

## Political Territories in a Global Era

JOHAN ERIKSSON<sup>1</sup>

### Research problem

What do states have in common with municipalities, the Catholic Church, criminal MC gangs, virtual communities, nomadic peoples, and corporate empires? My contention is that a degree of autonomy within some form of territory is a common goal for such, in other respects, very different entities. I also argue that in a globalized world, alternative forms of territories are emerging and gaining in significance, a development largely overlooked by the literature on globalization as well as by traditional state-centric perspectives. Perspectives on the significance of political territories are highly polarized, which has implied a lack of problematization (Brenner & Elden 2010). In a traditional perspective influenced by (neo)realism, it is held that the territorial dimension of politics is crucial for autonomy and political power (Mearsheimer 2001), but this reflects postulation rather than problematization. From this perspective, globalization and transnational networks are not considered to be sufficiently challenging to call for theoretical and conceptual revision. State territory is believed to be largely unaffected by globalization, and is considered to continue to be the basic units of the international system.

Theories of globalization and transnational networks, on the other hand, hold

that “deterritorialization” is a fundamental and increasingly significant trend in world politics (Held & McGrew 2007; Risse-Kappen 1995; Rosenau 1990, 2003). Focus here is on the emergence of non-state actors and how their activities perforate national boundaries and thereby challenge sovereignty. Further, globalization and network theories expound on how communication and political authority can have a global reach and be exercised immediately regardless of space and geographical distance. Good examples of such thinking are found in John Agnew’s influential texts on how researchers need to avoid “the territorial trap”, i.e. that power, influence and communication are neither limited nor defined by territorial distinctions such as “domestic/international” (Agnew 2003, 1994; cf. Ruggie 1993; Rosenau 1997; Walker 1993).

What is lacking is research that, in contrast to globalization theory, focuses on territory, but which also, deviating from (neo)realism, takes into account how globalization provides opportunities for *alternative* types of territory. Past theory and research pay scant attention to, on the one hand, territories which, in contrast to the nation-state, are geographically disconnected, and on the other, territories with boundaries that are not distinctive lines but rather diffuse zones. This opens for analysis of various types of groups and entities which are rarely considered in analyses of political territory – from criminal groups’ attempts to control drug trade in certain, often diffusely delineated and sometimes disconnected areas – to the Catholic Church’s global network of territorially-defined parishes (with the Vatican as a microstate center). Political territories of a traditional kind must also be considered – states, municipalities, the territory of the European Union – and how these

1 Projektet bedrivs vid Utrikespolitiska institutet. Johan Eriksson är även verksam vid Södertörns högskola.  
E-post: johan.eriksson@sh.se

are affected by the overlapping and perforating effects of globalization and fragmentation (cf. Rosenau 2003; Clark 1998). My contention is that such characteristics – geographical disconnectivity and diffuse boundaries – do not imply “deterritorialization” but should rather be seen as “re-territorialization”. Against this background, the purpose of this project is to contribute with theory and research which investigates alternative territorial forms, and how globalization benefits some types of territories rather than others.

#### **Past research, and theoretical development**

Paradoxically, territory in a global era is under-theorized not only in Political Science and International Relations, but also in the specialized field of Political Geography (Brenner & Elden 2010; Lefebvre 2009; Massey; Allen & Andersson 1984). Nevertheless, there are relevant attempts at problematizing territory in a globalized world. These contributions emphasize the symbolic dimension of political territory, the implications and limits of sovereignty, the consequences of border controls in a “post-Westphalian” world, or more generally, how globalization erodes the distinction between “internal” and “external” (Painter 2009; Sassen 2006; Linklater 1998; Rosenau 2003; Ruggie 1993).

Research on territory has almost exclusively focused on the state. Oddly enough, the dominant state-centrism is also seen indirectly through concepts which are used to portray challenges and alternatives to a world dominated by states: “sovereignty-free” (Rosenau 1990), “transnational” (Risse-Kappen 1995), “post-Westphalian” (Linklater 1998) and “post-inter-

national” (Rosenau 1989, 1990; Ferguson & Mansbach 2007).

There are still very few theories and conceptual tools available for analyzing the variation and complexity of alternative forms of territory, where states and other geographically contiguous territories with distinctive boundaries are only one type among others. One useful exception is Ferguson & Mansbach’s (1996, 2008) conceptualization and empirical analysis of historical polities – including city-states of the Antiquity, the complex political structures of pre-modern China, and the domain of the Aztec. In such a comparative and historical perspective, concepts like nation-state and sovereignty become anachronistic and applicable only to a certain empirical category (Ferguson & Mansbach 1996, 2008; Sassen 2006; Spruyt 1994).

In contrast to state-centric concepts, more general concepts such as “polity” and, why not, the straightforward notion of “political territory”, make it easier to capture differences, similarities and relations between various types of territories and political entities, regardless of geographic distance and whether the entity in question is a state, municipality, nomadic group, or religious community (cf. Eriksson 1997).

Another benefit of applying general analytical concepts such as “polity” and “political territory” is that it becomes easier to trace developments, linkages, similarities and differences *over time*. While states are certainly playing a key role in the new global era, many theorists claim they are not as dominant or autonomous as they were during the heydays of the preceding “Westphalian era” (Ferguson & Mansbach, Linklater, and Sassen 2006; Spruyt 1994, 2002; Scholte 2005). Related to this is the literature on “neo-medie-

		Territorial Consistency	
		Contiguous	Discontiguous
Boundaries	Distinctive	<b>1. “Courtyards”</b> (e.g. states, provinces, municipalities)	<b>2. “Enclaves”</b> (e.g. colonial empires, the Roman Catholic Church)
	Diffuse	<b>3. “Zones”</b> (e.g. nomadic and indigenous peoples, local firms, local criminal groups)	<b>4. “Bird Territories”</b> (e.g. diaspora communities, transnational corporations, transnational criminal networks)

Figure 1. *Types of Territories.*

valism” (Bull 1977: 254; Rengger 2000; Winn 2003; Krasner 1993; Eriksson 1993). This concept suggests that the contemporary world – perhaps more strongly than in the 1970s when Hedley Bull coined the term – has many similarities with the medieval world, particularly in terms of overlapping authority and multiple loyalties.

Inspired by the need for analysis including but going beyond the Westphalian state, I present here a new typology of territorial models (see figure 1). This is a taste of, and a first step in the theoretical development I am proposing. This typology of territories includes two dimensions – the nature of boundaries (which can be distinctive or diffuse), and the nature of territorial consistency (which can be contiguous or discontiguous).

By theoretically allowing boundaries to be both specific and diffuse, and by allowing territorial consistency to be both contiguous and discontiguous, it becomes possible to identify four basic types of territory. The first type, what I call the “courtyard”, has clearly defined and distinctive boundaries, and a contiguous territory. This represents the Westphalian ideal, but

it is the territorial model not only of the nation-state, but of many other familiar political entities – for example provinces, municipalities, and the European Union.

The territories of an “enclave system” also have distinctive boundaries, but the territories are dispersed and discontiguous, often spread out across vast distances. Of this an example is the traditional colonial “overseas” empire.

The third type – “zones” – is captured in for example studies on nomadic and indigenous peoples, whose sense of territoriality tend to emphasize diffuse and porous boundaries representing settlement and movement patterns rather than distinctive lines of jurisdiction. Like the “courtyard”, a “zone” has a contiguous territory, and is in this sense a “localized” entity, but their boundaries cannot be drawn as a line on a map.

The fourth type, what I call “bird territory”, is perhaps the most unfamiliar in the conceptualization of political territory. It implies discontiguous pieces of territory, each with diffuse boundaries, i.e. a system of geographically disconnected but politically integrated “zones”. Most birds are territorial – maintaining and protect-

ing breeding, hunting and feeding areas – but their boundaries tend to be diffuse and porous “zones”. With their ability to fly, often very long distances, birds can maintain several, geographically disconnected domains. In a similar way, diaspora communities, cyber communities, transnational corporations, and transnational criminal networks are today maintaining “bird territories”.

This conceptualization can inspire theory-building and empirical studies which show how, and under what circumstances, certain types of territories imply better or worse opportunities for autonomy and power. Let me here briefly suggest two possible theoretical propositions, as a taste of what can come out of this project. First, disconnected territories can, at least in cases where territory is spread over several continents, be assumed to counteract some of the difficulties of exercising autonomy and control in a globalized world. Of this an example might be how the Roman Catholic Church through its reach across a vast and complex network of territorial enclaves has maintained autonomy and power even in a global era (Vallier 1971).

Second, by contrast with polities with distinctive boundaries, diffuse boundary models can be assumed to be better adapted to effects of globalization such as the dissolving distinction between domestic and international politics, and the fact that different territories and spheres of influence can often overlap. Of this an instance could be how the Sami people of Arctic Europe have maintained and continually developed trans-border institutions across the many international boundaries dividing their imagined homeland (cf. Eriksson 1997).

### Research design

Starting with the typology and basic propositions outlined above, my goal is to contribute to theory-building on political territory in a global era, particularly to how traditional and alternative types of territorial entities are affected by and adapt to globalization. My first step in this endeavor will be to operationalize not only each type of territory but also the main contextual force (or “independent variable”), i.e. globalization (Held & McGrew 2007; Croucher 2004; Rosenau 2003; Sassen 2006). This implies developing empirical indicators, and identifying subcategories.

In a second step, guided by these indicators, I will make an empirical compilation of global comparative data on each type of territorial entity. The idea is obviously not to devise a comprehensive summary of every instance there is, but rather to observe some general patterns and trends, i.e. to try to see a little more of the forest rather than the individual trees. Moreover, this general survey can provide a resource for systematic selection of cases for further scrutiny. This empirical overview will be achieved by using secondary literature and available databases (particularly overviews, encyclopedias and “dictionaries” concerning the different types, e.g. the Polity IV project, see Marshal & Cole 2009; Minahan 1996; Appendix in Harff & Gurr 2004). It would be interesting to find out if some types of entities are becoming more or less common than others. While it is impossible to calculate any exact numbers, available data could possibly suggest some numerical range.

Dimensions of particular interest in this initial survey are for example, governing structures, polity context, and identity patterns. Governing structures concern for instance the nature of autonomy goals,

power resources, formal vis-à-vis informal elements, hierarchy vis-à-vis network, and whether entities are more or less open or closed. Polity context is a crucial dimension for territorial analysis, which is about possible overlaps with and relations to other polities. Identity patterns concern the community dimension, or membership basis, population and in some cases "demos" of polities. While identity patterns are crucial in any analysis of political mobilization and legitimacy in traditional polities – states, municipalities, the European Union – they are significant also for polities with alternative territorial foundations – the global community of the Roman Catholic Church, the transnational Roma community, and the sense (or lack) of community and loyalty in business empires and criminal networks.

The two first steps – operationalization and a global empirical survey – will be conducted during the first year of the project.

My aim to study territoriality under globalizing conditions does not imply a strict focus on contemporary entities. As has been convincingly argued, globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon, and the only way to clarify patterns of continuity and change is by adopting a long-term perspective (Ferguson & Mansbach 1996, 2008; Linklater 1998; Sassen 2006; Spruyt 1994). Indeed, a crucial contention is that various types of territorial entities are analytical rather than empirical concepts, and thus not bound to any particular period of time. It is an empirical question what types of territories dominate in what period of time. In line with the notion of "neo-medievalism" (Bull 1977: 254; Rengger 2000; Winn 2003; Eriksson 1993), I hypothesize that overlapping, diffuse, and discontinuous territories ("zones", "enclaves" and "bird territo-

ries") – which were the rule rather than the exception in the times preceding the "Westphalian state" – are becoming more common and significant in the contemporary global era.

In the third phase of the project, case studies will be carried out to gain further understanding of the complexities and conditions under which various types of polities cope with globalization. The case studies will be small in number and will focus on alternative types of territories, which clearly are in much greater need of new research than traditional polities (in particular states, the still dominant unit of analysis in Political Science and International Relations). Data on traditional polities can more easily be found using past research and other secondary sources. Case studies are particularly suitable for elaborating conditional generalizations, uncovering complex causal mechanisms, and tracing patterns of continuity and change (George & Bennet 2004).

At the present time of writing, it is a little too early to decide exactly what empirical cases to study. Case selection will partly depend on the results of the initial empirical survey. Importantly, cases to be selected should reflect not only the basic (alternative) types of territories, but also varying conditions and inter-polity relations. At the end of the day, case selection will also be influenced by pragmatic considerations, such as availability of data, my personal language skills (English, the Scandinavian languages, some Spanish and German), and financial resources. While this is still to be decided and influenced by the initial survey, I have to admit I am pondering the following instances: the Roman Catholic Church as a classic and truly global case of "enclave" system (cf. Vallier 1971), a nomadic tribe such as the Al Murrah beduins in Saudi Arabia as an in-

stance of a “zone” polity, and a major transnational corporation with global reach (such as Shell, General Motors, BP, or McDonald’s) as an instance of “bird territory”.

This research design implies limits regarding empirical generalization. The territorial politics of one particular state, province, criminal group or transnational corporation might differ considerably from others. The intention however is not to generalize empirically across every thinkable instance, but to conceptualize and build theory about *types* of territories, particularly about territorial systems which have diffuse boundaries and disconnected entities. As argued elsewhere (George & Bennet 2004), case studies are excellent tools for theory-building regarding alternative and deviant cases, falling out of the ordinary or dominant patterns.

The fourth and final stage of the project, overlapping with the concluding phase of the case studies, is an effort to synthesize results and analyses for the purpose of theory-building. With the conclusion of this project, I should be able to corroborate and critique past theory, and provide new insight into how various types of territorial entities are coping with globalization.

## References

- Agnew, John, 2003. *Lost Geographies of Power*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Agnew, John, 1994. “The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations”, *Review of International Political Economy* 1(1): 53-80.
- Brenner, Neil & Stuart Elden, 2010. “Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory”, *International Political Sociology* 3(4): 353-377.
- Bull, Hedley, 1977. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Clark, Ian, 1998. *Globalization and Fragmentation: International Relations in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eriksson, Johan, 1993. Whose Security? Analytical Considerations for the Study of Neomedieval Europe. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Swedish Political Science Association, Gothenburg, October 4-5, 1993.
- Eriksson, Johan, 1997. *Partition and Redemption: A Machiavellian Analysis of Sami and Basque Patriotism*. Doctoral Dissertation. Umeå: Department of Political Science, Umeå University.
- Ferguson, Yale H. & Richard W. Mansbach, 1996. *Politics: Authority, Identities, and Change*. Columbia. University of South California Press.
- Ferguson, Yale H. & Richard W. Mansbach, 2007. “Post-internationalism and IR Theory”, *Millennium*, 35(3): 529-549.
- Ferguson, Yale H. & Richard W. Mansbach, 2008. *A World of Politics: Essays on Global Politics*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Held, David & Anthony McGrew (eds), 2007. *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Krasner, Stephen, 1993. “Westphalia and All That”. In J. Goldstein & R.O. Keohane (eds), *Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, pp. 235-264. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri, 2009. *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Linklater, Andrew, 1998. *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Massey, Dorren, John Allen & John Andersson (eds), 1984. *Geography Matters: A Reader*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Rengger, N.J., 2000. “European Communities in a Neo-Medieval Global Polity: The Dilemmas of Fairyland”. In *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, ed. M. Kelstrup and M.C. Williams, pp. 57-71. London: Routledge.

- Risse-Kappen, Thomas (ed.), 1995. *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenau, James N., 2003. *Distant Proximities: Dynamics beyond Globalization*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenau, James N., 1989. "Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Toward a Post-International Politics for the 1990s". In *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges*, ed. E.O. Czempiel and J.N. Rosenau, pp. 1-20. Lexington, MA: Heath.
- Rosenau, James N., 1990. *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenau, James N., 1997. *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruggie, John, 1993. "Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations", *International Organization* 47(1): 139-174.
- Painter, Joe, 2010. "Rethinking Territory", *Antipode* 42(5): 1090-1118.
- Sassen, Saskia, 2006. *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Scholte, Jan Aart, 2005. *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spruyt, Hendrik, 1994. *The Sovereign State and its Competitors*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Spruyt, Hendrik, 2002. "The Origins, Development, and Possible Decline of the Modern State", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5: 127-149.
- Vallier, Ivan, 1971. "The Roman Catholic Church: A Transnational Actor". In Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (eds) *Transnational Relations and World Politics*, pp. 129-52. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, R.B.J., 1993. *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winn, Neil (ed.), 2004. *Neo-Medievalism and Civil Wars*. London: Frank Cass.