***The Birth of Territory*: Should political geographers do conceptual history?**

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Throughout his impressive repertoire, Stuart Elden consistently frames his methodological approach as being informed by *'Begriffsgeschichte'* (Elden 2010, 2013a, 2013b). No doubt awing non-German speakers with its enormity, the word simply means 'conceptual history' (and I will use this English translation here). As a method, the conceptual history Elden refers to was originally designed to catalog concepts in the German-speaking world from 1750-1850 (Richter 1986). A particularly encyclopedic form of history, it seems remarkably ill-suited to the political and contextual foci of political geography. It has long struck me that no one in political geography has yet questioned Elden's use of '*Begriffsgeschichte*,' which appears to function more as a signpost of authorial credibility—highlighting the stature of an author who is capable of wielding such large, unfamiliar, foreign words.

Instead of unreflexively perpetuating this politics of signification, which appears to have prevented geographers from critically interrogating Elden's methodological decisions, I contend that the contribution to political geography of Stuart Elden's (2013b) book, *The Birth of Territory*, is predicated on one central assumption: that conceptual history is a valuable undertaking for the field. Rather than take this for granted, in this short commentary, I want to push and pull at this assumption and ask: should political geographers do conceptual history? Arguably, most contemporary political geographers would balk at the idea of doing a definitive conceptual history of such favorite keywords as the "state," "border," "region," or "nation." Significant advances in the past 30 years have shifted our subfield away from a "philosophy of the object" to a "philosophy of the relation." Put another way, political geographers have focused primarily on political *practice*, rather than searching for a discernible essence of any of these terms, which are seen as political constructs. While Elden vehemently defends his approach as pushing away from "generalization and pretentions to universalism" (p. 16), and attempting to "bring in practices" (p. 8), his book is founded on an inherent tension in his concern for the semantic "content" of the term "territory" that, I believe, stems from his methodological predilection for conceptual history.

In the Introduction to *The Birth of Territory*, Elden argues that "territory is a word, a concept, and a practice, and the relation between these can only be grasped historically" (p. 7). Acknowledging that it is mostly "weak on practices," Elden still finds that conceptual history as pioneered by Reinhart Koselleck et al. "offers a valuable emphasis on the use of terminology" (p. 7). Notably, Elden consistently emphasizes that he is not interested in "territoriality," but rather the concept of "territory" itself. This is seen, for example, in his rejection of Robert Sack's (1986) work on territoriality on the grounds that "none of it really gets to grips with the complexities of the term *territory* itself," and is thus "historically and geographically imprecise" and seems "to transcend historical periods and uneven geographical

development, and also function beyond geographical scale" (p. 5). Not only is this claim simply false (each chapter of *Human Territoriality* delves into quite detailed historical and geographical analyses), but Elden's argument here points to a tension running throughout his project: he simultaneously wants to excavate the semantic content of territory *and* to treat it as a geo-historically contingent practice: "'territory' as a distinctive mode of social/spatial organization, one that is historically and geographically limited and dependent" (p. 10). Although the project in itself has certain merits, it ultimately contradicts the agenda of a practice-based political geography by pushing toward an essentialist fixation with the *term* territory (Antonsich 2011).

This tension appears to originate in Elden's choice of conceptual history, which is largely at odds with his Foucauldian-inspired effort to argue that territory is a historically- and geographically-specific "technology of government" (p. 16). The closest that Michel Foucault came to conceptual history was in his analysis of "transactional realities" (*réalités de transaction*), which he understood as concepts like madness or sexuality that "have not always existed are nonetheless real" (Foucault, 2008: 297). Lacking a discernable essence, they are not "primary and immediate" realities, but are governmental "technologies" whose history can only be written by "showing by what conjunctions a whole set of practices—from the moment they become coordinated with a regime of truth—was able to make what does not exist (madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality, etcetera), nonetheless become something, something however that continues not to exist" (Foucault, 2008: 19). But Foucault's method was far from a conceptual history as an interrogation of specific terms. He was never concerned with the actual content of these transactional realities, but rather how they functioned as tools in shifting apparatuses of government.

Although Elden positions his project as somehow related to Foucault's genealogical method (p. 8), his analysis is ultimately far removed from the spirit of Foucault's method – which he once elucidated as follows:

> I would like to distinguish between the 'history of ideas' and the 'history of thought.' Most of the time a historian of ideas tries to determine when a specific concept appears, and this moment is often identified by the appearance of a new word. But what I am attempting to do as a historian of thought is something different. I am trying to analyze the way institutions, practices, habits, and behavior become a problem for people who behave in specific sorts of ways, who have certain types of habits, who engage in certain kinds of practices, and who put to work specific kinds of institutions. The history of ideas involves the analysis of a notion from its birth, through its development, and in the setting of other ideas which constitute its context. The history of thought is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and 'silent,' out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions. (Foucault, 2001: 74)

Foucault's methodological distinction is important here because, even though Elden consistently tries to argue that he is doing a history of thought, his project is ultimately one of ideas. As he articulates it,

"genealogy" for Elden "makes use of the full range of techniques—including etymology, semantics, philology, and hermeneutics—that should inform the history of ideas but pairs them with an analysis of practices and the workings of power" (p. 8). By contrast, Foucault's particular style of genealogy plots "the history of the practices in which men have seen truths and their struggles over these truths" (Veyne, 1997: 181).

This is arguably a project that Elden seeks to undertake in *The Birth of Territory*, i.e. to "show how the concept of territory *emerged* within Western political thought and practice" (p. 6) and, in particular, as a "political technology" (p. 16). What is far less clear throughout Elden's book is precisely how this wide-ranging semantic analysis affirms his assertion that: "Territory is not simply an object: the outcome of actions conducted toward it or some previously supposedly neutral area. Territory is itself a process, made and remade, shaped and shaping, active and reactive" (p. 17). The connection between the linguistic and material/performative dimensions of territory is tenuous at best. This raises serious methodological considerations for political geographers, such that it becomes imperative to ask: can we productively understand the nature of such contests over truth, "institutions, practices, habits, and behavior" through such tools as "etymology, semantics, philology, and hermeneutics"?

In principle, the answer must be yes. However, such methods point to an important challenge, which is articulated best by Foucault's close friend and colleague, Paul Veyne (1997). He argues that if transactional realities (such as the "state" or "territory") are only ever *correlatives* of certain practices, they can never be understood by analyzing them on their own terms. That is:

> Our mistake is not that we believe in the State, whereas only states exist: our mistake is that we believe in the State or in states, and we fail to study the practices that project the objectivizations we mistake for the State or its varieties. (Veyne, 1997: 162)

So if, as Elden argues, territory "needs to be thought of in its specificity" (p. 10), the risk is that we lapse into endless verbiage, as Veyne retrospectively faults himself for doing in his tremendous book, *Bread and Circuses* (1990):

> […] bread and circuses will never be explained by starting with an eternal governed, eternal governors, and an eternal relation of obedience or depoliticization that unites them. For while these keys will open any door, they will never provide access to understanding a phenomenon as particular and as precisely dated as bread and circuses—unless we allow specifications, historical accidents, and ideological influences to proliferate, at the price of endless verbiage. (Veyne, 1997: 154-155)

Indeed, covering an impressive scope of texts and contexts, Elden seems especially concerned to capture all those specifications, historical accidents, and ideological influences: from the ancient Greek work of Homer, Euripedes, and Sophocles, to the writings of Julius Caesar, Cicero, Dante, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Rousseau and many others, as well as various foundational texts in the history of empire in Europe and beyond. But if, as Elden hopes, "the historical conceptual approach and its specifics would be

useful in other such analyses" (p. 16), political geographers might take heed from Veyne's warnings and shift the analytical focus to the *practices* of objectivization rather than the *correlatives* of these practices. In my reading, this does not imply a focus on "territoriality," but rather a broader focus on practices of government that might objectivize "territory" in some cases but not in others. These practices, which differentially draw upon, combine, and recombine social and material forces, are precisely those that demand the critical attention of political geographers. However, it is arguably only by decentering the *term* territory that such a project is possible.

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