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05

Territory, Boundaries, and Collective Self-determination

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SOVEREIGNTY & SELF-DETERMINATION



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Euborders Working Paper 05

September 2017

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Euborders Working Papers are part of the “Borders, sovereignty and self-determination” research project, which is coordinated by the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies (University of Leuven) and the Centre on Constitutional Change (CCC, Edinburgh).

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between territory, boundaries, and self-determination, focusing especially on the relationship between functional justifications for state territory and state borders, and that of self-determination. It argues that a successful justificatory argument for territorial right appeal to the idea of 'self-determination', and responds to the usual criticism of this norm, while also accepting some role for functional justifications. It argues that functional explanations for state territory are valid, and that a state has to achieve the goods that justify it (so is functional in that sense) but that this argument is compatible with many different territorial configurations. It also argues that an appeal to 'self-determination' is a much more plausible argument (along with functionalism as a necessary but not sufficient condition), and argues that the 'self' ought to be defined in a way that is non-ethnic and non-statist and shows how such a definition could be helpful.

Keywords: Territory; state boundaries; borders; Kant; functionalism; self-determination.

Territory, Boundaries, and Collective Self-determination

This paper examines the relationship between territory, boundaries, and self-determination. The typical justification for state territory—in Kantian political theory, international relations, international law, and political practice—appeals to the functional imperative for the state to take a territorial form. This explanation and justification typically appeals to the need for the state to be organized territorially, rather than on a personal principle, but does not justify the particular territory, or particular boundaries, of the state. There are, of course, some attempts to extend the functional form of the argument to the micro-level to justify particular territories of a particular state. This paper argues, however, that these attempts are unsuccessful. I propose a different justificatory argument for the territorial state—one that accepts the functionalist imperative but goes beyond it by focusing on self-determination, and has the potential to respond to the boundary question. I argue that a successful account would define the “self” that should be “self-determining” by appeal to the idea of a “people,” and articulate a relationship between “peoples” and “land” which helps to identify the geographical location of self-determination. This paper constitutes a response to Ivor Jennings’s (1956) claim that the principle of self-determination is deeply problematic. I argue that it does require a two-step argument: first, to define the people, and, then, to explain and justify the requirements and territorial limits of self-determination. However, this is not that difficult to do: there is a coherent, plausible, and attractive non-ascriptive account of “the people” who ought to be self-determining and this helps us in outlining an approach to the particular territory in the form of “heartlands” of territorially-concentrated—though not homogeneous, bounded, and hermetically sealed—peoples.

Definitions

Let me begin with some definitions. What is territory? What kinds of rights are we thinking about when we talk about territorial rights? And what do we mean by self-determination?

Territory, as I understand it, is the geographical domain of political or jurisdictional authority. It is a *political* concept and so distinct from land, which is a geographical notion—the part of the earth’s surface that is not covered by water. Of course, most land is claimed by a state, and so is territory, but there could be unclaimed land or land that

is contested between two states. Furthermore, the territorial domain of the state also extends to the airspace above and to the sea offshore, so is not coextensive with land. Territory, then, is more than topology, in part because it includes the idea of political authority.

Territory is also distinct from property, which we normally understand as a cluster of claim rights, liberties, powers, and immunities that, when held together with respect to a material thing, represent a form of “ownership.” For many theorists, jurisdictional rights conceptually precede property rights since the state typically defines the kind of property relations that are legal in the state: they make the rules surrounding acquisition, transfer, and the like. There are, however, some close analogies between the concept of “property” and the concept of “territory.” Like “property,” the territorial right-holder (the agent, such as the state) that has rights over territory typically doesn’t have just one single right but a cluster of different rights, which I will elaborate below, and, like property, the appropriate justification for “territorial state” is at the level of the system of territorial states, just as, with property, it is with the system of property holdings (Nine 2012). This is a familiar methodological point, and is often used to deny the need to justify the contours of particular holdings. I argue, however, that a full normative theory of territory ought to be able to explain either procedurally or substantively how each state comes to have legitimate territorial holdings.

What do we mean by a normative theory of territory? It is now almost universally accepted amongst theorists working on territorial rights that a normative theory of territory is a theory of the appropriate, normatively defensible relationship between the state, the people, and land. Any theory of territory has to explain how these three elements are related and to justify the particular configuration. It is a normative theory because it is aimed at justifying the authority of the state, both over people and over the territory that it controls.

The particular justification that I will offer in what follows appeals to the idea of collective self-determination. What do we mean by self-determination? The central idea is that there is value in the process of making rules and decisions that govern a people’s collective life. This value does not inhere in the fact that through it people create objective justice, although when they do, that’s an additional good. The idea is that people who are collectively self-governing have the institutional mechanisms to shape the conditions of their existence, and do so in relations with each other. They thereby experience a different (collective) dimension of autonomy than is involved in most liberal theories, which are mainly focused on protecting individual choice through protecting the individual private sphere. The central idea here is that, through the institutions of collective government, a people can co-create their own political project, and realize

and implement their own specific brand of justice, their own rules for organizing their collective lives. Institutions of political self-determination give expression to the communities in which people live; they express people's identities. They are an important forum in which collective autonomy can be expressed, and people can shape the context in which they live and realize their political aspirations, free of external domination. The reason why collective autonomy is valuable mirrors some of the considerations or arguments underlying the value of personal autonomy, as one would expect, given that this, too, is an agency good. The central ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives, and control their own destinies, through successive decisions over the course of their lives.¹

It might be objected here that the central normative ideal embedded in the appeal to collective autonomy is captured by the idea of democratic decision making. I agree that democracy and collective autonomy are related, as I explain below, but I argue that there are good reasons to resist the tight assimilation of collective autonomy to democracy. While democratic decision making ensures that we have institutional means to control the government and express our preferences and ideals, it is not sufficient or equivalent. The ideal of collective autonomy also suggests that we have an identity, or share an aspiration to collectively enact rules with particular others, which might require a democracy, or at least some input into decision making, but which, when absent, suggests that collective autonomy is unrealized. To see this, consider the situation of Canada's indigenous peoples, who seek to be self-governing over their own lives and exercise jurisdictional authority over matters of importance to them. Suppose, too, as is the case, that Canada's indigenous peoples are able to vote; the democratic franchise has been, since 1960, extended to them. Yet, we might say that they don't have collective autonomy unless they have some powers, some authority to govern their own lives, in the relationships and in the groups that matter to them.

Functionalist normative theories of territory

One possible response to the framing of this paper is to deny that a normative political theory of territory is necessary. After all, in the current interstate order, all states by defi-

¹ This central idea of control is difficult to operationalize: what counts as enough control? It is usually thought that personal autonomy requires an adequate range of choices, though not the existence of any particular choice, and that most choices do close off some options and open up some others, and that this is fine, as long as the agent is in a position at various stages of his or her life to make decisions from among this acceptable range.

dition have territory. As the 1933 Montevidean Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (Art. 1) makes clear, having territory is definitional of a state: states are defined as “entities *with fixed territories* (and permanent populations) under government control and with the capacity to enter into relations with other states.” (cited in Simmons 2003, 321, note 5, italics mine). Why not, then, justify states in terms of the goods that the state produces and so, in the process, justify their possession of territory as necessary to fulfill state functions?

This has been the dominant attitude to the issue of territory in international relations, international law, and political science, but is inadequate for two reasons. First, territorial statehood requires a *defence*; the existence of territorially-ordered states should not be assumed as part of the natural ordering of the world, and has a significant cost. In particular, the division of the world into distinct territorial entities is challenged by the cosmopolitan idea that views borders and territory as inimical to the moral equality of all human beings. Cosmopolitans typically object to two features that are often associated with territorial state: rights to control resources within the jurisdiction of the state and rights to regulate borders. Cosmopolitans have argued that resources are part of the common stock of mankind and that exclusive control by the territorial state is unjustified: the bounty of the earth should be used to benefit everyone (Armstrong 2010, 313-340). State control over borders is criticized too on cosmopolitan grounds: that it violates individual’s rights to free movement and equality of opportunity (Carens 2013; Oberman 2016). There is a third problem with territorial states, which has been mainly pressed by non-cosmopolitans: this is the idea that states do not reflect, indeed often do violence to, the complex, fluid, and trans-state relationships of the individuals and communities who are encapsulated in the borders of states, but are connected to other people across borders. People are related in cultural or economic or other ways that do not map easily onto the fixed borders of the territorial state, which turns out to be an ossifying and limiting structure. In this paper, I will not address the first two philosophical concerns, but will discuss the third in part III.

Related to this third criticism, and also on a more practical level, some argue that the territorial state is an outmoded form of organization. As the world has become more interdependent, many world problems require global responses, which cannot be effected by the system of independent territorial states. This is true of human-induced global climate change and environmental degradation generally, poverty which is exacerbated by global capitalism and a race to the bottom on the part of competing territorial jurisdictions, and international crime and terrorism, which many argue require a coordinated response, which is made difficult by independent territorial states. On both philosophical and practical levels, then, the territorial state needs defending.

The usual defense of a territorial state appeals to the functions that it performs. There are obvious benefits to be had from the state applying uniform laws and common policies to people living in proximity to one another, regardless of their status or identity (Wellman 2005; Waldron 2009). The territorial state, its defenders may claim, is essential to the realization of equal freedom, equality before the law, predictability, and social justice. This argument, while true, isn't adequate, because while it defends a territorial state system it doesn't defend or define the precise *territory* or domain of the state. It tells us that the state ought to be ordered territorially, but not where the state's territory ought to be. To answer this question, which is usually dubbed "the particularity question," we need to connect particular states with particular geographical areas. This is necessary to address territorial conflicts, such as when two or more states claim the same piece of land, or, in the case of secession, to define the boundaries of the seceding unit, or to sort out claims to the seabed or the high Arctic or Antarctica, which require us to think about the principles on which boundaries should be drawn.

A self-determination theory of territory

If we reject a normative justification of the territorial state on pure functionalist grounds, by which I mean a justification that appeals to the functions that the state performs for which territory is necessary (and the functions are typically the securing of peace and stability), as I've argued above that we should, what are the implications of a self-determination theory?

In order to answer this question, we need to be more specific about the "self" that is implied by a self-determination theory. This self—the territorial right-holding agent—could be conceptualized in a number of different ways. One might think that the self that is self-determining is the state or the people who live within a state. This would accord with the *uti possidetis* norm in international law and is often justified on the grounds that it is conducive to international peace and stability.

Or one could argue—as many did following Woodrow Wilson's 1919 invocation of "ethnic peoples" in Europe—that the self can be defined in linguistic or cultural terms, and that objective criteria (such as sharing a language or culture) can be applied to individuate distinct peoples and accord them an institutional framework and international personality that would enable them to be self-determining.

Or one might think that the value of self-determination can be realized by appealing to a civic conception of a peoples, where the collective agent is the mobilized people

on the territory, but that neither cultural unity nor preexisting statehood is a necessary requirement for this. I will defend this third conception but it is important to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the alternative conceptualizations to see why this third framing is preferable.

In some ways the statist view (and the concomitant principle of *uti possedetis*) is the most attractive, because it is easy to recognize the existence of the right-holding collective agent. We do not need to appeal to complex and difficult-to-apply criteria of collective agency to individuate the entities in question, but only to the existence of states themselves, which are recognizable in terms of their functions and institutional embodiment in the contemporary world.

This advantage, however, comes at a cost, as I have argued above, but two are serious. First, the theory is only retrospective. It can explain when an entity has territorial rights—when it has effective control over a territory where it exercises jurisdictional authority and so secures peace and stability—but it cannot address a number of questions that we would expect a full theory of territorial right to be able to address. It cannot explain who ought to be the holder of territory in a case where two or more competing states compete for the same territory. It also seems that autonomy or independence movements ought to be resisted, because the exercise of control alone seems to carry with it territorial right. This line of argument is made clear in Hobbes's functionalist theory: only when the state is grossly incompetent—that is, a failed state—do other claims have force (Hobbes 1968 [1651], 88-9). But this makes the theory not only statist but also supportive of the status quo, even if there are other mobilised groups that would be better at exercising control, realizing justice, or governing according to the wishes of the people. Alternatively, we could identify the self that is self-determining with an ethnic or cultural conception of the people. But this is subject to some familiar objections, not least the difficulty of arriving at a clear concept of what counts as a “cultural” group that doesn't invoke all kinds of groups that we think ought not to exercise territorial rights (such as the Cuban community in Miami) but also because it is potentially marginalises and excludes people on cultural or ethnic grounds.

What about a civic conception of the “self” that aspires to be self-determining? Can we identify a collective agent in a non-circular way, without relying either on political institutions or ethnic or cultural criteria? I have argued elsewhere (2015) that we can. We can conceptualize a people as consisting of a number of members who are in a temporally extended relationship with one another, who have an ongoing commitment and shared collective identity, as a member of a particular people, who aspired and have mobilized in shared activities to co-create the rules and practices that govern their collective life together. In this view, a people is a collective agent that has persisted over

time in which the interactions of its members have sufficient continuity that the people see themselves as participants in an ongoing political relationship with one another and share a political identity as members of a group. It is a collective agent in the sense that the actions of the group—while performed by specific members (since in fact it is individual people who live lives, make choices, and do things)—are not explicable without reference to the collective identity and relationship to the group that the individual is a member of. This is similar to other collective agents and collective acts: a couple dancing a tango are a collective agent (a couple) but their actions—the movement of their feet and arms and so on—are not explicable without reference to their shared intentions. The idea here is that we first need to identify a people who aspire to be collectively self-determining, and who are territorially concentrated on land that they occupy not unjustly. The area that they occupy not unjustly also represents the appropriate geographical domain of their (territorial) self-determination.

Boundary-drawing

One of the principal difficulties confronting any theory of territory is identifying the appropriate normative principle for delineating boundaries. The statist conception cannot explain where boundaries should be drawn: by appealing to functions like peace and stability we are unable to explain what land should attach to which state (though if we assume that many current states are able to fulfil state functions, the theory ends up accepting existing borders, which are theorized as purely arbitrary). In some cases, the functional argument will have radical or revisionary conclusions: imagine that a country S (Somalia) is a largely failed state, unable to exercise control across its territory. It would seem that the functional argument would justify another state, call it SW (Sweden), which is more peaceful or more stable, gaining control over its territory. This is so if we think that the functional principle should be optimized. But perhaps we think that geographical contiguity is a value for functional states: in that case we might apply a principle of functionality to boundary-drawing to suggest that a more functional state can gain rights over less functional states when they are geographically contiguous. In that case, the appeal to functionality could possibly justify a neighbouring country (let us call it Ethiopia) taking over the territory or domain of its neighbour (let us say Somalia), because it is better able to fulfil the basic state functions. I am not arguing in favour of this, but mean only to point out that the appeal to functionality either often justifies the status quo or has very revisionary implications, depending on how it is conceived. One thing that is missing is a direct appeal to the aspirations and political autonomy of the people living in the country.

Perhaps, though, the appeal to functionality is intended to operate differently. Let us consider some attempts to argue that particular boundaries might be optimally functional for the fulfilment of certain kinds of policy-related goals. For example, one might think that some regulations should encompass specific bits of territory on broadly functional grounds: on this view, the functions that the state performs determines the territory, or geographical domain, in which the state operates. Consider, for example, the regulation of pollution and fisheries in the North American Great Lakes. If the good in question is to maintain the environmental integrity of the Great Lakes, and a sustainable fishery, then it's clear that the domain of regulation should include the entire Great Lakes watershed. The function being performed determines the territory. Although it's true functional considerations cannot drop out of the picture, this does not give us a general account of boundary-drawing, because what's functional for fisheries or watershed management might be different from what's functional to ensure safe air space or what's functional for an efficient and effective welfare system or health or educational system. The domain of regulation might determine the area of jurisdiction, and yet we would need—for reasons that Jennings alludes to—to know who is included in the decision-making body to know what the good is that one wants to optimize in any given set of regulations.

Indeed, the problem is worse than this. Imagine that the government has to make a decision between three different policies to regulate a watershed—ranging from a complex hydroelectric dam to a more limited system of small dams to shoreline protection strategies to prevent flooding—and that the different policies have quite different environmental, economic and social effects. It might be that the appropriate—optimally functional—area for policy A is a large one; for policy B (if that is, indeed, the one decided on) is different again; but then a third, less ambitious, policy might have a more restricted optimally functional domain. But we would need to decide on the group that is making the decision prior to the policy that is decided on. This means that we cannot appeal to optimal functionality in a sectoral way to draw boundaries (to determine the decision-making group). We need to know the appropriate decision making group or domain so that we can make the policies themselves.

Perhaps though we can appeal to functionality to draw boundaries, not on a case by case or policy by policy basis, but by examining optimally functional general metrics. This has been attempted by Alesina and Spoloare (1997), who have argued for a sliding scale theory, between the benefits of scale and the counter-balanced negatives of congestion, coordination, and heterogeneity to arrive at an ideal size of states and an ideal number of states in the world. Notwithstanding the problems with the abstractness and possible applicability of their assumptions in the real world, it is noteworthy that this doesn't actually tell us where to draw boundaries since it mainly talks about size and number

of nations, and, of course, actual boundaries can be drawn in many different ways to get roughly similar sized states. To the extent that they incorporate homogeneity into their model, it may then—under the guise of functionality—appeal to ethnic or linguistic criteria, similar to the cultural nationalist argument for boundary-drawing.

Let me then set aside functionality as a single principle for boundary-drawing (even though we might still think that any particular boundary-drawing would have to meet a threshold test of “functionality” in the sense that the entity would have to be able to fulfil the basic functions that it is tasked with). Let us turn to the ethnic or cultural nationalist argument for a nation, and the concomitant argument that boundaries would have to be drawn *around* the self-determining ethnic or cultural group. Some might object that this is often not possible, but it’s not clear that this is an objection to actual cultural nationalist theories, which often accept that there are a number of practical challenges and propose other institutional arrangements to realize less extreme forms of self-determination, either soft borders or non-territorial self-determination (Miller 2014). I adopt the same structural form of argumentation that ethnic or nationalist theories deploy below, arguing that this is not a practical limitation of the theory, but normatively defensible in terms of the overall system of self-determining entities. However, I reject a cultural nationalist idea of the people as too exclusionary, arguing instead for a civic conception of the people.

Let me now turn to self-determination theories. The main advantage of focusing on self-determination as the basic value that is realized with territorial control is that it accords with one of our fundamental intuitions. We think that jurisdiction over territory is justified by the goods that it realizes—peace, stability, the rule of law— but we also think that through the exercise of this jurisdiction, people realize the good of collective self-determination. This is what explains why Sweden is not entitled to control the territory of Somalia and nor is Ethiopia: that control has to realize the value of self-determination on the part of the people who live in Somalia and who seek to be self-determining as Somalis (but not as Swedes or Ethiopians or some other unit encompassing all of them).

However, there is a basic challenge that any theory that defines territorial boundaries by first identifying a collective agent must meet. This is that territorial boundaries between political or jurisdictional units rarely align with social boundaries, and it is impossible, in any case, to draw hard boundaries between groups since groups are not hermetically sealed and homogeneous and their residency and relationship patterns on the land are variable.

If people are to be self-determining, and if self-determination is to take a territorial form—which makes sense, so that they can have equality before the law, rules to

regulate the interaction of people in proximity to one another, and solve coordination problems—the group has to be territorially concentrated. The members of the group must be physical present on the land (as long as that presence was achieved without prior injustice.)² Let us call this the occupancy principle. If the group is not territorially concentrated, they may realize non-territorial forms of self-determination, but they cannot exercise exclusive jurisdiction over a particular territory.

In response to the challenge (over different social and territorial boundaries), it is worth noting that in many cases it is possible to delimit heartlands of groups even if not precise borderlands. Since the “test” of the occupancy principle is whether the location is central to the aims and projects and relationships of the group, the occupancy principle requires some empirical investigation to verify that places are indeed central or integral to the way of life of the group, but at the edges there is indeterminacy, and many boundaries are somewhat (but not completely) arbitrary.

In other cases, groups are so intermingled that the institutional mechanisms of self-determination cannot take a territorial form (or only a limited territorial form). This does not negate the possibility of collective self-government, but suggests institutions like in Northern Ireland under the Good Friday Agreement, where both sides share power as coequals but neither group is excluded from its exercise.

It is worth elaborating on this case, because it illustrates the flexibility and also limitations of a civic peoples occupancy approach. Northern Ireland is a borderland region, inhabited by people who identify with rival political communities, who are so thoroughly intermingled that it is impossible to draw a line on the map or demarcate territorial zones which roughly corresponds to the different self-determination projects. The question of which self-determination project Northern Ireland should be included in —British or Irish—could not be resolved by applying democratic or justice-based or functional considerations to the matter because both sides meet the threshold for democratic, just, and functional entities. The occupancy principle too, on its own, seems helpless to decide the issue, since it is impossible to draw geographical boundaries around the groups.

In this case, we have two rival self-determination projects, two different peoples, where neither can exercise exclusive jurisdictional authority over its territory yet each people is still entitled to be collectively self-determining over their lives, although limited by respect for other people’s equal right to self-determination. An obvious non-territorial

² “Prior” here meaning within living memory. I broadly agree with Jeremy Waldron’s argument that the passage of time has effects on the salience of historic injustice claims. (Waldron 1992, 4-28).

solution is to give recognition to both communities, to have institutional mechanisms in which each community can exercise some kind of control over its collective life without dominating the other; but over many spheres where coordination is necessary (these are substantial, given the extent of territorial intermixing), the obvious institutional rule is community power-sharing. This suggests that the kind of institutional solution that emerged in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement is fair and appropriate: the joint creation of a jurisdictional authority in which the two communities are coequals, and in which both see the territory of Northern Ireland as one in which their collective aims, aspirations, and identities are reflected. This mix of territorial and non-territorial solutions, where the territorial solution confers forms of self-government in the heartlands of a group of people who seek to be self-determining, combined with overlapping jurisdictional authority in areas of shared interest or intermingled populations, is possible in a range of similar cases, from Kashmir to Crimea. Moreover—and this is an additional, crucial advantage over functional theories—it does so by appealing to the aspirations and identities of the people living on the land, to whether they seek to be collectively self-determining together, and defines the territory by examining the physical and material preconditions for the people’s projects and relationships on the land.

Conclusion

In this paper, I’ve defined territory, argued that a purely functionalist justification for the territory of the state is inadequate, and suggested that it makes sense to conceive of the principal value of territorial jurisdiction in the idea of collective self-determination. I’ve also addressed some of the problems in defining a self that ought to be self-determining. I’ve argued that a civic conception of the self-determining peoples takes better account of the role of territory and the scope of territory than rival ethnic or statist accounts and that it can be understood as requiring that boundaries are drawn around people who collectively aspire to be self-governing, if that can be done without impinging or negating another (similar) group’s similar right to be collectively self-governing.

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