



The Significance of Territory

S. Elden

Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK

Correspondence to: S. Elden (stuart.elden@durham.ac.uk)

Gottmann, J.: *The Significance of Territory*, Charlottesville, VA, University of Virginia Press, 169 pp., ISBN: 0-8139-0413-7, 1973.

Jean Gottmann (1915–1994) was a French geographer, although he was born in the Ukraine. He was from a Jewish family, his parents were killed in the 1917 revolution, and he was taken to Paris by his uncle. It was there he earned a doctorate in geography, working with Albert Demangeon at the Sorbonne. He fled Paris shortly before the Nazi occupation, living in the south until 1941, and at the end of the war returned to Paris to work with Pierre Mendès-France in the French government, before being sent back to New York to serve as Director of Studies and Research at the nascent United Nations. He taught for much of his career in England and the United States, including at Johns Hopkins University where he worked with Isaiah Bowman¹, and at the University of Oxford (1968–1983 and then emeritus). He worked at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales between 1961 and 1968, alongside Fernand Braudel, Claude Lévi-Strass and Alexandre Koyré. He died of cancer at the age of 78². He is perhaps best known for his 1961 book *Megalopolis*, which studied the urban region on the eastern seaboard of the United States, stretching from Boston to Washington DC, which was later turned into a shorter, more graphic, study by Wolf von Eckhardt (1964). In the 1950s Gottmann studied the history, politics and geography of the US state of Virginia (1955; re-edition 1969a). His other regional studies are often only available in French, and show an astonishing range of interests and expertise. Many of his other books were on urban geography, taking up the megalopolis idea (1990), what

he called the “transactional city” (1983) or, in an edited text, the relation between centre and periphery (1980), though he was also known for *A Geography of Europe* (1969b; originally 1950, with multiple editions) and his French textbook *Le politique des États et leur géographie* (1952; re-edition 2007).

The last of these books showcases a perhaps underappreciated side of Gottmann, as a political geographer (though see Agnew and Muscarà, 2012). The book covers a range of topics that are crucial to that sub-discipline today, including borders and frontiers, natural resources, the relation between international relations and geography and the role of international organisations. As a review of the recent re-edition suggested, “the text provides an astonishingly contemporary interpretation ... a conceptual apparatus to understand the world that is often lacking in political geography” (Boulineau, 2008). Yet that recognition, in francophone debates at least, and in Muscarà’s Italian study (2005a, b), is not shown to his most explicitly political geographical study in English: *The Significance of Territory*. This book, long out of print, and available second-hand online for sometimes eye-watering prices, is unjustly neglected³

The book comprises an expanded version of the Page-Barbour Lectures, given at the University of Virginia in 1971. In the preface to the book, Gottmann suggests that “amazingly little has been published about the concept of territory, although much speech, ink, and blood have been spilled over territorial disputes” (1973:ix). That sentiment, or that quotation, is often used today in studies of the concept, rather than the particular instantiations, of territory. But the lines

¹He plays a minor role in Neil Smith’s magisterial study of Bowman (2003).

²Biographical information is taken from the obituaries of *The New York Times* (Lyons, 1994), *The Independent* (Goudie, 1994), Corey (1995) and Clout and Hall (2003). A comprehensive study is forthcoming in *Geobiobibliographies*, written by Ron Johnston, Hugh Clout, and Peter Hall.

³The *Festschrift* takes a broadly urban focus (Patten, 1983). Johnston (1996) made a more balanced overall assessment of his work. Indeed Johnston elsewhere notes of *The Significance of Territory* that “this book, like so many others, has not been as influential as it deserved. Despite its absence of a theory of the state, it was seminal in its exploration of the links between societies and their territories through the concept of sovereignty” (2001:683).

that immediately follow it set out a distinctive agenda that his book works through in detail:

To politicians, territory means the population and the resources therein, and sometimes also the point of honor of Irredentist claims. To the military, territory is topographic features conditioning tactical and strategic considerations as well as distance or space to be played with; occasionally it is also resources in terms of local supplies. To the jurist, territory is jurisdiction and delimitation; to the specialist in international law it is both an attribute and the spatial extent of sovereignty. To the geographer, it is the portion of space enclosed by boundary lines, the location and internal characteristics of which are to be described and explained.

To the specialist interested in political geography, and I happen to be one, territory appears as a material, spatial notion establishing essential links between politics, people, and the natural setting. Under a purely analytical approach, the notion of territory would break up and dissolve into a multitude of different concepts such as location, natural resources, population density, settlement patterns, modes of life, and so forth. The important aspect of territory as the unit in the political organization of space that defines, at least for a time, the relationships between the community and its habitat on one hand, and between the community and its neighbors on the other, has been little explored (1973:ix).

In these two paragraphs, rich, dense and allusive, Gottmann begins to unpack the complexities inherent in the concept of territory. It is linked to the population and natural resources, to emotive attachments; it can be understood as terrain, related to tactical and strategic matters; it is a legal notion inherently intertwined with jurisdiction and sovereignty; it is a portion of bounded space, ready to be located and catalogued; it links politics, people and the environment; and these different elements can either be addressed singly or, better, as part of a synthetic analysis.

Gottmann's approach in the book that follows is both schematic and historical. He notes that his approach tries to understand territory not simply in moments of crisis, as something to be gained or defended, but as a routine element within politics. He notes that his approach only deals with Western concepts and history (1973:x), although later in the book he does address some questions in relation to colonisation and decolonisation. He notes, somewhat enigmatically, that he will understand territory "as a psychosomatic device" (1973:x; Muscarà, 2005b). However Gottmann is clear that he has no time for accounts of territory, common at the time he was writing, that derive insights from the field of zoology and studies of animal "territoriality" (1973:1).

The first part of Gottmann's book is historical, noting that there are stresses on the importance of territory from the earliest historical and political writings. He suggests that we can find this in such early texts as the Bible (1973:2), Plato's *Laws* (1973:17–20), and Aristotle's *Politics* (1973:21–22, 24). While he is perhaps too willing to find a recognisably modern notion in such texts of antiquity, and does not pause to consider if he is being misled by present-day translations, there is undoubtedly something that hints at a relation between place and power in these sources. He spends a bit of time looking at the etymology of the word (1973:5, 16), in phrases that are echoed or quoted in many subsequent studies. His historical study takes in the familiar, such as Jean Bodin and the treaties of Tordesillas and Westphalia, and the lesser known, such as Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban and William Petty (1973:57–61, 63; see 1944). He makes a compelling case for the importance of figures such as Montesquieu, Fichte, and von Thünen (1973:70, 77, 88), and events such as the American and French revolutions. He puts Friedrich Ratzel in a broader context that includes Alexis de Tocqueville and Frederick Jackson Turner (1973:103–105). Comments made in passing are sometimes rather throwaway, though they hint at something really important, such as the suggestion that "the usage of the word *territorium* is more commonly found from the fourteenth century on" (1973:36; Elden, 2013:Ch. 7). Given the delivery of these lectures in Virginia, he makes a special mention of American presidents Jefferson, Monroe and Wilson, though they would be important to the story had the lectures been delivered anywhere.

I would distance myself from Gottmann's claim that "the relationship of territory with jurisdiction and sovereignty over what happens in it, is an essential one" (1973:2). While Gottmann is stressing the importance of the latter two legal notions to a human understanding of territory, this is to differentiate them from "territorial organisation among certain animal species" (1973:2). But he sees this relation as being specifically, and generally, human (see also 1973:123). In my reading, it is not simply that territory, jurisdiction and sovereignty have been differently ordered at different times, but that the very terms themselves, and the relation between them, are not shared in common across all times and places. This is not simply an argument for different words being used, though that is a powerful indication of the systems of thought at play. Rather it is that the very concepts themselves were, quite literally, foreign to other histories and geographies (see Elden, 2013). Despite his stress on working on the concept of territory, and his suggestion that "to analyse territory better, it becomes necessary to examine its evolution in time and space" (1973:15, 1975), to my mind Gottmann is insufficiently historical in his interrogation. There is plenty of history here, but not a great deal of *conceptual* history, something he partly addresses in a later journal article (1975).

It is interesting to compare his historical map of Africa in 1885–1898 (1973:98), with the 1973 one he provides (1973:109), and with one today. On the 1973 map, Eritrea

does not appear (but it does on the 19th century one), Egypt is part of the United Arab Republic, and Sudan remains a single state. French, Spanish and Portuguese colonial possessions – French Territory of Afars and Issas (now Djibouti), Mozambique, Angola, Portuguese Guinea (Guinea-Bissau) and Spanish Sahara (now the disputed territory of Western Sahara) – remain. Others appear under older or unfamiliar names: Madagascar is labelled as the Malagasy Republic; Burkina Faso is the Upper Volta; Benin is Dahomey; Equatorial Guinea appears as Río Muni (a name retained today for the mainland part of its territory); Zimbabwe is labelled as Rhodesia; and Namibia as South-West Africa. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is named as “Zaire (or Congo-Kinshasa)” while the modern day Congo is labelled as “Congo Republic (Brazzaville)”. On the 19th century map there are a number of boundaries that became international boundaries; while a number did not – such as the division between British and Italian Somaliland, which is now the disputed republic of Somaliland and the recognised state of Somalia. The point of this comparison is not to show that Gottmann is outdated, but to use the forty years since his book’s writing to show the continuing importance, and continuing transformation, of questions of territory.

Gottmann is attuned to the economic aspects of territory (see especially pp. 60, 86–90), and domestic politics such as welfare provision within territories. There are useful discussions of agriculture and population density, with some helpful comments on different landscapes and terrains. There are discussions, as might be expected, of borders, boundaries and frontiers, but Gottmann does not see these as foundational to territory, but rather existing in a complex interrelation (1973:134–138). Anticipating some recent work on security, he suggests that “the frontier is a partition, that is, a screening instrument in the organization of accessible space” (1973:138). As might be expected given his other research interests, he is illuminating on the question of the relation between territory and the urban, both historically and in his own present context (see especially pp. 117–122, 152). He offers some interesting thoughts on the question of distance (1973:96–97), a geographical concept which is somewhat neglected as a topic of study in its own right. He quotes several legal texts in his analysis, and alludes to some of the mechanisms of international law and international organisations in relation to territorial disputes. He addresses the question of airspace (1973:125, 131–132), and discusses maritime territorial issues in a way that was fairly unusual at the time (1973:132–133). There are some indications of the potential territorial claims that were and could be made on Antarctica and the moon (1973:5, 129–132). Gottmann was of course writing in the middle of the Cold War and, given his personal biography, was very much affiliated to one side. It was a period of decolonisation, and his examples of recent states gaining independence are Bahrain and Bangladesh. But that context of writing aside, the vast majority of the book remains of contemporary relevance, some forty years after its

publication. Curiously though, for such a state-centred analysis, he rarely theorises the state as such (Johnston, 1996:189; 2001:683 n. 10). Such analysis is found in much more detail in *Le politique des États et leur géographie*, which remains unavailable in English despite his unfinished attempt at an anglophone rendering, having rejected the idea of someone else doing it (Johnston, 1996:191–192; Clout and Hall, 2003:207).

While Gottmann’s book is well referenced, he does not suggest many alternative studies of the concept of territory. This is partly because of his correct comment that the concept had been underexplored. He briefly mentions Edward Soja’s *The Political Organization of Space* (1971); and today it would be joined by more, but still not that many, including Allières (1980), Anderson (1996) and the textbooks of Storey (2012) and Delaney (2005). My own study of territory and the “war on terror” (2009) borrows its subtitle from this book of Gottmann’s (1973:49); and my historical account in *The Birth of Territory* (2013) seeks to account, with much more historical detail and textual analysis, for what Gottmann covers in briefer compass in the first part of *The Significance of Territory*. All of us working on territory, in its conceptual, historical and political complexities, remain in Gottmann’s debt.

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