

Triangulating territory: a case for pragmatic interaction between political science, political geography, and critical IR

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The relationship between the political and socially constructed nature of territory (or, territories' 'constitutive properties') and international politics has recently attracted substantial attention from scholars hailing from political science as well as political geography and critical international relations. The conversations across these scholarly traditions, however, leave a lot to be desired. The question then becomes, how can we, if at all, facilitate further interaction and cross-fertilization across seemingly disparate literatures? This study proposes a strategy of 'pragmatic interaction', which entails three steps: (i) establishing a simple conceptual framework that would be both recognizable and agreeable to scholars hailing from different perspectives; (ii) emphasizing a number of research topics that are of relevance to these scholars; and (iii) examining some of the recent entries from the relative literatures in the light of the identified research topics. The analysis suggests that there is much potential for interdisciplinary cross-fertilization over two broad research areas – 'territorial heterogeneity' of the past and present global territorial orders and the relationship between territory and power – also driving attention to potential research venues such as territorial interpretations of the anarchy/hierarchy problematique and the interaction between identity and territoriality.

Key words: territory; territorial constitutions; territorial heterogeneity; IR theory

Territory lies at the heart of both practice and theory of international politics. Modern states as well as the concept of sovereignty, the core foci of interest for students of international relations (IR), are defined with respect to territory. Research on armed conflict has also revealed that territory, broadly defined, has constituted the single most salient issue with respect to interstate wars and disputes for the better part of the last half a millennium (Kahler and Walter 2006; Lake and O'Mahony 2006, 153). Even in the face of globalization and rapidly changing technology, 'people's attachment to

particular pieces of territory does not seem to have declined' (Walter 2006, 288).¹ As Alexander Murphy puts it, 'territory retains its allure, and the strength of that continuing allure calls into question the assumption that modernist political–territorial conceptions are simply changing a little more slowly than modernist political–territorial arrangements'. (Murphy 2013, 1214)

Scholarly interest in territory's place in international politics, in turn, remained relatively dormant for a long time, only to blossom from the early 1990s onward, not only in IR but also in political geography. However, an effective conversation between IR scholars and political geographers that could help better advance the shared goal – unpacking the relationship between international politics and the 'character' of territory – has yet to materialize.² While scholars operating in different scholarly traditions scrutinize similar topics ranging from sovereignty, interstate and intrastate war, humanitarian interventions, post-conflict reconstruction, border disputes, economic interdependence, and terrorism, what can be referred to as mainstream IR – usually associated with the US political science departments and journals like *International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly* – and political geography have evolved almost in total isolation from one another.³

The poverty of the dialogue across different literatures is striking. Most political science oriented interventions on territory engage in little more than a nod in the direction of political geography. Similarly, political geographers who work on territory also rarely 'talk to' research conducted in political science; a popular textbook on territory that deals with global politics, for example, makes virtually no reference to IR literature (Storey 2012). Furthermore, when political geographers engage IR, they usually do so via critical theorists, who tend to define their work in opposition to the scholarly tradition in political science and categorically reject most of its assumptions, as well as epistemology and methodology.

This article deals with a question that directly follows from this divide: how can we, if at all, facilitate further interaction and cross-fertilization across seemingly disparate literatures vis-à-vis the study of territory? This is a more challenging question than meets the eye. For one, the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological distance and barriers between the

¹ On arguments over territory's demise, see Ohmae (1995), O'Brien (1992), and Friedman (2005).

² A recent and notable exception is offered by Miles Kahler and Barbara Walter (2006). However, the volume lacks a shared conceptualization of its core subject matter, territory, and with the exception of David Newman's contribution, does not involve rigorous interdisciplinary interaction.

³ For an exception, see Bakke et al. (2014).

literatures are not imaginary. While the mainstream IR is driven by an ever-increasing penchant for social scientific aspirations and criteria, much of the work in political geography has been fuelled by post-modernist approaches and political philosophy. In such a landscape, barriers to entry can be formidable; scholars who aim to crossover may need to learn a new 'language' and practice considerable open-mindedness about research questions and designs that are usually antithetical to their own training and commitments.

The disciplinary walls are also well-guarded; most political science journals may find submissions from political geographers to be 'unscientific' and geography journals may criticize political scientists for not engaging the most basic tenets of human and political geography. Furthermore, while 'interdisciplinary research' is a popular catchphrase in academia, scholars are often rewarded with regard to achievements in their own fields. Last but not least, time is also a scarce resource, forcing most of us to concentrate our attention primarily on developments in our own respective disciplines. Put bluntly, it would be naïve to argue that once scholars hailing from different research traditions become more aware of each other's work, synergies will automatically follow and a thousand flowers will bloom.

In this article, I make the case for 'pragmatic interaction' among the relevant scholarly traditions. While disciplinary barriers make a complete meeting of the minds impractical and even impossible, there exist research questions and frontiers where the potential costs of disengagement are high and actual costs of engagement are low. Identifying such areas where different disciplinary universes align, in turn, requires fleshing out a basic common vocabulary and then focusing on topics where conceptual and theoretical 'beachheads' already exist, which is possible only through a systematic analysis.

The strategy I propose entails three steps. The first is establishing a simple conceptual framework that would be both recognizable and agreeable to scholars hailing from different perspectives. The next step is to emphasize a number of research topics that are of relevance to these scholars. In this article, I point towards two research areas: (i) the origins and consequences of what can be referred to as 'territorial heterogeneity' in the past and present of world politics; and (ii) the relationship between power – or political authority – and territory in the context of international politics.⁴ The third step involves examining some of the recent entries from the

⁴ The term 'territorial heterogeneity' is sometimes used in studies that deal with voting patterns or ecological change, but I refer to the ways in which politics–space relationship shows considerable variation in legal, political (representation and accountability), economic, cultural, and administrative spheres either within the same spatially defined political unit or within a 'system' of such units.

relative literatures – in particular, political science, political geography, and critical IR – in the light of the identified research topics in order to explore potential areas of cross-fertilization as well as to generate novel research questions about territory's role in world politics.

The remainder of this essay unfolds in five main sections. First, I introduce the main conceptual framework. Second, I point towards what I refer as 'territory's constitutive properties' as the dimension that offers the most potential for interaction across disciplinary borders. The third section provides a brief overview of three recent entries from political science, political geography, and critical IR in the context of the origins and consequences of territorial heterogeneity in world politics, outlining the common themes as well as highlighting a number of relevant research frontiers where interdisciplinary conversations over territory can lead to novel insights about international politics. Fourth, the same strategy will be utilized to highlight the relationship between political authority – or power – and territory in world politics. The fifth section, in turn, points towards two further areas of research where interdisciplinary dialogue may yield novel insights and perspectives: a territorial interpretation of the anarchy–hierarchy debate and the relationship between territories and identities.

Conceptualizing territory

In the study of international politics, territory is a term that is commonly invoked but rarely defined (Elden 2010, 799–800; see also Ruggie 1993, 174; Vollard 2009, 688). We can associate the lack of a definition in mainstream IR to the reification of the territorial state, which, partially thanks to the impacts of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (TIP), 'became not just a political hegemon, but a conceptual one as well' (Murphy 2010, 771; see also Waltz 1979; Agnew 1994). From a territorial perspective, TIP treats the global landscape as 'homogenous empty space' comprising interchangeable pieces of land where borders merely exist by definition and are rarely, if ever, scrutinized, perpetuating the reification of the Westphalian view of territory in IR (Williams 2006, 6; for an exception, see Caporoso 2000).⁵ Such reification, to be sure, is not limited to neorealism; while they are known for problematizing many assumptions or conclusions of neorealism, neither neo-institutionalism nor constructivism, nor even the English School, are immune to this conceptual and analytical trap (Buzan 2010, 97, 182).⁶

⁵ 'Homogenous empty space' is associated with Anderson (1983).

⁶ On neo-institutionalism, see Williams (2006, 22). While Alexander Wendt (1999) recognizes the contingent and malleable nature of territory, he nonetheless treats borders and

In particular, territory is usually assumed to be ‘self-evident’ (Elden 2010, 800) in at least three ways: it is (i) conceptualized as a natural, intrinsic, universal phenomenon; (ii) reduced to its geographical, physical, and topographical components; and (iii) seen as if it is essentially and exclusively a Westphalian phenomenon. These assumptions, however, are misleading. First, there is nothing natural or primordial about territory and territoriality. The view that ‘human territoriality is a natural, instinctive phenomenon’ has been largely discredited (Penrose 2002, 279; Newman 2006, 108).⁷ For ‘asserting territorial control is a “conscious act”, instead of natural instinct’, territory implies space demarcated and constructed for *political* purposes (Vollard 2009, 690; see also Sack 1986, Storey 2012, 20; Paasi 2003, 111).⁸ Second, while a number of IR scholars may equate territory with geography, these terms, as the study of territory and territoriality has long established in geographical literature, are not synonymous (Agnew 2009, 29).⁹ A third common yet misleading assumption is that territory is the product of the Westphalian *ideal* of clearly demarcated space over which states exercise exclusive sovereign rights. The Westphalian understanding of space–politics relationship, however, does not reflect a ‘universal’ standard, but constitutes only one of the many possible spatial–political arrangements (Biggs 1999; Murphy 2002, 208; Penrose 2002, 283). It follows that most studies in IR *can* treat territory (or *what territory stands for*) as self-evident and unproblematic only by assuming away the contingent and malleable nature of the relationship between territories and politics.

Compared with IR scholars, students of political geography have been more attentive to the task of conceptualizing territory. While the difference (or relationship) between the terms territory and territoriality is not always clear in mainstream IR, political geographers explicitly define the former in terms of the latter. Following the work of Robert Sack, it is almost universally accepted that ‘territories are the product of human agency and this agency is usually referred to as “territoriality”’ (Sack 1986; Penrose 2002, 279; see also Gottmann 1973). Territoriality is ‘a primary geographical expression of power’ as well as ‘a geographic strategy that connects society and space’ (Sack 1986, 19; Penrose 2002, 279). That territory is socially and politically constructed does not necessarily mean that it is conjured

territories as givens (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, b, 46–47). Similarly, Barry Buzan’s treatment of territory leaves little room for defining the term independent of the Westphalian state. For similar observations, see Vaughan-Williams (2009a, b, 45–46) and Larkins (2010, 19–23).

⁷ For a recent challenge, see Johnson and Toft (2013/14).

⁸ The seminal study on this subject is offered by Edward Soja (1971).

⁹ For an example of this practice, see Starr (2005, 398).

	Space	Demarcation	Constitution
Contents	Environmental/Physical Features & Material Resources	Boundaries, Borders, Frontiers	Ideas, Culture, Power Relations
Relationship to Territory	Provides "Raw Material"	Establishes geographical markers such as Proximity, Size, Location, Contiguity	Defines Social-Political Role and Meaning of Territory
Representative Studies	Mackinder 1904, Kagan 2009, Mearsheimer 2001	Vasquez 1993, Huth 1996, Lake and Mahoney 2006	Ruggie 1993, Agnew 1994, Spruyt 1994

Figure 1 Three dimensions of territory.

from thin air. Jan Penrose offers a particular conceptualization that would also be amenable to IR literature: ‘*space* is present whether anyone knows about it or not, but space only becomes a *place* when it acquires a “perceptual unity”... and it only becomes a *territory* when it is delimited in some way [emphases added]’ (Penrose 2002, 279). Territory, in this context, emerges as a result of territorialization of a particular space through both demarcation and assignment of a political–social meaning – or, a perceptual unity – to it. This conceptualization points towards the existence of three interrelated dimensions that collectively define territories: the physical/geographical (or topographical) features of space (or land), demarcation of space, and the constitution of this demarcated space. How these dimensions collectively configure territories is illustrated in Figure 1 (see also Elden 2010).

In this framework, geographical space would refer to physical features such as oceans, waterways, altitude as well as natural (read material) resources that may be attached to the space (or land) in question.¹⁰ The impacts of geographical space on politics are not necessarily constant but can vary depending on environmental or technological change. While the first dimension of territory does not require territorialization, demarcation and constitution of territory follow from politicization of space and require human agency. Territorialization, in this context, directly aims to organize and regulate individual and social behaviour by way of defining the scope and extent of authority and the cultural as well as emotive affiliations of human groups with space. For territories to exist in any meaningful sense, their demarcation and constitution also need to be periodically and systematically reified through institutionalized practices.

In particular, demarcation involves the process of delineating and compartmentalizing space. Note that demarcation does not necessarily

¹⁰ On ‘land’, resources, and territory, see Rosecrance (1996, 48), Gartzke (2006, 161), and Agnew (2009, 35).

imply Westphalian ‘impregnable hard shells’ but can also be maintained and managed through fluid frontiers or porous borders (Herz 1957). Demarcation of space will determine the modes of transactions of goods and services, the mobility of people across compartmentalized spaces, as well as the rather ‘tangible’ features of territory such as the size and location of political units, their proximity and contiguity vis-à-vis each other.¹¹ Assigning political, social, and cultural functions as well as meaning to demarcated space, in turn, makes up the third dimension of territory. The political and social construction of demarcated space can follow from domination of one social group by another, political cooperation and competition, social engineering, or historical contingency.

As Kratochwil recognized long ago, different processes and mechanisms of demarcation will also influence the very constitutive properties of territories (Kratochwil 1986). Demarcation processes, however, do not necessarily determine the constitutive properties of territory. Modern nation-states, for example, demarcate state territories via the so-called Westphalian ‘hard borders’; however, how territory is constituted in the age of nationalism (where state territory, in principle, constitutes an indivisible homeland) is significantly different from the monarchical territories of the 17th or 18th centuries in the European state system. Put differently, similar demarcation methods can host different constitutive properties.¹²

Together, demarcation processes and constitutive properties of territories construct what I refer as ‘territorial constitutions’, or the set of dominant territorial discourses as well as institutionalized practices at the legal, administrative, cultural, and political spheres that then manage and regulate the relationship between society, state, and space.¹³ In this article, I differentiate between demarcation-related *features* (as opposed to processes) of territory from its constitutive properties as an analytical category in order to delineate different research questions. While this three-faceted conceptualization does not amount to a shared language, it provides a basic shared vocabulary that can help identify areas where there may be potential synergies.

Also note that this framework can help facilitate inter-disciplinary synergies – or, conversations – beyond the three research traditions that are scrutinized in this article. In recent years, for example, the idea that territory ‘should be included in and under the principles of justice’ attracted

¹¹ On tangible–intangible distinction, see Newman (2006).

¹² Also note that constitutive properties can also influence demarcation processes.

¹³ I thank Alexander Wendt for suggesting the ‘constitution’ terminology.

considerable attention from political theorists and philosophers (Nine 2008, 148). This literature scrutinizes the so-called ‘territorial rights’ in order to unpack the ‘moral bases’ of states’ as well as non-state groups’ claims to certain territories (see Banai *et al.* 2014). John Simmons and Cara Nine, for example, maintain that the origins of such rights can be derived from John Locke’s theory of property and social contract (Simmons 2001; Nine 2008). David Miller, in turn, offers a ‘nationalist’ theory of territorial rights, emphasizing the symbolic association that is established between culturally defined groups and bounded space (Miller 2012). Anna Stiltz, by building on a Kantian perspective, argues for ‘[making] philosophical sense of... the territorial state’ and offers a ‘legitimate state theory’ that distinguishes between rights of property and rights of jurisdiction (Stiltz 2009, 187, 2011).

From the lenses of the framework that this article presents, the relevant debate is about the normative bases of territories’ constitutive properties. The territorial rights literature, in this context, can engage others that are treated in this article – through the medium of the framework – in at least three ways. First, it can more directly tackle the ways in which territories’ constitutive properties that relate to justice and morality claims are constructed at the interstate level. Second, the existing literature on the constitutive properties of territory can motivate political theorists to further problematize the contingent and malleable nature of the demarcation-related features of existing territories such as the location or functions of borders, which are sometimes taken as fixed or unproblematic. Lastly, engagement with territorial rights literature can help students of international politics examine how competing claims about justice and morality shape and are shaped by different territorial constitutions in the context of territorial disputes.

These being said, space limitations do not allow for further exploration of a four-way conversation. Next, I position the three-dimensional framework vis-à-vis research in political science, geography, and critical IR.

First dimension: geography as territory?

The first dimension of territory is best associated with the so-called geopolitics. Even though he never used the term himself, geopolitics is usually associated with British geographer Mackinder, who championed a decidedly environmental reading of the global territorial order and sought to uncover the ‘geographical causation in universal history’ (Mackinder 1943, 596; Mackinder 1904; Kearns 2009, 6).¹⁴ Mackinder famously

¹⁴ It was Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén who coined the term.

emphasized the superiority of land power over sea power as well as the centrality of the so-called Heartland for understanding global politics, arguing that whoever controlled the Heartland would rule the entire world.

The methods and assumptions of classical geopolitics were a far cry from those associated with modern-day political scientists, but its students most certainly harboured scientific *and* political objectives, framing geopolitics as ‘a philosophical synthesis of other sciences, drawn around the hypothesis of environmentalism’, while also presenting it as a science that aimed at guiding policy (Kearns, 2004, 344; see also Blouet 2004; Kearns 2010, 187). As is well known, the notion of environmental determinism as well as Mackinder’s ideas about a ‘land-based global empire’ were utilized by Nazi ideologues and strategists for planning and justifying military aggression and mass murder (Kearns 2009, 9). Geopolitics was then demonized by the Allied powers and branded as ‘intellectual poison’ in the immediate aftermath of WWII, only to make a comeback by 1980s in modern disguise, this time divorced from scientific pretensions, if not from the penchant for guiding policy (Parker 1998, 49; Dodds and Atkinson 2000, xiv; Kearns 2009, 23; see also Flint 2006). Sometimes referred to as ‘neoclassical geopolitics’, the relevant thinking is best represented by Robert Kaplan, who recently drove attention to the centrality of the ‘dictates of geography’ for understanding contemporary world politics, warning scholars and practitioners about the looming ‘revenge of geography in the most old-fashioned sense’ (Megoran 2010; see also Parker 1998; Kaplan 2009).

In contemporary IR theory, this perspective is represented by scholars such as Jacob Grygiel, who suggests that students of international politics should move beyond the a-geographical and ‘abstract’ theoretical frameworks privileged by modern IR theorists (especially Kenneth Waltz) and reclaim the key insights offered by classical geopolitics about the role of geography (Grygiel 2006). John Mearsheimer offers a more nuanced perspective by driving attention to the importance of the ‘stopping power of water’ for explaining variation in great power behaviour (Mearsheimer 2001; Toft 2005, 393). The physical conditions such as ‘rough terrain’ also make their way into the research that deals with development or conflict (Fearon and Laitin 2003). This ‘geographical’ – or physical/environmental – approach has some appeal among political scientists, but there is little room for interaction between political science and political geography (as well as critical IR) over this dimension, since most political geographers and critical theorists define their work in opposition to – and as a direct critique of – the deterministic representations of the relationship between the physical aspects of geography and politics. Put bluntly, interdisciplinary

cross-fertilization over the first dimension of territory faces numerous, and perhaps insurmountable, challenges.

Second dimension: location vs. process

The scholarly interest in territory's demarcation-related features, or the 'tangible dimensions of territorial size, shape, and proximity to neighboring territories within an interstate framework' bloomed during early 1990s (Newman 2006, 86; e.g., Diehl and Goertz 1988; Vasquez 1993; Huth 1996; Vasquez and Henehan 2001; Huth and Alee 2003; Carter and Goemans 2011). In the last two decades, the relevant studies have been closely associated with so-called peace research (or conflict studies) that scrutinizes the relationship between the demarcation-oriented features of territory and international disputes as well as armed conflict, usually by building on quantitative analysis. While this research programme tends to operationalize the demarcation-oriented features of territory as variables, scholars associated with political geography, and critical theory are more interested in the demarcation *processes* as well as their social and politically constructed – and constructing – nature, emphasizing how these processes are reflected in the discourses and cultural practices of territory and territoriality especially in the context of power relations among political and societal actors.

In theory, there is potential for cross-fertilization across different literatures in this dimension. However, the relevant literatures have 'matured' in isolation from each other's influence, leading to the ossification of particular methodological practices as well as epistemological leanings in different literatures, which then makes it difficult for scholars to cross the disciplinary barriers or find acceptance on the 'other side' when they try to do so. For example, while the literature that draws on quantitative analysis recognizes that IR needs to engage geography to a larger extent, it also seems to be interested primarily in exporting its own methodological convictions and sensitivities across disciplinary borders, occasionally criticizing the scholarly work in political geography for being 'restricted to case studies that are not framed within the normal science projects typical of IR' (Flint *et al.* 2009, 827; Starr 2005, 387). These 'normal science' projects have so far shown little interest in problematizing territory or engaging its contingent and politically infused nature, which constitutes the heart of what most political geographers and critical theorists are primarily interested in.

Overall, I argue that the first dimension does not allow for much interaction between disciplines, while cross-fertilization in the second dimension is impeded by ossified methodological practices and theoretical assumptions that are associated with different disciplines, which may prove

to be incompatible in practice. I argue that it is the third dimension – or the constitutive properties of territory – that offers the most promise for cross-fertilization.

Exploring the 'Character' of territory

Scholars working on the constitutive properties of territory agree that the study of territory needs to 'move beyond the traditional discourse of demarcation, proximity, size and shape of territories' (Newman 2006, 109). In this reading, political competition and cooperation over territory has been not only about demarcation of space, or about *where* borders will be drawn, but also about the very political, social, and cultural 'character' of demarcated space. The empirical assumptions as well as methodological leanings of the relevant scholarly approaches, when compared with the other two dimensions of territory, are less fixed and more amenable to each other. Furthermore, even though scholars hailing from different approaches draw on different framing strategies, these scholars are essentially interested in similar, or at least complementary, research questions. In addition, there exist numerous 'beachheads' and/or canonical works that have made their mark across different disciplines, suggesting that scholars focusing on this dimension can build on existing bridges to explore the 'other side(s)'.

The scholarly attention on the constitutive properties of territory (in the context of international politics) remained relatively, if not completely, polarized, with political science on the one hand, political geography and critical approaches on the other. In mainstream IR, two key interventions deserve special attention. Taking issue with the bellicist theories of state-formation,¹⁵ Hendrik Spruyt, in his *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*, maintains that the rise of the Westphalian state over its competitors such as city-states and city-leagues was not merely a function of sovereign states superior war-making capabilities (Spruyt 1994). Instead, the mutual recognition that sovereign states bestowed upon each other's *particular* territorial arrangements (which later came out to be framed with reference to the Peace of Westphalia) in order to keep transactions costs of managing trade as well as to minimize the diplomatic hassles that would emanate from multiple and clashing jurisdictions led first to the marginalization and then eventual extinction of alternative political-spatial (read territorial) arrangements, prompting the territorialization of the entire Continent in the image of the sovereign state.

¹⁵ For bellicist theories of state formation, see Tilly (1990).

In this influential 1993 *International Organization* article, John Ruggie suggests that the ‘unbundling of territoriality is a productive venue for the exploration of contemporary international transformation’ (Ruggie 1993, 171) and draws a comparison between the modern understanding of the territorial and the medieval order (Ruggie 1993, 150; see also Teschke 1998, 346; Penrose 2002, 283; Hirst 2005, 27, 28–32). For Ruggie, the *origins* of different forms of territorial orders can be traced to the institutionalization of ‘knowledge’, or ideas, about the relationship between space and politics, which, to a large extent, depends largely on ‘the domain of social epistemes, the mental equipment by means of which people [reimagine] their collective existence’ (Ruggie 1993, 169). Combined with Spruyt’s analysis, Ruggie’s arguments provide a dynamic account of the rise of the Westphalian territorial order, which can be best framed not as a historical necessity but as a story of cooperation (among sovereign states) and competition (e.g., sovereign states vs. city-states and city-leagues) over the question of how the European landscape was going to be politicized at both institutional and ideational levels (Ruggie 1983, 276, 1993).

The constitutive properties of territory have attracted considerably more attention in political geography and critical studies than it has in political science. The initial impetus for this research was built on the works of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre as well as geographers such as Jean Gottmann and Robert Sack. The scholarly interest in territory flourished especially from late 1980s onward; as David Newman wrote in 2006, ‘territorial discourse within political geography [has] experienced a renaissance during the past two decades’ (Newman 2006, 85; Storey 2012). The relevant literature is vast, but two lines of scholarship deserve special attention: John Agnew’s influential ‘territorial trap’ and ‘critical geopolitics’.

In his widely-cited 1994 article, John Agnew argues that IR theory is built on three geographical assumptions that effectively limit its understanding of territory. The first assumption entails the reification of ‘state territories as set or fixed units of sovereign space’, which in turn serves to ‘dehistoricize and decontextualize processes of state formation and disintegration’ (Agnew 1994, 59). Second, modern IR theory draws upon the polarity of domestic and international politics, which then obfuscates the ways in which these two dimensions interact (Agnew 1994, 59).¹⁶ The third component of the territorial trap, in turn, involves viewing ‘the territorial state as existing prior to and as a container of society’, which artificially normalizes the complicated and multifaceted nature of society–territory–politics interaction

¹⁶ On a similar point, see Kratochwil (1986, 27).

simply by assuming away the complexity (Agnew 1994, 59). Without recognizing the flawed and misleading nature of these assumptions, Agnew argues, IR cannot move beyond the territorial blindfolds that not only limit but also distort its theoretical and historical *vision*.

While he does not consider his work as a part of it, Agnew is sometimes associated with the so-called critical geopolitics (Dalby 2010, 281). For students of critical geopolitics, ‘the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states’ (see also Ó Tuathail 1996; Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 192). Most adherents of critical geopolitics do not ‘seek to develop a theory of how space and politics intersect but rather [have been] concerned with developing a mode of interrogating and exposing the grounds for knowledge production and of seeking to analyze the articulation, objectivization and subversion of hegemony’ (Power and Campbell 2010, 243). From such a vantage point, for example, classical (or neoclassical) geopolitics presents particular *representations* of the global political landscape, which are in fact tools for establishing and legitimizing strategies of domination, as *facts*. For example, according to the adherents of critical geopolitics, Mackinder’s ideas that are so cherished by the students of neoclassical geopolitics and numerous IR scholars amount to little more than ‘a panoramic view of global imperialism’ (Blouet 2004, 327).

Over the last two decades, critical geopolitics has transformed itself from a marginal footnote into a popular research programme and has in fact become so inclusive that it amounts to little more than ‘a synonym for contemporary political geography’ (Dalby 2010, 281; Power and Campbell 2010, 24; see also Mamadouh 1999).¹⁷ Regardless, the term has so far served as a potent rallying point for geographers who are interested in international politics as well as numerous critical IR scholars. The engagement between critical geopolitics and critical IR, in turn, has been quite robust. This is hardly surprising, for ‘the emergence of critical geopolitics was coeval with the development of critical theories of international relations from the late 1980s onwards, especially in the work of Richard Ashley, James Der Derian, Michael Shapiro, and Rob Walker’ (Power and Campbell 2010, 343). In relation, geographers associated with critical geopolitics and critical IR scholars use similar methodological approaches such as *problematization*, which ‘interrogates the way that a concept is used

¹⁷ Critical geopolitics has also attracted criticism from within political geography. For example, see Dodds (2001, 473) and Penrose (2002, 290). Arguably, the zenith of critical geopolitics has now been passed, and critical geopolitics has become part of the mainstream political geography. For a recent and comprehensive account of the evolution of critical geopolitics, see Dodds, Kuus, and Sharp (2013).

in discourse, how that usage is connected to questions to do with power relations, and the way in which it is also productive of particular forms of subjectivity' (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 9).

An early attempt that questions the territorial assumptions of IR from a critical perspective is offered by Richard Ashley in his 1987-dated article, 'The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space'. For Ashley, critical scholars, who can be likened to 'revolutionaries', are supposed to participate 'in the making of history' by 'doing interpretive violence' to traditional readings of international politics and relevant practices (Ashley 1987, 429). The dominant interpretations and readings of the international space, according to Ashley, are used effectively as tools for domination, while they are paradoxically presented as static, timeless, and universal 'facts' of political life. The critical scholar should constantly question the dominant discourses and practices, exploring the 'historical emergence, bounding, conquest, and administration of social *spaces* [italics in original]' while simultaneously exposing the fact that the 'sovereign state boundaries' are 'plastic divisions of political space' (Ashley 1987, 409, 421).

The critical IR's attention to territory and territoriality soared by late 1990s and early 2000s. One illustrative example of this line of work is offered by the Identities, Borders, Orders (IBO) group, which culminated in an edited volume by Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid (see Albert, Jacobson, and Lapid 2001).¹⁸ Usually associated with international political sociology, international law, and international political theory, the so-called IBO perspective favors a 'processual/relational/verbing' approach for analysing the space–politics relationship, rejecting the notion that such relationship can be defined by inertia. Territorial orders, in this reading, are best defined as *processes* that are temporarily stabilized. Such processes, in turn, should be thought in terms of their *relational* aspects, which necessitate that scholars should approach all relevant social experiences in the context of the 'community' where they take place. Finally, the processual and relational aspects of space–politics relationship must not be divorced from the discursive (hence, 'verbing') dynamics that empower and substantiate such relationship. IBO perspective, according to its supporters, can be utilized to explore the ways in which the present-day territorial order is in fact being projected as a 'normative order' by powerful actors to 'discipline and punish' their adversaries by creating spaces of morality vs. immorality.

As robust as it is, the relationship between political geography and critical theory also resembles a closed circuit, as both literatures rarely

¹⁸ I thank Andreas Behnke for this suggestion.

engage (and are engaged by) political scientists, at least in order to partake in constructive dialogues. That being said, as far as the constitutive properties of territory are concerned, this polarization – or mutual indifference – can be thought as less of a hindrance, as the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological ‘distance’ between political geography, critical IR, and political science is shorter when compared with other dimensions. Further attention to framing and a more open-minded, not to mention focused, reading of research being done outside one’s disciplinary boundaries, in this context, can help scholars better evaluate the commonalities and differences.

An illustration may help. In mainstream IR, research on the relationship between the character of territory and patterns in conflict has followed two general paths. First, scholars such as Monica Toft, Ron Hassner, and Stacie Goddard scrutinize the relationship between the so-called indivisible territory and armed conflict (Toft 2002/03; Hassner 2003; Goddard 2006). On the other hand, Mark Zacher, Tanisha Fazal, and Boaz Atzili have pointed towards the importance of the so-called ‘territorial integrity norm’ that came to prominence after 1945 and has – to a large extent – ruled out territorial conquest as an acceptable international behaviour (Zacher 2001; Fazal 2007; Atzili 2012). While these studies are well known in political science, they barely engage political geographers, who, in turn, rarely take notice of the said studies.

Interpreted from the framework I offer, the relevant research in political science can be framed as an inquiry into the origins and consequences of different configurations of territory.¹⁹ The literature on indivisible territory, in particular, looks at how the cultural, political, and strategic dynamics constitute different kinds of territories and the territorial integrity norm debate points towards how territories have recently been ‘reconfigured’ at the system-level through the institutionalization of particular norms and practices. Put differently, the former research focuses on the domestic construction of territory’s constitutive properties and the latter emphasizes how such properties are configured and re-configured at the interstate level, collectively highlighting the contingent – and essentially ‘plastic’ – nature of the global territorial order as well as the power relations that sustain and transform it.

Framing this line of research in decidedly territorial terms can not only allow political scientists to map out their existing insights vis-à-vis research being conducted in political geography and critical IR, but also make the relevant research more accessible (or interesting) to scholars operating outside political science.

¹⁹ For similar framing, see Vollaard (2009, 689).

This illustration also suggests that mapping out analyses and interpretations across disciplinary boundaries becomes more viable of a task when the conceptual framework is ‘applied’ to a particular research topic. In the next two sections, I juxtapose a number of recent entries from political science, political geography, and critical IR in the context of two broad research topics in order to evaluate similarities and differences, as well as to map out areas of potential cross-fertilization. The first topic of concern involves the exploration of territorial heterogeneity in world politics. Relating to the first topic, I overview recent entries by Boaz Atzili, Stuart Elden, and Nick Vaughan-Williams. The second topic is the relationship between power and territory, especially in the context of the processes through which political and social actors consciously or inadvertently construct the nature and the spatial extent of political authority. On this topic, I examine monographs by Ronald Hassner, John Agnew, and Jeremy Larkins.²⁰

Note that the selection of books was not arbitrary, but was carried out with three criteria in mind. The first was expert advice, especially with respect to research conducted outside political science.²¹ Second, while they are not selected on their similarities *per se*, the books under scrutiny can still ‘speak to’ each other, at least to a certain point. The third criterion, in turn, has to do with variation in the ‘scope’ of the research questions raised by these studies, which collectively cover a scholarly terrain that include global issues as well as regional ones in the past and present of international politics.

Territorial heterogeneity in world politics

In conventional thinking, the spatial–political representation of international politics as a domain of homogenous territories is best reflected in world political maps, where each state is assigned a distinctive colour. In this geopolitical imagining, the state system exists in homogenous empty space in at least two ways. First, while we find it convenient to separate, say, ‘orange’ Germany from ‘blue’ France by assigning distinct colours to each polity to flesh out the physicality of the ‘state’ (which is in fact an organizational form), we also implicitly accept the notion that territories are substitutable and equal; when borders change, for example, some orange parts of the world effortlessly become blue (or vice versa) on the map. Furthermore, the

²⁰ The claim here is not that some studies are best categorized exclusively under particular research topics, but that exploring the potential synergies across the relevant body of work becomes more of a feasible task when a research topic is identified *a priori* as a focal point.

²¹ In particular, I thank Stuart Elden.

assumption of the interstate system as a collection of territorially defined sovereign states also implies a sense of spatial equality as far as legal status and sovereignty are concerned, defined in terms of both freedom from outside intervention and authority exercised by the state inside the borders. Put differently, there are different ‘colours’ in the world, but they are assumed to be equal in terms of sovereignty. The second component of the territorial homogeneity assumption, in relation, involves how territories inside the state borders are constituted. In world political maps, a state’s territory is assigned a single colour that shows no internal variation; ‘Germany’, for example, is marked by a single shade of blue, implying the uniformity of the territories that lie within its borders.

More recently, the assumption of territorial homogeneity has come under attack. The most popular challenge is based on globalization and its impacts on state sovereignty, which are usually associated with the rise of ‘de-territorialized’ networks. While this perspective questions the viability of the frameworks that are fixated on the so-called Westphalian territoriality in the age of globalization, it still falls short on three grounds. First, as Anssi Paasi recently argued, despite the rising importance of networks and the increasing porousness of state borders, these borders and the associated practices still play a decisive role in creating and sustaining territories, especially in the context of how states utilize their meaning-making capabilities to exert their authority in social and political life (Paasi 2009).

The second problem with the ‘end of Westphalia’ arguments is that we are not moving from a centuries-old territorial order to a new one.²² Until the second half of the 20th century, global politics was a heterogeneous habitat where empires co-existed with sovereign states and European colonialism, rendering the notion of territorial equality and homogeneity – at best – a fiction. Third, a temporal interpretation that focuses not only on 1648 but even 1945 (or any other focal point in time) as the ‘beginning’ of a global political order based on territorial homogeneity is misleading, for territorial practices in many parts of the world have always been at great variance with the ideal of the sovereign state (e.g., see Herbst 2000). In sum, while IR theory is built on territories’ homogeneity and substitutability, recent research suggests that the past and present of the global territorial order has been marked more by heterogeneity.

While he does not necessarily define his arguments in such terms, Boaz Atzili, in his *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors* (*Good Fences*, hereafter) makes a strong case for unpacking the problems associated with the heterogeneous nature of territory in world politics. *Good Fences* explores the so-called

²² On the ‘myth’ surrounding Westphalia, see Schmitt (2011).

norm of 'border fixity', which, thanks to constant practice, an empowering narrative (e.g., discourses), and institutionalization (through regional and international organizations) has become an undeniable fact of international politics in the post-WWII era, stabilizing the territorial borders of existing states to a large extent. While it has contributed to peace and stability in many regions, Atzili argues, the norm of border fixity has also fuelled and perpetuated both intrastate and interstate conflict in 'regions where states have been socio-politically weak, such as the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans, and Central America as well as large parts of Asia and the former Soviet Union' (Atzili 2012, 2).

The causal logic entails a *territorial* interpretation of bellicist theories of state formation: territorial pressures are essentially different from non-territorial ones since they create substantial incentives for state elites to build strong institutions and establish social cohesion among the population. The border fixity norm neutralizes this competitive mechanism: not only are weak states *not* 'selected out', their governing elites can also afford to rule without necessarily building socio-politically strong states. Chronically weak states, in turn, are more likely to experience civil strife and internal conflict, which may then spread to neighbouring countries in the form of interstate or trans-border armed conflict or refugee crises.

From the lenses of the conceptual framework offered in this essay, Atzili points towards the existing territorial heterogeneity as a side-effect of the norm of border fixity. In the past, there used to be a 'floating' border regime, which made for wars but also created incentives for states to homogenize territories within their borders, an attribute of 'strong states' in Atzili's terminology. In the post-1945 era, the emerging 'fixed' border regime is creating disincentives for rulers to engage in similar activities, which then leads to the perpetuation of heterogeneous territories in parts of the globe that then may prove to be ripe for internal and transnational conflict. The message following from *Good Neighbors* is stark: in some parts of the globe, the inbuilt tensions over how territories are constructed at the interstate level and domestic level will be perpetuating conflict and instability.

Stuart Elden's *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (*Terror and Territory*, hereafter) displays remarkable similarities with *Good Fences*, but two books do not directly engage each other.²³ In *Terror and Territory*, Elden – a leading figure in the study of territory especially in political geography whose work also cuts through political theory and critical IR – seeks to 'uncover the logic and grammar of contemporary

²³ To be precise, Elden cites Atzili's earlier work in passing.

geopolitics' in the context of the so-called War on Terror (Elden 2009, xxxi; see also Elden 2013).

Elden argues that world politics from 1945 onwards has in fact been based on a 'sovereign fiction' that posits that 'every state is in control of its own territory and therefore has territorial sovereignty within its boundaries and equal sovereignty outside them' (Elden 2009, 63). Exposing this fictitious nature of sovereignty requires analysing the notion of 'territorial integrity' with respect to its two major components: (i) preservation of territorial borders (or territorial preservation) and (ii) territorial sovereignty. Elden suggests that these two components (the former pertaining to the demarcation-related characteristics of property and the latter to its constitutive properties) have long been at conflict with each other, for while territorial preservation is artificially forced upon the international system by dominant states who have long thought of it as a stabilizing factor, the same dominant powers constantly challenge territorial sovereignty in many parts of the world through direct and indirect interventionist measures (especially Elden 2009, 21–23; see also Graham 2011, 36, 38–39).

September 11 further stimulated the penchant for interventionism in places where Western states perceive and portray as zones of disorder primarily because 'a putatively deterritorialized threat – the network of networks of al-Qaeda or global Islamism' – was immediately 'reterritorialized in the sands of Afghanistan and, later, Iraq' (Elden 2009, 4). Fighting terrorism, accordingly, requires that United States and its allies infringe upon territorial sovereignty of states like Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Somalia (and perhaps even Pakistan), where sovereignty is no longer given or absolute, but contingent. As long as the United States and its allies exercise an unlimited right to undermine the sovereignty of states that already suffer from limited effective sovereignty and porous borders, internal competency of these states are bound to deteriorate, perpetuating political instability in geographies where the so-called war on terror is being fought.

In his *Border Politics*, Nick Vaughan-Williams, who can be associated with the so-called 'Aberystwyth school', is interested in the ever-present identification and incessant deconstruction of the ways in which diverse border politics configure and reconfigure practices of inclusion and exclusion (Vaughan-Williams 2009b, 749).²⁴ Vaughan-Williams highlights that, especially in the post-September 11 era, 'offshoring the border' has become a common practice for many Western polities: barriers to entry are established well beyond the physical borders of a state through integrated

²⁴ On borders, also see Newman (2010, 775), Andreas (2003), Newman (2006, 107), and Newman and Paasi (1998).

information systems that help identify ‘risky’ entrants before they even approach the said physical borders, implying that ‘internal security is [now] projected beyond [borders]’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 57). This transformation creates the need for ‘alternative border imaginaries’ that would re-conceptualize the limits of sovereign power ‘not as fixed territorial borders located at the outer edge of the state but rather infused through bodies and diffused throughout everyday life’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 96, 9).

A considerable portion of the book builds up a series of conversations with political theorists, especially with Foucault, eventually invoking Giorgio Agamben’s notion of ‘zones of indistinction’, or zones where it is not possible to differentiate between two different (and potentially contradictory) elements by drawing a line between them and where the polarity between the said substances is present at any point inside the zone, revealing itself through an ever-present tension. According to Vaughan-Williams, borders are essentially zones of indistinction where the sovereign – whose power relies on a decision over which ‘life forms’ are worthy of living or not – creates an expendable life form, or ‘bare life’. In this context, ‘borders are linked to the bodies of those in transit, as mobile as the subjects they seek to control, and not merely confined to the outer edges of sovereign territory but more and more generalized throughout a global biopolitical terrain’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 166).

From this observation, Vaughan-Williams generates the concept of a ‘generalized biopolitical border’, which ‘refers to the global archipelago of zones of indistinction’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 116). The increasing control of bodies through these zones, in turn, suggests that ‘border performance’ is also becoming ‘body performance’ (Vaughan-Williams 2009a, 134). Vaughan-Williams concludes that students of borders should move away from a geopolitical vision and towards a ‘biopolitical’ one (see also Minca and Vaughan-Williams 2012).

Areas of divergence and convergence

As far as conceptual frameworks and methodology are concerned, these three studies point towards different directions and approaches. Atzili offers a decidedly positivist perspective, where independent and dependent variables are tied to each other through an easily identifiable causal mechanism and the associated hypotheses are tested via comparative case methodology. Vaughan-Williams, in turn, is interested not in causal arguments, but in exploring ‘how borders work’ and presents a treatise in political philosophy with a barely hidden normative agenda (e.g., to facilitate emancipation through deconstruction of dominant frameworks). While Elden considers it ‘as a geographical or spatial challenge to international

relations' (Elden *et al.* 2011, 330), *Terror and Territory* does not engage mainstream (US-based) IR theory through a medium and presentational style that would be accessible to most of its adherents.

So, what could have been achieved through deeper interaction among the said works? In general, all three studies could be strengthened through a closer reading of the others, for each study tends to miss, or at least downplay, some dimensions that are highlighted by others. For example, while Atzili places much emphasis on the importance of norms, he does not engage the following question: if the construction of territories can be a tool for establishing authority, should not we expect that a norm of such tremendous importance has its origins in the incentives and efforts of the most powerful actors in world politics? A closer reading of Elden provides an answer; what Atzili refers to as a border fixity norm might in fact have been created and policed by the great powers. This, however, does not necessarily imply that Elden provides a more comprehensive account than Atzili does. For one, Elden's argument does not deal with what lies at the heart of Atzili's thesis, the incentives of the 'local' politicians and political entrepreneurs, which – we may suspect – might be playing important roles in how territories are being configured in the relevant parts of the world. Vaughan-Williams, in turn, provides a more nuanced and sophisticated interpretation of the global territorial order than both Atzili and Elden do, but also offers a truncated perspective that over-emphasizes the particularities of the United States and European experiences at the expense of the 'grey zones' – areas that remain outside the classical Westphalian and biopolitical orders – that constitute the foci of both Atzili's and Elden's studies.²⁵

Despite their differences, these works also point towards common trends in the respective literatures, in at least three ways. First, there is a convergence on the idea that territorial heterogeneity in contemporary world politics should be problematized. Atzili, for example, operationalizes the constitutive properties of territory as a causal variable. Elden explores the ways in which the so-called war on terror has largely exposed the territorial duality in the present-day global political order. The logical conclusion that follows from *Border Politics*, in turn, is that the 'gap' between different border practices around the globe is widening, leading to the construction of contradictory territorial constitutions.

A second common trend is the attention being paid to the 'clash' between the demarcation and constitution of territories. Both *Terror and Territory*

²⁵ Arguably, such position can be tied to Vaughn-Williams's concern for deconstructing the relevant practices in the object of his criticism, the Western governments.

and *Good Fences* highlight that while the constitutive properties of some territories are in constant flux, their demarcation-related features (e.g., *where borders are*) remain static. Vaughn-Williams also makes a similar point; in the ‘exceptional’ cases of the United States and the EU, the novel discourses and associated practices are reshaping the ways in which territories are constituted not only within the relevant states, but also beyond their borders, suggesting an inherent inconsistency between the demarcation-oriented characteristics of territories and their constitution.

A third area where different literatures point towards relevant trajectories involves the impacts of ideas about territory, broadly defined, on political stability. In mainstream IR, social constructivists tend to suggest that ideas and norms about the appropriate modes of state behaviour can be thought of as factors that alleviate the anarchic nature of international politics. Atzili criticizes this emphasis on ‘good norms’, driving attention to the negative impacts of a norm that aimed to ‘make the world more peaceful’ (Atzili 2012, 216, 3). This position, to be precise, would find resonance in the works of Elden and Vaughn-Williams. Political geographers and critical theorists, different from IR constructivists who tend to conceive ideas and norms as a set of benevolent dynamics that help political actors mitigate conflict, tend to argue that ideas (about territory) are in fact usually used as strategies of domination at the hands of powerful actors, sometimes with unexpected consequences.²⁶

That being said, Atzili adheres to the dominant IR constructivist position about the *origins* of these norms and, as hinted above, rejects the notion that the norm of border fixity is imposed on the international system by a handful of powerful states; such norms, according to Atzili, emerges spontaneously (or endogeneously) through the ‘social’ interaction of states. This is one area where research in political science and political geography, not to mention critical IR, can be conceived as competitors. A healthy competition is sure to contribute to our understanding of territory and territoriality in world politics and would most certainly be an improvement over the current state of affairs, where the interdisciplinary disengagement is so robust that scholars rarely consider the explanations and interpretations that exist outside their disciplinary walls as competitors, regardless of their relevance to the research question under scrutiny.

Power of territories, territories of power

The very construction – and, not to mention, reification – of territories are associated with political processes and practices that define the extent,

²⁶ For similar reasoning, see Barkin (2003).

scope, and nature of political authority. Not surprisingly, scholars scrutinizing the constitutive properties are interested in the ways in which territories create power as well as how political, social, and economic power can be used to configure and reconfigure states' and societies' relationship to space.

Ron Hassner's *War on Sacred Grounds* deals with the incompatible authority claims made over sacred places, which constitute 'an independent category of disputes worthy of special attention' (Hassner 2009, 2).²⁷ Hassner identifies three existing approaches relating to the study of such disputes: the interpretive approach that emphasizes the content of religious texts and practices that pertain to sacred grounds, the constructivist perspective that highlights the role of religious leaders in assigning meaning and function to these spaces, and the materialist perspective that privileges the dynamics of strategic bargaining between interest-driven politicians. Concluding that that none of these individual approaches is sufficient for addressing the question at hand, Hassner offers what he calls 'thick religion methodology', which combines IR focus with an interpretivist perspective and entails tracing 'a comprehensive logical chain, from the content of specific religious ideas to particular outcomes in international politics' and identifying 'causal or even constitutive relationships between religious ideas and political behaviour' (Hassner 2009, 178).

Hassner holds that, different from 'secular' territories, sacred spaces make for 'pure' indivisible territories since they are 'irreplaceable and cohesive sites with inflexible and highly visible boundaries' that leave 'no room for compromise and no substitute for [them]' (Hassner 2009, 69). The key to unpacking the dynamics of dispute over sacred space, then, is to explore the factors that render such spaces indivisible in the first place. For Hassner, there are two relevant dimensions: centrality and vulnerability. Centrality follows from the functions sacred space serve for believers with regard to communication with – and access to the presence of – the divine. Vulnerability, in turn, refers to 'the extent to which access to the site and behavior within it are circumscribed, monitored, and sanctioned' (Hassner 2009, 31). The likelihood of conflict is at its highest at sites that are most central and vulnerable in the eyes of a religious movement's followers.

Hassner argues that, in order to understand the dynamics of relevant disputes, we should pay close attention to the 'contents' of the relevant religious discourses, acknowledge – but also recognize the limits of – religious actors' ability to change and challenge the 'value or configuration

²⁷ Hassner is a political scientist, but *War on Sacred Grounds* moves outside the disciplinary boundaries and ventures into religious studies.

of sacred space', and explore the nature of 'delicate bargain[s]' that need to be struck between religious and political leaders (Hassner 2009, 94, 159). In order to illustrate his arguments, Hassner examines cases of successful dispute management as well as cases of mismanagement, especially in the Middle East, while also extending his logic to secular territorial disputes.

John Agnew's *Globalization and Sovereignty*, in turn, challenges the 'dominant image of globalization' that portrays a new world where the Westphalian territorial order is being replaced by an endless web of networks that recognizes no man-made borders (Agnew 2009, vii).²⁸ For Agnew, the so-called 'myths of globalization' obscure our understanding of global politics almost as much as the territorial trap does.²⁹ Agnew argues that the relationship between territory and sovereignty, two concepts that need to be differentiated analytically, has always been complex and resistant to uni-dimensional conceptualizations or linear historical narratives. Globalization, in this context, has been neither eroding sovereignty nor leaving it unscratched; it is merely complicating an already complex and multifaceted relationship.

Agnew breaks down this complex relationship by scrutinizing two dimensions: central state authority and territoriality. The former refers to the extent to which a state can project power in an uncontested and uninterrupted fashion within a bounded territory and the latter involves the degree to which territorial borders have been 'totalized' with respect to the regulation of transactions that take place across a state's borders. Out of these two dimensions, Agnew extracts four different categories. The first entails the combination of strong state authority and consolidated state territoriality, or, the 'classic' Westphalian ideal, which, according to Agnew, has never truly ruled the entire globe but still has significant *ideological* mileage in it. The second sovereignty regime, in turn, is called 'imperialist' and refers to cases where central state authority is weak and state territoriality is open (which implies that territory is 'subject to separatist threats, local insurgencies, and poor infrastructural integration'), reflecting the political-spatial dynamics in numerous locales in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America (Agnew 2009, 130).

The third regime, which practically refers to the EU, is 'integrative' and entails cases where state is weaker but territoriality is consolidated. The final category is the globalist sovereignty regime, identified with a strong state and open territoriality. Different from adherents of the idea that

²⁸ The book can also be thought as a territorial companion to Krasner (1999).

²⁹ These myths are (i) the world is now flat; (ii) globalization is new; (iii) globalization and liberalization (in economic terms) are synonyms; (iv) globalization is antithetical to the welfare state; and (v) there is no alternative to globalization (Agnew 2009, 13–18).

globalization is a function of economic and technological trends, Agnew asserts that this regime does not arise spontaneously but requires at least one state, or a 'great power' in IR talk, to promote it. In present day world politics, the United States, while it practices classic sovereignty within its own territory, actively seeks to impose a globalist regime elsewhere. For Agnew, it is the frictions between overlapping regimes that lead to much tension and instability in world politics, instigating conflict between the 'beneficiaries of the globalist regime who extend well beyond the borders of any particular state' and 'those states and people trapped in the imperialist and globalist regimes... that are not experiencing many of its benefits' (Agnew 2009, 135).

While Agnew is interested in the 'present' of the global territorial order, Jeremy Larkins, in his *From Hierarchy to Anarchy* (*From Hierarchy*, hereafter), seeks its roots in the Renaissance cultural practices, venturing into historical and philosophical terrain – including the works of Ptolemy and Dante – that yet remains alien to most IR scholars. Building on Ruggie's conceptualization of 'episteme', Larkins holds that territories are not solely political but also cultural products and how territoriality is produced is a function of the 'structural codes that determine how particular cultures represent and use space' (Larkins 2010, 41).

Larkins traces the reification of territory to the 19th century political thought, primarily to the ideas of Weber, whose 'desire to master space' propelled the idea that 'politics and history were ultimately determined by spatial factors such as states' size, location, and the distance between them', privileging, and effectively reifying, the demarcation-oriented features of territories at the expense of their constitutive properties (Larkins 2010, 29). Larkins concludes that Weberian historical sociology 'offers no way out of the territorial trap' (Larkins 2010, 30). The key to understanding the present day territorial order, instead, lies in the 'Renaissance texts and images', for it was during the Renaissance that 'the rupture or break with the medieval territorial imaginary was initiated' (Larkins 2010, 6).

From Hierarchy drives attention to the association between religious cosmology and geographical practices, highlighting that the 'medieval culture of space was structured by the rigid hierarchies' that could be identified 'as the divinely authorized design of all celestial and terrestrial being' (Larkins 2010, 72). Drawing upon close readings of Machiavelli, Larkins holds that Renaissance literally undermined the 'spatial hierarchies of the medieval political imaginary' and triggered the process that fixed 'sovereignty, violence, and identity onto state space', which eventually formed the foundations of the modern territorial imaginary (Larkins 2010, 122, 123). This argument is further substantiated through a detailed analysis of the visual portrayals of the ruler(s) (personification of sovereign

political authority) as the centre of an increasingly homogenous and abstract space.

In a most innovative move, Larkins then explores the role that Renaissance imaginary played in the territorialization of the international society. That America was free of symbolic centres of hierarchy in the eyes of Europeans, in particular, allowed the colonizers to utilize the new geographical imagery in the ‘new’ continent to a larger extent than they could in Europe. European territorial imaginings reconfigured the spatial make-up of the new world, filling it with meanings, memories, and identities, helping Europeans dominate its *old* inhabitants by defining the nature and scope of the political authority that could be exercised. *From Hierarchy*, in passing, also implies that Europeans then imported the spatial experience and knowledge gained in the New World back to Europe to further rationalize and homogenize space there (see also Branch 2012).

Areas of divergence and convergence

While the previous section points towards parallels across different scholarly traditions, the three studies presented above reflect the polarization that runs deep across them. Agnew and Larkins’s studies speak both to each other and, to an extent, mainstream IR, yet *War on Sacred Grounds* reads like an entry into the scholarly body of work in political geography with a most interesting twist: it contains no discernible references to the relevant literature in political geography. That *War on Sacred Grounds* shuts the door to interdisciplinary engagement, in this context, makes it difficult for Hassner’s arguments to travel across the disciplinary borders and leads to a situation where conceptual wheels that have long been in existence elsewhere seem to be reinvented.

The question then becomes, what is lost by the lack of engagement (or, alternatively, what can be gained from further interaction)? The power–territory relationship presents significant challenges to researchers, which, arguably, can be better addressed through further interdisciplinary interaction. A most important challenge is related with operationalization of variables and/or specification of relevant concepts. For example, Agnew displays an impressive command of IR literature and is able to position *Globalization and Sovereignty* with respect to the relevant debates in it. However, it is at times difficult to precisely pinpoint what type of interstate behaviour that the clash of globalist and imperialist regimes motivates, or how states’ incentives shape the emergence of such regimes. In relation, contradictions between *Globalization and Sovereignty*’s treatment of terms such as “globalist (or imperialist) regimes” and that of IR literature’s may create confusions for IR scholars, who may also find it difficult to operationalize Agnew’s categories and conceptual framework.

In turn, while *War on Sacred Grounds* is most definitely an innovative study, it can also be criticized for its rather retrospective and ‘snapshot’ perspective of what counts as success and failure vis-à-vis the resolution of competing authority claims; that the Mecca crisis of 1979, which ended with more than two hundred dead and almost six hundred injured, is taken as a case of successful management, for example, may be contested by historians and area specialists. Further engagement with the relevant research in political geography and critical IR, where scholars tend to de-emphasize ‘big events’ (e.g., actual instances of armed conflict or the ‘resolution’ of crises) in order to focus on the broader processes that may influence the outcome (as well as what happens after the particular ‘event’ taken to be the outcome), could address the pitfalls of such a snapshot perspective when scrutinizing the relationship between territory and political authority.

From Hierarchy, in this context, utilizes a ‘long duration’ approach in order to examine the mutual construction of territory and political authority. However, while Larkins’s almost exclusive emphasis on cultures of space in the context of epistemes and practices serves *From Hierarchy* well when problematizing extant perspectives, this ‘culture, all the way down’ approach also seems to underplay the role of power politics in the construction and management of territories. This tension creeps into Larkins’s analysis especially when he brings up the case of America, for Larkins’s emphasis on power and domination in the context of European–Amerindian interaction does not necessarily follow from his cultural interpretation of the European landscape. Put simply, Larkins provides a compelling account of how new forms of power emerge out of different cultural practices that relate to space–politics relationship, but he does not fully engage the ways in which political actors can strategically institutionalize different forms of domination by manipulating the same relationship. Arguably, Hassner’s emphasis on the incentives of and interaction among political actors, not to mention the (territorial) ‘regime’ approach that Agnew offers, can be explored to further complement Larkins’s account over the two-way interaction that tie political authority and territory’s constitutive properties.

In sum, research on the relationship between power and territory is one area where scholars operating within one tradition can look into other disciplines to identify and address the relevant challenges. *Globalization and Sovereignty*, for example, in line with Agnew’s other relevant work, can be conceived as a linchpin that actively tries to connect disparate literatures. Hassner, in turn, offers a multi-faceted model that can be explored in further detail in the context of the existing research in political geography and critical IR. Larkins’s *From Hierarchy* contains many

insights to be explored, both conceptually and methodologically, over the question of how political authority and territory is reflected in, and accordingly can be traced through, cultural practices, symbols, and discourses. Overall, territory–power relationship offers a fertile ground that also comes with considerable challenges; cross-fertilization across disciplinary boundaries can help face these challenges more effectively.

Road ahead: making the case for pragmatic interaction

The overview of the sample of studies scrutinized in the previous sections confirms that conversation across disciplinary borders is, at best, underwhelming. Atzili's references to political geography remain symbolic gestures and Hassner's *War on Sacred Grounds* consciously chooses not to engage the relevant literatures in political geography and critical IR (Hassner 2009, 10).³⁰ Elden's *Terror and Territory* does not necessarily tackle mainstream IR in a way that would stimulate reaction from it. Agnew's *Globalization and Sovereignty* presents an exemplar of an attempt to bridge the gap between mainstream IR and political geography but also exposes some of the crucial differences between them with respect to conceptual as well as empirical strategies. Larkins's *From Hierarchy* and Vaughan-Williams's *Border Politics* remain relatively detached from the core theoretical and empirical concerns of political science oriented students of IR.

Regardless, the analysis above also suggests that if the relevant body of work is 'read' from a common conceptual framework and in the light of specified research topics, there may be benefits to be accrued from further interdisciplinary interaction. There are at least two further areas – or research topics – where interdisciplinary interaction can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between territory and international politics: the association between hierarchy and territoriality and the ways in which territories are constituted by and in turn constitute identities.

Is hierarchy what states make of territory?

The idea of territorial heterogeneity, when combined with the notion that territory can be a tool for power projection as well as an arena for political contestation, implies that the concept of 'hierarchy' can also be framed in territorial terms. In fact, endorsing David Lake's views on the salience of hierarchy in international politics, Agnew explicitly makes the case that

³⁰ Hassner suggests that critical studies are as relevant to political scientists as 'astrology is to astronomers'. Personal correspondence via e-mail, cited with permission.

inequalities of power in international politics are also associated with territorial hierarchies (Agnew 2009, 111; Lake 2009).³¹ Elden's arguments also point towards the existence of a 'two-level' territorial order in international politics: a territorial anarchy defined by sovereign-equals and a hierarchical pattern between dominant powers and those territories 'ruled' by political entities whose territorial sovereignty has been rendered contingent by powerful states. In this context, the United States can be conceived of as a hegemon with the ability and intention to hierarchically order territories with respect to the contingency of territorial sovereignty, at least in some parts of the world (see Dodds and Sideway 2004, 292; Elden 2009, xx).

A similar argument can be extracted from the work of Larkins: the particular culture of space that was generating territorial anarchy in Europe was in fact empowering a clear hierarchy between the European lands and the 'newly discovered' spaces in America.³² Vaughan-Williams's readings into the changing nature of borders can also be interpreted in this light: while Western powers are re-configuring their borders in ways that help them project their right of exclusion beyond their own physical frontiers, other states are unable to do so. Similarly, while Atzili and Hassner do not invoke the term hierarchy in the context of territory and territoriality, their entries suggest that some territories are more equal than others.

A crucial question on the relationship between hierarchy and territories involves operationalization of the former concept in terms of the latter. In particular, political scientists may point out that there is a good reason why they do not engage the notion of territorial hierarchies in the neighbouring literatures: the relevant debates are not amenable to positivist empirical analysis that lies at the heart of their research. I argue that an unprejudiced and innovative reading of the relevant literatures can motivate rigorous empirical inquiries over the relationship between hierarchy and territory. One potential application, for example, may start from the idea that 'some territories are more equal than others' and link the so-called 'global visa regime' (or, the global mobility regime that comprised passport, visa, and frontier formalities) (Salter 2006) to the available data on the dyadic visa regulations between states in order to examine the association between power asymmetries/symmetries and territorial practices. A recent data set that maps visa regulations across countries at the dyadic level suggests numerous possibilities where scholars can examine whether (and/or under what circumstances) power asymmetries, institutional

³¹ Elsewhere, Agnew uses the term 'spatial hierarchy' (Agnew 2003, 84).

³² For a similar perspective, see Keene (2002).

affiliations, alliances, patronage relationships can influence the visa regulations, or how ‘penetrable’ state territories are, between two countries (Lawson and Lemke 2012). Overall, a territorial reading of the anarchy–hierarchy debate offers a fertile and uncharted ground where innovative and interdisciplinary research can flourish.

Territories and identities in international politics

Political geography has long established that territory is a key component of identity formation for social groups (Penrose 2002, 282). Given that space can be thought of as ‘the ultimate locus and medium of struggle and is therefore a crucial political issue’, the *character* of territories present themselves as areas of contestation both between different political organizations, say, states, and within them (Elden 2009, xviii). Social groups’ self-defined identity, in this context, can drive their willingness to initiate or sustain conflict over not only demarcation but also constitution of territories, just like particular configurations of territory (with respect to both demarcation and constitution) can influence the identity politics over potential conflicts. Just as ‘hegemonic groups may use space, boundaries, and various definitions of memberships (or citizenship) effectively to maintain their position and to control others inside the territory’, reactions to hegemony can entail strategies that aim to reconfigure the institutional as well as ideational dynamics that define territories (Paasi 2003, 116). Furthermore, the relationship between territory and identity also implies an important emotive element, for particular territorial strategies involving the use of maps or statues and particular territorial units such as sacred spaces all involve an emotional attachment on the part of human groups (Anderson 1983; Hassner 2009).³³

Territory’s relevance to identity and international politics can be scrutinized in the context of two key dynamics: nationalism and religion. Note that our understanding of the modern state system is dependent on the notion of nationalism – which is clearly ‘a profoundly territorial phenomenon’ – as it is on the so-called Westphalian understanding of territory (Penrose 2002, 294; see also Kadercan 2013). An immediate implication is that our understanding of the so-called Westphalian order, from a territorial perspective, is built not only on the works of the legal scholars of the 17th century (or the diplomatic practices between the members of the so-called international society), but also on the particular ideas and practices associated with the rise of nationalism from the 19th century onward (especially, Murphy 2013, 1215–16). Given that both

³³ On emotive aspects of territory and territoriality, see Kolers (2009) and Pollini (2005).

nationalism and the Westphalian practice of territorial sovereignty are essentially Western ideational constructs that do not always ‘work out’ in many parts of the world, the ways in which nationalism and territoriality operate in non-Western cases constitute research areas where territorial interpretation of the relationship between identity and conflict can offer novel insights.

A similar case can be made for the nexus of religion–territory–conflict (Newman 1999, 13–14).³⁴ Elden, for example, suggests that Al-Qaeda’s ‘war’ has in fact been primarily over the constitutive properties of space, with the ultimate goal pointing towards the creation of a new territorial order in the region that would stand outside the Westphalian ideal and more in line with particular interpretations of Islam (Elden 2009, 46, 48).³⁵ A similar perspective can be developed to examine the particular practices utilized by the leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), who claim to be rooting for a caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

It is accepted that ISIL, different from the network-oriented structure of Al-Qaeda (which, ironically, appears to base its command–control structure in synch with the existing Westphalian borders), is a ‘territorial’ entity, aiming to hold and capture land. However, what is missing from most debates is the fact that the particular territoriality that ISIL practices is considerably different from the so-called modern territorial states (as well as the conventional wisdom about what ‘territorial’ stands for) in at least three ways. First, ISIL recognizes the ‘plasticity’ of existing state borders and literally claims to operate outside the modern state system. Second, ISIL also refuses to adhere to the ‘hard borders’ that have become the sole demarcating principle over the course of the 20th century and instead – mirroring the so-called *ghazi* tradition that was prevalent in most Islamic empires of the past – operates on the basis of ‘open frontiers’ (Abu-el-Haj 1969, 469). Third, ISIL, just like many traditional empires, decidedly aims to create heterogeneous territories within its domain, where administration, rule of law, political rights and obligations, and jurisdiction are much more flexible and multi-layered than it is possible in the typical Westphalian state. This particular territorial strategy, then, is empowered by religious overtones either directly through references to *sharia* (religious law) or indirectly by taking the Islamic empires of the past as models for configuring space–politics–identity nexus. Further exploration of the ‘territorial logic of the Islamic State’, arguably, can help us the better make sense of

³⁴ Hassner (2009, 34) argues that ‘the phenomenon of sacred space concretizes religion, giving it a worldly, material facet’.

³⁵ For Elden (2009, 33, 41), Al-Qaeda acts in a ‘profoundly territorial way’.

dynamics and the trajectory of the organization. Put simply, a territorial perspective that builds on a ‘post-disciplinary’ perspective holds the potential to effectively triangulate religious beliefs, space, and conflict in order to generate novel insights and interpretations about political phenomena that prove resistant to traditional conceptual and analytical frameworks.³⁶

Conclusion

In the conventional wisdom, territory is taken to be merely the canvas on which power and security are pursued, institutions are created, and conflict or cooperation emerges. While it may be painted and repainted – so that the ‘portrait’ of international politics may change over time – the *essence* of the canvas remains constant and never becomes more than a ‘passive stage’ (Murphy 2002, 208; see also Agnew 2010, 780) that exerts little, if at all, influence on politics. After staying in no man’s land for decades, the conventional wisdom is now becoming increasingly challenged and the ‘character’ of territory is attracting substantial attention from scholars hailing from political science as well as political geography and critical IR as a subject worthy of study.

The conversations across these scholarly traditions, however, leave a lot to be desired. This article made the case for pragmatic interaction, which may facilitate the generation of new research questions and address the extant puzzles in a new light. The pathway that I suggest is neither a panacea for the numerous obstacles that stand in the way of fruitful interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, nor the only one to instigate further conversations across disciplinary boundaries. It is, at best, an attempt to stimulate scholarly thinking about the character of territory from a truly interdisciplinary perspective. Some 20 years ago, pioneers such as John Ruggie, John Agnew, and Richard Ashley got the interdisciplinary ball over the study of territory rolling. The ball is still in the game, but we can most certainly do more with it.

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³⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer and the editors for suggesting the term ‘post-disciplinary’.

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