

Territory

A Definition

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A territory after the enclosures. David Hockney, *East Yorkshire. Spring Landscape*, 2004. Private collection.

The word territory derives from the Latin *territorium*, a term that can be linked to *terra* – earth – and *terere* – to tread. Therefore, *territorium* seems to address the possession of land effected through agricultural cultivation.⁰¹ Although the actual etymology of *territorium* is unclear, this connection to ownership and cultivation was acknowledged by several Latin authors, most notably Cicero, who defined *territorium* as the zone of influence of a political community.⁰² Words that in different languages are often used interchangeably with the term territory, such as the Latin *districtus*, the French *banlieue*, the Italian *contado*, the English *county*, or the German *Kreis*, always refer to portions of land defined according to specific arrangements of law. Thus, the idea of territory addresses the conditions under which a community, a sovereign power, or an institution define in a material, juridical and cultural way the land on which they settle. For this reason, I argue that, ultimately, the concept of territory addresses the process of land *appropriation*.⁰³

There is nothing primordial or ‘natural’ about land appropriation. Land appropriation – or the act of settling – is a specific mode of dwelling that arose at the very last moment of the 300,000-year-long history of human species. This occurred 15,000 years ago when humans ceased to be hunter-gatherers and became sedentary. This process, known as ‘domestication’,⁰⁴ began in southwest Asia and – it is important to remember – has not, to this day, reached completion. A fundamental consequence of domestication has not only been the occupation of a territory by a group of people or a community, but also the building of permanent homes. As noted by many archeologists and anthropologists, the emergence of

01 For a thorough discussion of the possible etymologies of *territorium* see Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). The connection to the idea of ‘trodden earth’, or ploughed earth, is made explicit in a passage of Varro quoted by Elden, *op. cit.*, p 63.

02 *Ibid.*

03 Several authors have explored the constructed and often violent character of land ownership; Karl Marx read this practice as a form of ‘primitive accumulation’ in Karl Marx, ‘Part Eight: Primitive Accumulation’, in *Capital: Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp 873–942. Jurist Carl Schmitt addressed the concept of appropriation in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, translated by GL Ulmen (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2006).

04 On the topic of domestication see Peter J Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

stable dwellings precedes the rise of agriculture that consisted of the imposition of clear boundaries on the land. I would therefore argue that the first manifestation of territoriality – that is to say, of the practice of organizing land tenure – is concomitant with the emergence of the home as a permanent structure.

Homes function not only as shelter to humans and animals, but also as the marking of boundaries that include and exclude, and that define an 'inside' against an 'outside'. Social systems such as family, clan or kinship became possible only because the architecture of the house was constructed as a system of inclusion/exclusion. Indeed, what is at stake in the boundaries that enclose the house is the ritualization of possession by those who *own* the house. With the rise of intensive cultivation and agriculture, the tracing of boundaries expanded from the house to large portions of land. Extensive cultivation expanded the idea of bounded space from the home to the land and it is within these conditions, what later would be defined as 'territory', emerged as a fundamental political datum.

In order to understand the specificity of this particular organization of space we must remember that throughout history human species have lived on earth without tracing any boundaries. Being non-sedentary implied that human action was not organized by *lines*, but by *points*. It is important to stress that hunter-gatherers were not adrift over vast spaces: their movements were organized by their focus on specific 'landmarks' such as mountains, lakes, river, haunts, water holes and other outstanding topographical features. In other words hunter-gatherers did not conceive land as a surface, but as a constellation of specific marks. Often transformed into sacred sites, these marks served as means of symbolic and physical orientation. As emphasized by anthropologist Peter J Wilson, hunter-gatherers inhabited space not as lines, but as 'focuses'.⁰⁵ In this geography made of points, land was not bounded but organized as zones of influence whose power of attraction would not be exclusionary. Wilson argued that this hazy, ill-defined sense of boundary is reflected in the way hunter-gatherers did not organize their way of thinking in culturally uniform social categories. Citing the example of the hunter-gatherer people of Southern India such as the Paliyan and the Hill Pandaram, Wilson explains how non-sedentary people operate with what has been defined as 'memorate knowledge', that is 'knowledge derived by individual experience unmodified by any such socially shared or transmitted process as education'.⁰⁶ This condition, which survives today in what remains of the hunter-gatherer way of life, was radically challenged by the spread of sedentary living and of stable communities where rights of land possession push institutions not just to draw boundaries on the ground, but to use these boundaries as a way to measure land itself.

Herodotus narrates how geometry was born in Egypt out of the practice of surveying land by stretching the rope.⁰⁷ This practice carried out by the Pharaoh's officials was necessary for building temples and granaries and found a significant application in parceling out soil when it reemerged after the yearly Nile floods. Through rectilinear subdivision practiced at a large scale, early state formations such as Sumer, Egypt and China were able to impose coherent parceling on the land whose goal was to both organize large masses of people and their labor and reinforce the state central authority. The civilization that perfected this process of appropriation and domestication of land through geometric parceling was ancient Rome. The Romans' constructed a sophisticated legal apparatus that divided private property from public property, or *ager publicus* – an instrument that became crucial to processes of colonial conquest. This 'public' land was forcefully expropriated from indigenous populations, then measured, subdivided, and given to colonial settlers who would cultivate it and thus

05 Peter J Wilson, op cit, p 50.

06 Ibid., p 30.

07 Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p 95.

translate the violent act of appropriation into a stable, pacified landscape of farmers and rural estates. It is interesting to note that the word *forma*, from which the English *form* derives, was the term used to indicate the cadastral tablets on which land property was registered. The legal force through which Romans sealed their violent land appropriation was reinforced by the precision with which land was physically subdivided into clearly defined properties. An outstanding example of this subdivision was the *centuriatio*,⁰⁸ a system of land division based on a grid of 700 x 700 meters which surveyors traced directly on the land and served as the datum for granting parcels of land to private owners, but also as the blueprint for the layout of cities, their public spaces, roads, canals, and other infrastructures. It is precisely through practices such as the *centuriatio* that land, property, infrastructure, and finance formed a coherent apparatus that stabilized land tenure into a strict order. The cadastral survey, a descendent of the Roman *forma*, is thus the fundamental deus-ex-machina of the concept of territory as it translated the concreteness of the ground in both the legal abstraction of law and the economic abstraction of financial value. We should not forget that the cadastral survey not only made boundaries lawful but also quantified land as a financial asset.

Land survey – a method of land appropriation based on lines which are both cadastral and physical objects such as walls, fences, edges, and lines of trees – was resurrected in Europe at the dawn of modernity when early nation states engineered their sovereignty by consolidating a clearly defined regime of land tenure. Within feudal societies, land tenure was organized through customary rights, which were constantly negotiated and contested between peasants and lords. With the introduction of property rights, the legitimacy of land tenure was defined no longer by negotiation, bargaining and conflict but, rather by the authority of the state who granted these rights to owners and defended them with the universalizing force of law. It is precisely the shift from possession by *custom* to possession by the legal title of *property* that gave origin to the phenomena that Karl Marx defined as ‘Primitive Accumulation’.⁰⁹ Marx argued that primitive accumulation was an essential pre-condition for the rise of capital and consisted in the legal theft of common land enacted by the state. This theft was an act of violent dispossession that deprived large parts of the population of their livelihood. In England, this condition was best exemplified by the rise of the enclosures – a process of primitive accumulation that dramatically changed both the way of life by making people depend on wage labor, but also the very organization of land itself. By turning land into a patchwork of ‘enclosed’ large-scale estates demarcated by fences and walls, it was no longer possible to freely roam. Yet the greatest consequence of the advent of property rights as the deus-ex-machina of modern territoriality was a new perception and understanding of territory as a *map*.¹⁰ Indeed, the imposition of property rights required the precise mapping of rural fields and villages, thus pushing the technology of cadastral survey to unprecedented exactitude. It was during the fifteenth century that mathematical survey transitioned from use only by navigators who mapped their route on sea with nautical charts to that of land survey, resulting in a calculable ‘good’, ready to be translated as a measurable financial asset. This development of cartography was paralleled by an increasing sophistication in drawing techniques and systems of representation in architecture and engineering. We should not forget that the rise of perspective as a fundamental system of visual representation was supported by the increasing ability of mathematicians and surveyors to measure land. The drawing of maps was no longer a simple mnemonic recording of

08 This process is described in depth in Rolando Bussi (ed), *Misurare la Terra: Centuriazione e Coloni nel Mondo Romano: Città , Agricoltura, Commercio: Materiali da Roma e dal Suburbio* (Modena: Franco Cosimi Panini, 1985).

09 Karl Marx, op cit.

10 On the emergence of the map as a geopolitical tool see John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-coded World* (London: Routledge, 2004).

figures and symbols, rather it became an exact translation of topographical features into abstract geometrical entities such as points, lines, and surfaces. This way of rendering the territory was instrumental not just to claim property rights but also to make land calculable and thus exchangeable as any other finite commodity. Until the fifteenth century it was difficult to conceive of land as commodity because it was perceived as an unbounded thing, and thus as impossible to understand as a *finite* object like a house or a cow. With the advent of cadastral survey and the possibility to project – at least on paper – lines of property, owners were allowed to think of and calculate land as an entity to be bought and sold. Cadastral surveys translated the concreteness of land into the abstracting force of money – the universal equivalent of the modern world. In this way land was no longer the primary means of peasants' subsistence, rather it became the standing reserve for capital, a material to be used and a resource to be scientifically mapped in order to be extracted or exploited. This conception of land as an economic asset became widespread when modern European states such as Spain, Portugal, France, and England violently appropriated land on other continents. As Gary Fields¹¹ has argued, the violence of colonial appropriation consisted not just in warfare but also – and especially – in *lawfare*, in other words with the introduction of rights of property that de facto erased any other form of indigenous land tenure. In order to justify the right to property, colonial states framed any customary form of land tenure as a 'disorderly' way of settling, lacking legal consistency and, above all, unproductive in terms of economic advantage. The ideology of improvement was particularly popular among settlers during England's colonization of North America in which the neat straight lines projected by surveyors erased the nuanced systems of boundaries and thresholds through which the Native Americans organized their life on the land. A most vivid image of cadastral violence can be seen in the portrait of Nebraska land surveyor Robert Harvey taken in the 1860s. The surveyor is standing next to an array of surveying tools, holding a rifle. The tools and the rifle are the two faces of the business of surveying: geometry and violence, science, and land grabbing. Indeed, indigenous populations knew that measuring land was equal to appropriating it and were understandably hostile to surveyors. It is not by chance that Thomas Jefferson promoted the famous 1785 Land Ordinance which consisted of geographic subdivision of the American land into gridded 'townships' as the ideal support for a nation of rural cultivators. Like the Roman Empire, agriculture in the United States was meant to continue and legitimize the appropriating gesture of surveying as the act of enclosing land within the boundaries of property. It was therefore through the process of surveying and the transformation of land into a calculable entity that the standard definition of territory as a bounded space under the control of a group of people was made reality. Such a bounded space – or territory – is not just the space of the state, but any piece of land enclosed by the exclusionary right to property. The mathematical and geometrical precision through which land was enclosed and calculated has become the technical basis through which we render the idea of territory as an object of knowledge. Today, the ubiquitous use of Geographic Information System (GIS) as a framework for gathering, managing and analyzing data which has become obligatory for the undertaking of both any form of spatial governance and research in the field of urbanism, continues the 'cadastral' impulse of the colonial survey. Even if by now scholars are aware of the bloody history of land appropriation, our contemporary understanding of territory remains mediated by increasing sophisticated means of cartographic information. Not only maps, but data of any kind, from topography to demographics, from resources to climatic conditions, anything that concerns our own ecology is translated into the exactitude of cartographic reason. There is

11 Gary Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017).

no doubt that such precision is necessary today in order to understand a world that is deeply embedded into capitalistic modes of production. Yet, in order to undo the violence of cadastral imagination we also need to find alternative forms of land occupation and representation that could go beyond the idea of property which is so embedded into our contemporary idea of territory. As we have seen, the concept of territory is inseparable from the idea of permanent occupation and exploitation of land. As difficult it is to imagine the possibility of reversing the process that turned us from hunter-gatherers into sedentary dwellers, an emancipatory 'territorial' project should invest in a new understanding of boundaries as non-proprietary form of land tenure. Such a project that understands boundaries not as a means of enclosure, but as a means of orientation, as artefacts whose goal is to reinforce the sense of reciprocity within communities. As Brenna Bhandar has argued 'there is an urgent need to grasp other ways of relating to land, those obscured and repressed thought the imposition of the cadastral survey and imperial modes of mapping, through systems of title registration, through the rendering of entire communities as illegal squatters based on their ways of living'.¹²

Within the modern conception of territory, boundaries are often markers of possessions of homes, estates, regions, and nation-states whose exclusionary force comes from both the abstraction of scientific cartography and the power of law. Against this conception we must rediscover boundaries and other ground forms that allowed our sedentary inhabitation not as barriers, but as thresholds, as physical forms around which to organize beneficial modes of coexistence. Consequently, we must elaborate new forms of mappings and cognitive devices that do not depend on the measuring parameters granted by science and technology which in many cases are granted to us by capital. Rather than obsessively reducing the idea of territory from the abstraction of data, maps, or statistics, as it is often done with urban research, we must rediscover territories as *existential grounds* in which communities define their habits in radical contrast with the way territorial institutions impose rights of access and property.

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