one is unacceptable to the other. This then is the key theoretical contribution of the study; the extension of the idea of indivisibility to territory. Indivisibility is argued to be 'a contingent outcome, one that is very much the product of human action' (p. 4). The strength of the book is to be found in the two substantive parts, where Goddard provides a detailed and nuanced account of the claims made by all sides in the conflicts. If some criticisms might be made—the analysis of Jerusalem seems to be largely reliant on different views from within the Western and Israeli academies and public spheres, and issues of language seem strangely underplayed (though see p. 181)—they are on the whole extremely interesting and striking discussions of these complicated cases. Goddard's claim is that the indivisible nature of these cases is a social construction. She notes how

Jerusalem was divided between 1948 and 1967, and that Northern Ireland has proved to be a place where compromise is possible. By showing that they have been understood in different ways at different times, Goddard is able to demonstrate that solutions are possible, though she certainly does not think they are simply reached.

One peculiar aspect of the analysis offered here is that there is little discussion of what Jerusalem is, in terms of its territorial extent. There are some references to how an ambiguity over its definition might be part of a solution (i.e. pp. 200-1, 238), but little discussion of different ways of seeing the city. Is it the old city, its suburbs, or much wider areas? There is discussion of annexation, but this is solely the 1967 Israeli annexation of the Jordanian part of Jerusalem. This is a crucial issue though, because Jerusalem is not a static entity. In the Western media illegal settlements in the West Bank are sometimes described as 'a suburb of Jerusalem', thus showing how the borders can be stretched further (see, though, p. 158). There is also some ambiguity about what Palestinians are actually claiming. Are they, like many parts of the Israeli voice, claiming the whole of Jerusalem, complete and undivided? Or are they claiming only parts, which are denied by Israelis who want either the same places or hold to the idea of its indivisibility. Similarly, in the case of Northern Ireland, it is the boundary drawn around this that is a crucial issue. To claim that it is for the people to decide its future already presupposes a decision has been made as to who is included within the territorial frame. Different perspectives in the debate would see the 1921 division as part of the problem; not to be taken as the definition of who should decide its solution. These issues, which would seem crucial for the political geography of these questions, are strangely underplayed. The way the problem is spatially represented and divided is part of the construction of its indivisibility. Yet there are considerable resources here for those interested to explore further.

The book is not as successful in conceptual terms. Goddard relies on a largely uncomplicated notion of territory in order to show how it is constructed as indivisible. No definition of territory is forthcoming, even in terms of showing how it might only be possible to show how it has been understood in different times and places. Indexes can be misleading, but territory does not merit an entry. While this might be said to be because it is discussed throughout, indivisibility, indivisible territory and legitimacy, for which similar claims could be made, all receive extensive reference and subdivision. Nor is this corrected in terms of the book's focus. At no point do we get a sense of how territory itself is constructed; rather than simply particular ways of seeing it as indivisible. On the other hand, the notion of an issue being indivisible is given quite extensive treatment, drawing on a range of sources, and subjecting them to critique (Ch. 1). The most we get is an assertion of how indivisibility relates to territory, the claim being 'that far from being an inherent characteristic of territory, indivisibility is a political construct' (p. 240). Outside of claims by hard-line politicians, it is difficult to think of a theorist of territory who would argue the opposite, making this particular argument perhaps less significant than Goddard thinks. The book then is an important contribution to the two particular sites studied, and work on territorial disputes and to theories of indivisibility, but it is much less helpful for those that want to understand territory.

A similar argument on the conceptual side could be made of Kolers's book. While the title promises a great deal that should transcend any specific focus, the book is much more concerned with how justice

arguments can be applied to territorial conflict than with either territory or conflict in themselves. Kolers applies theories of justice (understood themselves to be subject to high degrees of conceptual specificity) to an unproblematic space. The book is a liberal justice theory of territorial issues, rather than its subtitle promise of a political theory of territory. The application of the theory in chapter six is largely devoted to an analysis of Israel.

Kolers looks at almost no literature on territory. Indeed, he claims that state territory has been almost completely ignored by political philosophers (pp. 1, 67). He pushes the claim by suggesting that what does exist is 'by and large, perfunctory and unsystematic insofar as it deals with territory and territorial rights' (p. 2). He suggests that 'as far as I can tell not a single other work in political philosophy pauses at any length to consider what territory is' (p. 4). It depends who is included in political philosophy, of course, since William Connolly has hardly ignored such issues (see, for example 1995). But by ignoring other disciplines, and excluding anything not originally written in English, he is walking through the library with blinkers. Kolers mentions a couple of encounters with the discipline of geography (p. xi and xiii) but these appear to have had little impact on his work. The exception is his use of Robert Sack's pioneering study of human territoriality (1986), though he wishes to restrict its findings to what he calls juridical territory, i.e. state territory (pp. 4, 10 n. 1, 72-3). Yet this is read entirely without context. In the early twentieth century animal ethologists used a human category with a complicated history—territory—to understand animal behaviour. They named these processes territoriality, adopting a word meaning the condition of territory to invoke a more active sense of shaping it. Some human geographers began to utilise these ideas, seeing human behaviour as amenable to theorisation along such lines. Sack, among others, challenged the behaviourist assumptions behind such accounts, to see territoriality as a social strategy rather than biological drive. Such a potted history may appear a little crude, but it should caution us in any uncritical use of Sack, or theories of territoriality more generally, as a means by which to understand (state) territory: it is working backwards through some very muddy waters. Does territoriality, which is said to pertain to social control of space at multiple scales and throughout human history, really allow us to understand the specificities of the relations between the modern state and its territorial extent?

Given the audacity of Kolers's claims about the neglect and his own originality, it is astonishing how mundane his own definitions of territory actually are. Often these are the kinds of things that would be barely acceptable in an undergraduate text: 'a territory is a geographical place that is bounded and controlled in part through geographical means such as the establishment of physical boundaries or other means of demarcation' (p. 4); 'most fundamentally, state territory – a country – is a kind of place' (p. 69). This is in stark contrast to the extensive discussion of the theories of justice that might apply to territorial disputes; issues that take up the vast bulk of this study. Kolers defines his core thesis in the following way:

A territorial right exists if and only if an ethnographic community demonstrably achieves plenitude in a juridical territory; this right grounds independent statehood only if there is no competing right and the territory is a country (p. 5).

It seems that for Kolers the most complicated terms—and the ones he spends most time unpacking, are the ones concerning justice and rights. The analysis of Israel is perhaps restricted for this reason. He describes situations akin to Goddard's indivisible territory as situations which are 'territorially incompatible' (p. 25). I am aware of the difficulties in providing a balanced, let alone neutral, discussion of the Israel/Palestine situation, so I do not want to pick on nuances of language unfairly. But one example perhaps shows how the neglect of geographical questions restricts the ability to analyse. This is the map on p. 193, which is a representation of how the situation in 1949 could have been solved along the lines Bill Clinton proposed in 2000 at Camp David. It shows Gaza and the West Bank as the 'proposed Palestinian State', as contiguous landmasses, with relatively small areas annexed to Israel, and notes, but does not show, some exchange the other way. Put like this it seems strange that Palestinian negotiators did not sign up to the accord. But even Israeli negotiators have said that the Palestinians were right to refuse. The reason, in part, is because what was being offered was not nearly as simple as a landmass enclosed in a border. There were areas where the Palestinians would share control; restrictions on their sovereignty everywhere, especially in terms of aerial and maritime sovereignty; and a whole set of cuts, divisions and breaks in the land (the map on p. 205 shows the plural and overlapping jurisdictions much more clearly). I am not simply suggesting that Kolers's project is one-sided: the proposed solution (pp. 207, 213-5) actually offers something that many Israelis would find difficult to countenance, rejecting both the cosmopolitan one-state and the nationalist two-state solutions (p. 190, 214). It has problems, certainly, but may provide the impetus for a discussion that breaks with a fairly restrictive set of possibilities. That is to be welcomed. But the issue here is not that the argument is flawed politically but that it is deficient theoretically, and precisely because it fails to adequately problematise the notion of territory: conceptually or historically.

In terms of tracing a history, Larkins offers much more of an intervention. It is perhaps the most interesting of the books under review here: it is certainly the most ambitious. Larkins argues convincingly that international relations has, for too long, taken an unproblematic sense of territory as a given, the ground upon which its concerns play out. Larkins rather unhelpfully labels this as the 'territorial *a priori*', suggesting that it functions for IR much the same as space and time did for Kant, pure intuitions, structuring experience rather than things experienced. Yet space and time were subject to intensive analysis by Kant, in terms of their ontological status, something that neither Larkins nor IR provides for territory. Indeed, it is questionable if territory does indeed have that status in IR, or rather whether it is more simply an under-examined issue, largely assumed rather than interrogated. He does provide some analysis of what the term 'territory' might mean, though this is largely second hand, and somewhat peculiarly, through the very brief discussion in Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Relations* (p. 21; Wendt 1999, p. 211). Like Kolers, Larkins makes use of Sack to bolster his argument. Yet as noted above, Sack uses 'territoriality' to describe an active strategy, rather than the older sense of the word to describe a condition of territory. While there are persistent equivocations between these meanings throughout his study, Larkins offers some helpful criticisms of how Sack, too, remains committed to an epistemic realism (p. 36). His broad claim is to conceive of territory less as a material object than 'as an idea, a component of the social imaginary that is produced in discourse' (p. 35). While the challenge to the static, material understanding is helpful, to see it solely as imagined is

equally problematic. Rather, as Lefebvre argued with space, it is the combination of a range of factors—material and representational, and as embodied in lived practice—which are then historically understood that is important (Brenner and Elden 2009). Despite some discussion of Lefebvre, Larkins ends up insisting that Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘conceived space or representations of space’ is the ‘most important’ for his study (p. 38). At one point Larkins criticises John Ruggie for uncritically combining a range of different theoretical resources, and for lacking ‘methodological rigor’ (p. 43). This is a criticism to which his own theoretical forays are not immune.

Larkins is on more secure ground when he challenges the IR orthodoxy of the modern system of territorial states as coming into being with the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia. This mainstay has been convincingly criticised in recent years (Krasner 1993; Osiander 2001; Teschke 2003, for example), but retains its power as a shorthand or shortcut. Larkins argues that this is constructed, in part, on a simplistic division between medieval and modern worldviews. His tactic, in part, is to show that this is only possible because the period of the Renaissance is written out of the story. He is attuned to the debates about the meaning of these time periods, but retains the label to look at a period that encompasses cultural, political and theoretical changes of some magnitude. His sources range fairly widely, including painting, philosophy and literature, alongside political theory, where the focus is on Niccolò Machiavelli. Larkins therefore argues that the ‘origins of the territorial *a priori*’ are not to be found in the early modern period of Descartes and Westphalia, but rather in ‘the widespread revolution in the conceptualisation and representation of space that occurred during the Renaissance’ (pp. 33-4). This is a plausible suggestion, inasmuch as any straight-forward ‘origins’ can be found, although it too relies on rather crudely epochal understandings—the medieval period and the modern understood as the hierarchy and anarchy of the title; with the Renaissance bridging and complicating the story.

The reading of Machiavelli is one of the most important parts of the book. Larkins follows Machiavelli as seeing the 1494 French invasion of Italy as significant moment in challenging both political practice—the independence of Italian city-states—and political ideas. Larkins, partly following Foucault’s characterisation, sees Machiavelli as directing the prince or ruler’s power first towards a territory. Larkins’s corrective to Foucault is that the prince’s relation to the territory that is the ‘objective component of his jurisdiction’ (p. 130) is ‘fragile, synthetic, and permanently threatened by external enemies and internal opponents’ (p. 131). He agrees with Foucault that ‘territory is a fundamental component of Machiavellian sovereignty’, while countering that ‘the sovereign prince is estranged from the territories which define his sovereignty’ (p. 131). Yet Machiavelli never uses a word that can be straight-forwardly rendered as ‘territory’, not deploying the Italian word current at his time *territorio*, and though he does talk of site, land and dominion—*sito*, *terre*, *dominio*—the relation between these and the question of rule is never straight-forward. Indeed, most of the recent English translations of both *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi* suggest that *lo stato*, perhaps the key word of Machiavelli’s political vocabulary, must sometimes be translated as ‘territory’ to make sense of what he is arguing. But this is to assume Machiavelli must have meant or implied this; rather than recognising that he may have had good reasons not for using the term or that his object of rule was understood rather differently.

In place of the 'territorial *a priori*', Larkins proposes a notion of a 'territorial imaginary', which is claimed to be a 'more fluid concept... which emphasizes the historically contingent, transformative, and subjective nature of sovereign-territory' (p. 196). He is therefore critical of 'universal, fixed, and objective' understandings of territory, and wants to suggest that territory should not be solely understood 'within the domain of political discourse' (p. 196). These are worthwhile sentiments, and as guidelines for future work are hard to contest. The most problematic element of this idea in the book though is the insistence on talking of such things as the 'medieval territorial imaginary' (p. 74, for instance). What this means is not at all clear. Does it imply that the medieval period had a particular territorial imaginary, which just happens to differ from the modern or Renaissance imaginaries? But this is to suggest a conceptual vocabulary which did not exist: *territorium* is a relatively rare term in Medieval Latin, and was not used in political theory. If 'territory' is to be historically examined then the word, the concept and the practice all need to be examined historically. To suggest that 'Innocent IV claimed that as *vicarious Christi* papal *plenitudo potestatis* had global territorial extension' (p. 81) is grossly anachronistic. This approach seems to imply that territory has simply been differently ordered at different times, a claim similar to that advanced by Sassen (2006), rather than the more radical claim that the term territory emerged as a way of describing a particular and historically limited set of practices and ideas about—to try to use relatively neutral terms for a moment—the relation between place and power. When Larkins claims that 'the Renaissance made possible the modern conception of a territorial imaginary, no longer governed by the spatial motif of above/below, but authorized by the oppositional figure of inside/outside' (p. 196), it is difficult to see how much he differs from the standard story of IR. He is surely right that with odd exceptions the Renaissance has been written out of the history of that discipline (see Mattingly 1955; and more recently Bratchell 2008; Descendre 2009). But is he simply pushing the date for the emergence of a modern understanding back, or suggesting that the Renaissance made possible later developments? That would be a poor reward for his labours: there are resources in this book for a much more challenging account.

One thing that readers of this journal may find surprising is the lack of attention paid, in all these books, to the work geographers have done on territorial issues. Goddard briefly mentions Alexander Murphy's 1990 *Annals* article and a couple of pieces by David Newman on Israel; Larkins draws on Sack, John Agnew, Denis Cosgrove, and David Harvey in a few places, but these are both books largely shaped by their own disciplinary affiliations. Kolers is by far the worst offender, taking account of almost no writings on territory, using Sack on territoriality (and briefly Tim Cresswell on place) as his principle guide, and making it appear as though he is working in largely uncharted waters. None of these authors references a single article that has been published in *Political Geography*. The response should be the reverse: political geographers would do well to engage with the arguments these three books have to offer, in particular Goddard's empirical detail and Larkins's work on the Renaissance. In broader terms though geographers might want to ask why it is that their works have apparently proved so little use to political scientists, theorists and philosophers who are today grappling with these issues. While institutional and disciplinary politics may play a role, the reason is surely more than this. One possibility is that it is down, in part, to the difference between work on *territories* and work on 'territory'. A more

properly historical and conceptual approach to territory might have helped these works through some of their geographical difficulties.

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