

CONCEPTUALIZING THE TERRITORY AS AN ENTANGLEMENT OF MATERIAL AND SOCIAL REALITY

Conference « Founding territorial sciences », November 23-25, 2011, Paris

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ABSTRACT

The paper strives to theoretically grasp the territory and this way contribute to the foundation of territorial science. Territory is conceptualized as that what links people and their environment. It is a unique, socially and materially constructed or produced 'ecological niche' and at the same time 'social space' of a group of people, defined by their territorial identity. Territory is a structure that is embodied in reality and that 'lives' in people's minds as well as in their practices. It has an underlying infrastructure of common rules or codes and of network of material and informational flows. The specific communication code of the territory is the culture that comes with its defining identity. The extent of shared territorial practices and codes in various dimensions of environmental space delimits the boundaries of the territory. But rules, boundaries and gates to the territory are also enforced by a threat of 'terror' against those that do not belong there or disrupt the territory.

KEYWORDS

Territory, concept, theory, social space, ecological niche, identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Paper goals

The paper strives to theoretically grasp the territory. It explores the implications of the concept, brings together a number of related concepts and develops their connections. Context, identity and entanglement of social and material issues are seen as key concepts that needs to be taken into the concept of territory.

The overarching goal of the paper is to contribute, through theoretical development of the concept of territory, towards greater social and environmental sustainability of modern civilization. It seems that the way out of multidimensional crisis of modernity lies not in a 'technical' solution but in a (profound?) conceptual shift. Founding of new scientific field, 'territorial science', may be helpful in this respect. What I see as a main task for such a new science, is to bridge two gaps: that between social and life sciences (that is between humans and nature) and that between theoretical knowledge and lived practices. Territory seems to be a conceptual vehicle capable of doing this: capable of bridging various scientific fields (that have their stake in territory) and of mustering or rather *engaging* people in order to change their life practices in appropriate way.

Scientific context

Although the author's primary field of interest is urban planning, there are explored and interlocked also concepts from sociology, ecology, history, psychology and geography. The key supporting terms are *social space* and *ecological niche*. Some insights are drawn also from the etymology of the word *territory*.

What is peculiar with territory is the fact that it is not possible to study it from outside ('objectively') or from any privileged perspective. Territory is simultaneously conceived and lived – it is conceived and lived *in variety of perspectives* that are not reducible one to another. Although the territory is social and at the same time material construction, it is almost impossible to engineer it – because it is also a result of a clash of various *forces* (social, political, economical, military, environmental, cultural). Even this attempt at conceptualization of the territory can be seen as an intervention in a battle of discourses or between scientific paradigms.

Territory is therefore, in many respects (politically, economically, culturally), highly sensitive concept – this may be an obstacle in scientific endeavour but it is a challenge as well. Simply said: beware of the terror that comes with territory!

2. TOWARDS THE CONCEPT OF TERRITORY

Territory

Territory is that what links people and their environment, it is also a framework of such relations. It is entanglement of material and social reality. It is a specific (unique) part of environmental space, part of ecological niche of human population. Territory is also a name of that unique and recognizable part of social and material reality.

Territory is socially constructed (Berger, Luckmann 1971) or produced (Lefebvre 1991), it is a mental construction in the minds of the people but this construction is heavily supported by alteration of material reality (by construction of artificial environment, by marking of borders, by land-use) – it is therefore both: material and social construction. It is not possible to separate the material from the social in this concept of territory because our conception of the world influence the way we use and build the territory, and conversely, because of the material structures, cities and other characteristics of environment in which we live profoundly influence the way we conceive of the world.

Territory consist of landscape, cityscape, 'enviroscape' and people's 'mindsapes'. It is a *palimpsest* that is being constantly re-used while the traces of its past are still discernible, imprinted in physical structures, houses, forests and roads as well as in the memory of people and in a written history. The concept of territory that is employed here is therefore principal opposite to any conceptions of space that includes the meaning *tabula rasa* or 'empty space'. Territory is always full of objects, structures and living beings that constitute it. It has its history and momentum that needs to be taken into consideration in whatever development plan. Basically, territory also includes a lot from the meanings of *genius loci* ('spirit of a place' – Norberg-Schulz 1979) and *zeitgeist* ('spirit of the age').

Identity, boundary, structure, character

Concept of territory is closely related to the concepts of *boundary* and *identity*. While boundary is rather geographical term, meaning the dividing line between different land-uses (between fields, meadows, forests, lakes etc.), border between states, edge of a city etc., identity is largely psychological or sociological term, meaning individual person, group affiliation, distinction from others and usually also consciousness of the self, self-determination or proclamation of identity. Both boundary and identity are mutually supportive concepts: when boundary circumscribes something, it divides inside from outside which is a first step towards identity formation. And conversely, development of identity is very much driven by distinction from others – and that means also delimitation of boundaries. Unlike complex living organisms with innate (natural) ability to form their own identity (body is a clear boundary), all social identities and boundaries are constructed and therefore needs to be marked, maintained or enforced. There is nothing natural in social identities, maybe with the exception of the need to have some identity (Max-Neef 1991). Territorial identities are closely related to social identities and inherit therefore all of their possible vagueness, ambiguity, layering, multiplicity and problems of delimitation.

Identity in all human affairs is inseparable from proper names. Once there is some recognizable identity, distinct from others and therefore unique, you can give it a unique, proper name. And territory, that is not just any bounded piece of space: it has its specific *structure* in space-time (unique geography, history, developmet path, momentum of material flows and of social processes) as well as specific *character* (of environment, of climate, of inhabitants, of social rules etc.). But there are different kinds of territorial identities: some have clear cut boundaries, while others have distinct character but loose boundaries. Territories don't even have to be continuous, for instance territory of United States is effectively not just major part of North American continent but its embassies and military bases all around a world as well. The division of Berlin during cold war, when West Berlin was a part of spatially separated West Germany, is another case in point. Different character of East and West Berlin was at that time easily recognized by everyone (in character of society, in state of buildigs, in rules of conduct, in clothing of people) and the political division of the city deeply influenced its material structure – especially once the Berlin wall was constructed – as well as the material flows into the city (food, energy and other commodities).

The case of Berlin also clearly illustrates the concept of *ecological footprint* – that there is much greater territory that provides necessary resources needed to sustain long-term existence of such a modern city. This is nothing new, all the military leaders since ancient times have known the siege tactics and that cutting the city and its inhabitants from their territory is a way towards surrender of the city. However, historically, even the threat of siege profoundly influenced the structure of cities and greater territories as well. City and territory must have been defensible and existence of a territory sustainable. This is a reason behind demarcation of a territory. Its the *terror* that can be heard even in this word (originating from latin *terrere*, „threaten“, „frighten“ – *territorium* mean "a place from which people are warned off" – Harper 2010) that gives meaning to any territorial boundary. Its the threat of counteraction (military, legal and so on) that prevents unauthorized crossing of any such borderline. This is the social in the concept of territory – that it is someone's area, that the territory is owned and defended.

Ecological niche, population, freedom, social space

Now we get to that roots of the concept of territory that originates in ecology. Key concepts are *ecological niche*

and *population*: „the population is the unit of analysis in population ecology. A population consists of individuals of the same species that live, interact and migrate through the same niche and habitat“ (Waples, Gaggiotti 2006), „the niche is the set of biotic and abiotic conditions in which a species is able to persist and maintain stable population sizes,“ (Wiens, Graham, 2005) more technically is the concept of niche defined as an "Euclidean hyperspace whose dimensions are defined as environmental variables and whose size is a function of the number of values that the environmental values may assume for which an organism has positive fitness“ (Hardesty 1975).

While dealing with humans, everything gets more complex. Material concepts of resources, conditions and laws of population growth are simply not sufficient. People are able to transcend the deterministic laws of nature, make conscious choices – that is indeed the content of the concept of *freedom* which is, at least according to some philosophers, that what is profoundly human: „The philosophy of freedom begins with a free act before which there is not, nor can there be, existence, being. If we were to begin with being as the basis, and recognize this primacy of being over freedom, then everything, including freedom, is determined by being. But a determined freedom is not freedom at all.“ (Berdyaev 1949).

In the concept of territory, although it is very close to the meaning of ecological niche or human habitat, we are not talking about populations but about societies or social identities. And human societies are not given, they are (consciously or not) chosen – that is the freedom of self-definition. People are, at least comparatively to other species, much more open to change. And they change their living environment accordingly: they construct their territory in a similar way as they construct their personal and social identities and relations. But not everyone is in this respect constructor, it is much easier to join, occupy, fill the position within social and territorial framework.

The territory, as proposed here, is always conceived in relation to socially defined part of human population (people that identify themselves with particular identity). Territory is therefore Lefebvre's (1991) *social space* and at the same time human *ecological niche* that is materially embedded in the environment.

Networks, communication, culture, infrastructure

Manuel Castells (2010) writes extensively about (social) networks and identity. He distinguishes *space of places* from *space of flows*: „Cities are, from their onset, communication systems, increasing the chances of communication through physical contiguity. I call space of places the *space of contiguity*. On the other hand, social practices as communication practices also took place at a distance through transportation and messaging. (...) This new form of spatiality is what I conceptualized as the *space of flows*: the material support of simultaneous social practices communicated at a distance.“ (Castells 2010, p. XXXI-XXXII) It is easy to infer from this quote that the concept of communication is central for Castells's concept of space (and of network society). Network is a structure with a common communication code that consists of a set of interconnected nodes.

We can take this concept of space and use it in our concept of territory. The common communication code of the territory is the *culture* that comes with its defining identity. The network that constitutes the social aspect of the territory is a network of social relations between people that have that territory in mind, people that live that territory and that maintain the processes that constitute it. The networks that sustain material existence of these people (various supply chains built on diverse infrastructural networks) are another constitutive element of the territory. Topology of these networks and especially various exchange points are key elements that delimitates the territory.

Since boundaries in space of flows are mainly the various gateways, entries and switching points between different networks, the topology of most contemporary territories is no longer contiguous in any easily conceivable sense. If the convenient 'map of the world', consisting of state borders drawn on Earth's surface, used to be a meaningful representation of the world in times when agrarian production and availability of mineral resources was a cornerstone of production and of the fate of nations, the same 'political map of the world' conceals today much more of any territory than it reveals. Contemporary 'map of the world' would much more resemble the complex traffic schema of a metropolitan area than a street map.

Since communication codes and social practices are that what is crucial in any group identity in network society, and also due to the high mobility in space, various contemporary territories are overlapping, porous and fragmented. There are multi-use 'public' territories in between more precisely delimited parts of 'limited access' territories: that what is public (shared) is, since the ancient times, the common 'territorial infrastructure.' But in ancient and medieval times, the hierarchical structure of territories used to be much stronger – and division of space between more or less 'public' or 'private' was subordinated under the hierarchy of 'rulers' (i.e. those people that 'set the rules'; territory was often established by way of 'terrorizing'). One of the characteristics of modern times is the rise of the public sphere: a sphere ruled by rules and by law that is as impersonal (or 'objective') as possible. Common 'rules' or 'codes' is that what lays basis of any *infrastructure*. The more 'infra' it is, the lesser identity is there, and therefore the less such 'deep' infrastructure delimits any territory.

Practices and processes: dynamics or 'life' of the territory

Practices are building blocks of processes. Territorial processes are entanglement of living and non-living objects in material time-space. Every process is always somehow structured in time and is able to work upon structures in space. Territory is a structure in time-space as well as in the minds of people ('mindscape'). It is the structure embedded in other structures as well as the structure among other structures.

Every territory is a unique and 'full' structure – it is not an 'empty' framework but structure that has been materialized and that is full of processes. It is a structure that is embodied in reality and it 'lives' in people's minds as well as in their practices. Once it is no longer 'living', it is 'dead', it becomes an empty structure. Dead territory becomes an empty shell that can be reconstructed either from its material parts or from recorded memories but once the continuity of (social or material) processes that constituted the territory is broken, the territory ceases to exist.

There is close relationship between practices and codes, however, the distinction lies in a fact that while practices are material (embodied, lived, physical, real), codes are social (mental, known, inter-subjective). Practices are 'living' processes, codes are 'dead' structures, but every process proceeds within a structure and every structure may be restructured (or destructed) by a process (internal or external). Because territories are in a way 'living' (they have their internal processes that are able to change their internal structure), it is possible to talk about growth, development or decay of a territory. And also, every external intervention into 'living' territory means a disruption of its internal processes and it harms the lives of its people there and it usually provokes counteraction.

3. CONCLUSION

Proposed concept of territory is only rough outline that tries to show a direction for further elaboration. It lists concepts and themes that should not be omitted in any attempt to found 'territorial science' (the key words are listed in headings of sub-chapters). Paper also points out some notable interrelations between concepts that should be gathered together in such a new scientific field.

Concerning methodology, I feel that it is crucial to find a way of employment of the variety of perspectives because each perspective opens up new 'dimensions' of the territory. What is essential is to establish a common 'territorial' communication code, a language that would grasp territorial identity, structure, character and boundaries in all those 'dimensions' of particular territory as well as interrelation to other territories. Although methodological clarity is of utmost importance, it should not lead to reductionism, simply because diversity, interconnectedness, contextuality and emergence are general concepts that go with the territory.

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