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Planting flags in water

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Abstract

In this commentary, I respond to James Riding and Carl Dahlman's article, *Montage space: borderlands, micronations, terra nullius, and the imperialism of the geographical imagination.* I build on their arguments about 'more-than-dry landscapes' to consider how the relationship between fluid *and* non-fluid landscapes sheds light on the construction and contestation of political space. To do so, I offer additional examples of how people plant flags in water, shedding light on the political implications of how physical territories are imagined, claimed, and sometimes, simply created at the fluid/non-fluid interface.

Keywords: water; territory; political geography; borders; colonialism

Introduction

When I was an undergraduate student majoring in Geography, I worked with a history professor who wanted to map the travels of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558). My task was to create a GIS basemap, which we could then use to plot his travels over time. The challenge of the shifting political boundaries of the 1500s was something I expected. What I didn't expect, however, was how much work I would have to put into reconfiguring the physical geography of what is today the coastline of the Netherlands. Human and nonhuman processes worked together to create a dramatically different coastal landscape in the nearly 500 years since Charles's time. While I intellectually understood that physical landscapes changed, the scope of these changes was a startling realization that the material effects of shifting shorelines could not be divorced from the *political* implications of how territories are imagined, claimed, and sometimes, simply created out of thin air – or rather, water.

James Riding and Carl Dahlman's (2021) article, *Montage space,* directs our attention to many of the same processes of shifting boundaries between land/water, political territories, and past/present/future. The flag-planting exercises they examine in the 'Free Republic of Liberland' – that fictional state on the 7 km^2 marshland island Gornja Siga between Serbia and Croatia – raise important questions about how shifting physical geographies relate to shifting political geographies. Riding and Dahlman (2021) emphasize how this geopolitical curiosity cannot be understood apart from the 'more-than-dry landscapes' in which the story unfolds. This jointly material and political story is an important one, but as my experience with mapping the physical geography of Charles V's domain illustrates, it is not particularly new.

Nor, I would argue, is this a story that can be told just through the lens of the 'more-than-dry.' As Riding and Dahlman (2021: 12) write, 'The act of claiming territory, of planting a flag, suggests Gornja Siga is dry land and it is distinct from the waters that bound it. Yet the island lies the Danube in a floodplain.' Thus, it is precisely the *relationship* between fluid and the non-fluid that is so essential for understanding how political space is constructed and contested. To underscore how the fluid and non-fluid work together, I want to highlight some additional examples of how people plant flags in water. As Riding and Dahlman's (2021) example of Liberland suggests, there are many ways that (aspirant) political figures claim fluid landscapes (like marshes, littoral zones, continental shelfs, rivers, or aquifers), or work to transform fluid landscapes into more traditional political territories (like building artificial islands or shoreline extensions).

Political geographies of the fluid and non-fluid

Perhaps one of the most obvious cases of people planting flags in water was when a Russian submarine planted a Russian flag 4,200 meters below the North Pole to 'prove' Russian claims to the

contested Arctic sea shelf in 2007 (Dodds, 2010b; Steinberg, 2010). The international response was swift, with the Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay famously telling reporters, 'This isn't the 15th Century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say "We're claiming this territory"' (quoted in BBC, 2007). Yet the idea of the ocean as a frontier has a long history – and one that has nearly always included the imperial practice of planting of flags (Steinberg, 2001, 2018). Geographers and environmental historians working on the Arctic have vividly illustrated how state sovereignty has come to dominate the frames through which we understand claims to Arctic waters (Demuth, 2019a, 2019b; Dodds, 2010a; Dodds and Nuttall, 2015; Kelman, 2017; Medby 2018, 2019). But as these scholars also show, the unstable and unpredictable patterns of ice melt and water flows has always complicated the aspirational claims of political leaders speaking from dry land.

Recent conflicts over sovereignty in the South China Sea also illustrate how both fluid and non-fluid spaces are called into the material and rhetorical battleground of statist expansionism. In many ways, the region has been a laboratory for the Chinese government's effort to expand its territorial reach – including efforts to plant flags in the water itself or on contested islands, or to build new islands to expand its littoral zones (BBC, 2020; Rice et al. 2016; Yorgason, 2017). As the Dutch history of shoreline transformations suggest, actively building artificial islands is a long human tradition. Besides the recent Chinese islands, developers in the Arabian Peninsula have been especially active on this front for many years – the most famous examples being the luxury 'Palm Jumeirah' and 'World' island projects off the coast of Dubai (Gupta 2015; Jackson and della Dora 2009; Ouis 2011). Here we see almost the inverse relationship as in the Chinese case: the islands are not built in contested zones to extend the reach of the Emirati state, but instead are built such that the UAE can lure foreign investors to a property market that had previously been largely closed off to foreigners. Thus, they found ways to capitalize on inviting foreigners to plant their flags in the Emirati waters, where planting those flags on Emirati land had long been understood to be politically untenable.

What makes both the Chinese and the Emirati cases so troubling is that these extraordinarily expensive island-building schemes are unfolding with complete disregard for the fact that their sustainability is nearly impossible given near-term sea level rise projections. So perhaps they are best understood as cases of planting flags in formerly- and future-fluid landscapes that aren't too different from those marshlands in the Danube floodplain. Indeed, Liberland's push to become a 'cyber-nation' with e-residency (Riding and Dahlman, 2021: 20) may become the fate of many of the world's future-fluid nations as islands states become entirely submerged – a pressing issue that the international law community has nonetheless reached no consensus on how to resolve (Sammler, 2020: 615). Whatever the result, Riding and Dahlman (2021: 22) are surely correct to predict that our contemporary 'cartographical stasis' is sure to be upended by climate change.

Colonizing water, colonizing land

As Diné geographer Andrew Curley (2021, 706) succinctly and forcefully notes: 'Water governance is a source of colonial control.' Riding and Dahlman's (2021) example of the contested Danube border landscape between Serbia and Croatia could easily be read through the vast literature on transboundary water politics (e.g. Akhter, 2015; Allouche, 2019; Haines, 2016; Fall, 2010; Menga, 2016; Sneddon and Fox, 2006). Important as this research is, it seems to exist separate from the work of Indigenous scholars and others who show how state-centered approaches of water politics leave out Indigenous claims to water, land, and sovereignty (e.g. Curley 2019, 2021; Daigle, 2018; Meeks, 2020; Norman, 2014; Wilson, 2014; Yazzie 2013). That is, Indigenous efforts to contest the colonial-territorial state are erased in and through the acts of planting state flags in water.

Riding and Dahlman's (2021: 24) reminder that 'terra nullius is a colonial invention' offers a useful cue to find ways to jointly consider transboundary water politics and colonial interventions in fluid and non-fluid spaces. Again, it is the relationship between the wet and the dry that helps us see why this is so critical. Some of the most insightful work on colonial dis/possession via water has

focused on deserts. The desert emphasis might seem obvious: access to water is more likely to be contested if it is in relatively short supply. Yet this facile assumption is not enough to capture the depths of imperial history in desert lands. As it turns out, would-be colonizers truly struggled to draw imperial and state borders in deserts all around the world (Ellis, 2018; Fletcher, 2013, 2015; Gentry et al., 2019; Isenberg et al., 2019; Schofield, 1996; Zunes and Mundy, 2010).

In this sense, we can add desert sands to the comparison that Riding and Dahlman (2021: 13) draw between riverlands and seas, 'fluid geographies that signal a world of mobilities, betweeness, instabilities, and becoming.' The 'shifting fluvial borderscape' might appear as an opposite of 'static land' for some (Riding and Dahlman, 2021: 13), but any colonial administrator working to plant a flag in the desert knew that there was nothing static about its landscapes. Thus to deal with the desert's material resistance to state boundary-drawing efforts, agents of empire targeted their flag-planting exercises in its waters. They did so in different ways in different parts of the world, but the ultimate outcome tended to be what Curley (2021) describes as a process of converting use and access to water into a form of property rights.

Colonial dis/possession through privatizing water applies not just to surface waters but also groundwater. Planting flags in underground water is yet another example of how those seeking to create and apply state power have done so in simultaneously fluid and non-fluid landscapes – at times extending the reach of colonial state sovereignty across borders by pumping cross-border underground aquifers, or by denying Indigenous communities rights to pump waters they need for survival and prosperity. This is again also particularly visible in dry landscapes like the Arabian Peninsula or the US Southwest (Jones, 2010, 2015; Joseph and Howarth, 2015; Koch, 2021; Molle and Closas, 2020) – but it is by no means irrelevant to the more-than-dry landscapes considered by Riding and Dahlman (2021).

In short, whether the landscape is a 'swampy human-nonhuman island' or an arid desert, Riding and Dahlman (2021: 27) are correct to draw our attention to the role of colonialism in understanding how 'water becomes part of the tumultuous process of modernization, development and environmental transformation.' Colonizing water is just as much an act of colonizing land: the flag-planting exercises of empire are always simultaneously fluid and non-fluid. Of course, Charles V knew that well before we had high-tech GIS tools to map his wanderings – and those of his imperial successors.

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